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Long-term impact of the coach-athlete relationship on development, health, and wellbeing: stories from a figure skater

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ABSTRACT

Coaches have been shown to detriment athletes' health, wellbeing and development. Knowledge of this long-term effect and what it means for athletes to live with such stories is under-explored. Using self-narrative, we examine the long-lasting impact of the coach-athlete relationship in the stories of a former figure skater, Fanny. Guided by Arthur Frank's dialogical analysis, we present creative non-fictional stories to show how Fanny made sense of her figure skating experiences, which were framed by a sport investment narrative and a career-wrecking injury that terminated her dream of becoming a professional figure skater. We suggest that if handled as an act of self-care, storytelling can re-configure the dominant coach-athlete relationship and sport investment narrative and help athletes to understand and reconstruct their stories. Finally, we reflect upon the impact of Fanny's story on her advisers and consider the pedagogical implications of such narrative work in sport coaching and sport education.

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Prologue – I want to be an ice princess

The small pond outside our house is frozen, and I have spent two hours skating around in circles trying to conduct tricks that I have made up. I proudly show the moves to my mother who is on the ice with me. My father has set up construction lights in nearby trees so that I can skate when it is dark.

“I want to become an ice princess.” I tell my mother when I enter the hallway to our house. I am frozen and wet from several falls on the ice, but I have set my mind to it. I am 8 years old, stubborn, and everything I own is pink and sparkly. Of course, I want to be an ice princess. My

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parents have never been figure skaters, or part of any artistic sport, but they have always supported my decisions, especially regarding sport and exercise.

Soon after, my parents have registered me with a skating club. There are many coaches at the club, but only one head coach. She is a tall, thin woman, with light skin and blonde hair set in a tight bun. She wears a lot of make-up, and is always dressed in black: Shoes, pants, jacket; everything is black.

This woman would become my coach for my 14-year long figure skating career, and in this role, she significantly impacted my personal development, figure skating career pathway, and life today.

Introduction

There is consensus that coaches play a fundamental role in developing child and youth athletes. Their coaching practices, training methods, and the relationships they build with athletes teach athletic skills, develop performance, impact personal development, and shape career pathways (Coakley, 2011; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). In sports that demand early entrance and large amounts of training, such as women's artistic and rhythmic gymnastics, and figure skating, the responsibility to develop athletes holistically is particularly important as it is common that child and youth athletes of these sports spend more time with coaches than parents and teachers (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995). Artistic sport cultures are, however, documented to be dominated by coach authority, lack of athlete protection policies, narrow corporal and performance ideals, and a drive for perfection; in short, a context that places athletes at risk of harm (Cervin, Kerr, Barker-Ruchti, Schubring, & Nunomura, 2017; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Some research shows that early specialisation sports can create positive development (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005; Holt & Neely, 2011; Stirling, Cruz, & Kerr, 2012), including in artistic sports (White & Bennie, 2015). However, the majority of empirical literature, and in recent years frequent media reports and personal disclosures, tell of the negative impact artistic sports have on athletes. Research demonstrates that this impact can result in injuries and long-term impairment (Maffulli, Longo, Gougoulas, Loppini, & Denaro, 2010), eating disorders and body dissatisfaction (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Kerr, Berman, & Souza, 2006), and disempowerment and loss of self-esteem (Norman & French, 2013; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Ryan's (2000) book *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, although not strictly empirical, is infamous for demonstrating the effects participation

in US women's artistic gymnastics and figure skating can have on athletes.

The normalisation and glorification of today's artistic sport narrative is problematic because it conceals the negative impact a sport, and coaches and coaching particularly, can have on athletes. While some research has demonstrated how artistic sports negatively impact its athletes (e.g. Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Cavallerio, Wadey, & Wagstaff, 2016), and personal accounts of what artistic athletes report to have experienced during their athletic careers are available (e.g. Gertsch & Steffen, 2015; Sey, 2008), studies examining long-term impact are scarce. We thus lack understanding of the long-term or long-lasting impact that coaches have on artistic athletes' personal development and career pathways. Specifically, how athletes construct stories about the relationships they had with their coaches is under-explored. The stories people tell about themselves and their relationships with others, however, can serve to provide a sense of meaning and act to guide overarching life narratives (Frank, 2010; Frost, 2013). Using stories to provide unique insights about athletes' realities and the ways in which they make sense of key events and relationships in their sporting lives is important because they may reveal a great deal about their past, present and future health and well-being.

Research characterised by a focus on personal accounts of aesthetic sport experiences demonstrate a number of narrative elements. First, the accounts demonstrate that sport organisations, coaches, and often parents, believe in and glorify young athletes' "talent" and early competitive success. The assumptions behind this are that talent is necessary to succeed in artistic sports, and that its athletes must learn the complex movement skills during childhood when their minds and bodies are considered flexible to achieve this learning (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009-). Second is the Olympic dream. This element represents an aspirational future and means that a diligent work ethic and intense training, already during childhood, is perceived necessary to turn talent into successful elite performance. Third, coaches are positioned as experts and given the authority to fulfil what athletes and parents dream of. This element affords coaches god-like status, who can dictate an athlete's (and often her family's) entire life (Norman & French, 2013; Ryan, 2000). In combination, many assume that these three elements represent a necessary recipe for success and might be termed the early specialisation narrative. However, several authors problematize this narrative, arguing that early specialisation has a number of consequences including burn out, eating disorders, decreased social development and enjoyment of sport, and drop out (Baker, Copley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009).

Lang (2010, p. 57) even proposes that contemporary youth elite sport represents “a modern form of child abuse”.

In this article, we use self-narrative stories as one way to explore the long-lasting impact of the coach-athlete relationship of a former figure skater. Specifically, we tell the story given first-hand by Fanny, the lead author of this article, who during her 14-year long figure skating career was coached by one person. We will: a) present Fanny’s figure skating career as she narrated it through a narrative of self; b) examine the coach-athlete relationship and the coaching she received; and c) consider how the resulting experiences impacted Fanny’s personal development and career pathway. To achieve these aims, we adopt a narrative study of lives approach, particularly Arthur Frank’s (2010) theoretical conception of socio-narratology and accompanying dialogical narrative analysis to think with stories about the way they act in lives.

In the following, we employ a socio-narratological vocabulary to present the article’s theoretical framework, research methods, and results. In the section “Narrative and the coach-athlete relationship”, we present relevant literature. In “A socio-narratology approach” we draw on Frank’s work to conceptualise storytelling practice and outline the research methodology in “Movement of thought”, where we describe the data production method “Memories become stories” and data analysis procedure “Practice of criticism”. The results are presented under the heading “Figure Skating Stories”. This section is structured in three phases that characterised Fanny’s figure skating career, and represented in eight creative non-fictional stories. Each of the three phases is followed by narrative interpretations. We conclude with the section “How stories shape lives: Closing thoughts”, which proposes implications and reflections on the complex negotiation when facilitating a student project that entails a personal story and life. Firstly, however, we present existing narrative knowledge of how coaches impact athletes.

Narrative and the coach-athlete relationship

Sport more widely has witnessed an increase in attention paid to the importance of narratives and life stories to further understand experiences of, for example, health and illness (e.g. Sparkes, 2004; Stewart, Smith, & Sparkes, 2011) disability, (e.g. Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2002) and coaching (e.g. Jones, 2009; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005). Whilst varied perspectives exist, generally speaking, narrative approaches are characterized by a focus on how people live in a story-shaped world (e.g. Bruner, 1990, 1991), sharing the ontology that our lives are storied, and our identities are narratively constructed by the wider socio-cultural milieu and of our “being-in” a relational world (Smith &

Sparkes, 2008). Eakin (1999: 43) reminds us to not underestimate “the extent to which the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – it’s relations to others”; that *all* identity is relational. Relations with others, and specifically what we might term relationships, therefore play a central part in life stories and meaning-making. The stories people tell about themselves and others represent attempts of individuals to narratively construct meanings of their experiences of their relationships with others. This said, a few scholars have begun to adopt a narrative approach to examine the relational lives of athletes’ autobiographical experiences of their relationships with coaches (Cavallerio, Wadey, & Wagstaff, 2017; Jones et al., 2005; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). Taken together, this research aimed to illuminate the impact coaches have on athletes. Their results demonstrate how key events concerning coaches shape athletes’ lives and personal development in a direct and lasting fashion. Two recurring themes stand out, however: The uneven power distribution and the personal nature of the relationship the athletes had with their coach. These themes significantly impacted the athletes presented in the case studies cited above (Sally, Laura, Anne, Bella) in adopting behaviours to please their coaches, take on destructive behaviours, and in the end, experience disappointment and compromised health and wellbeing.

With regard to *uneven power distribution*, the coaches presented possessed the power to pressure and shape the athletes “into narrating their life in ways that follow” a specific elite sport story (Carless & Douglas, 2013, p.707). This elite sport story was founded on the athletes’ assumption that their coaches held the key to success (Jones et al., 2005; Purdy et al., 2008). Furthermore, in addition to the coaches’ position as gate keepers, they were also afforded the power to dismiss or punish the athlete if not performing to expectations (Cavallerio et al., 2017). In Bella’s case, this situation created an intense fear of her coach’s critique, which was greater than her fear of losing to her competitive opponents (Owton & Sparkes, 2017). In Sally’s case, the coach’s powerful position impacted this athlete not to show her coach when she was in pain (Cavallerio et al., 2017). All four narrative cases demonstrate how the athletes obeyed their coaches, and how they did not question their coaches’ decisions (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2005; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Purdy et al., 2008). Instead, the athletes desperately tried to please their coach (Jones et al., 2005).

Perhaps most importantly is that despite the uneven power distribution, the athletes characterised their relationship with their coach as *personal*. The athletes claimed to have had a special bond with their coaches, which allowed them to receive extra attention and special treatment (Jones et al., 2005; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Purdy et al., 2008). The athletes in these cases perceived their coaches as “something more” than an instructor, including as a role model (Jones et al., 2005), a friend (Purdy et al.,

2008), and a “father figure” (Owton & Sparkes, 2017), integrating narrative indicators of intimacy.

The power/personal relationship the four athletes narrated had a number of consequences. For Laura, it led her to defend her coach’s actions to the point of losing herself in the process (Purdy et al., 2008); for Sally, the result was destructive training behaviour and serious overuse injuries (Cavallerio et al., 2017); for Bella, the submissive relationship started a grooming process that led to sexual abuse (Owton & Sparkes, 2017); and for Anne, the result was an eating disorder, which this athlete adopted in a last desperate attempt to please her coach (Jones et al., 2005). Moreover, and important for the purpose of our article, the athletes’ perceptions of their coaches and the relationships with them changed over time from personal when the athletes’ narratives began to include the negative consequences described above (e.g. eating disorder; injuries; questioning the coach’s decision) (Jones et al., 2005; Purdy et al., 2008). At that stage, the athletes were left with confusion, disappointment, and changed feelings towards the coach. This is important because narrative constructions of significant events in relationships that end in negative emotional states and circumstances can be predictors of psychological wellbeing and mental health (Frost, 2013).

The four athletes’ stories support previous scholars’ findings that coaches impact youth athletes’ personal development and athletic career pathways. Additionally, literature taking a narrative approach provides the subjective view from an athlete’s perspective, and an in-depth understanding of the types of impact and consequences that athletes may experience. Yet, this knowledge base is currently limited to less than a handful of articles. Understanding how athletes construct stories about the relationships they had with their coaches and the long-term impact of these relationships is under-explored. Using stories to generate unique insights about athletes’ realities and the ways in which they make sense of key events and relationships in their sporting lives is important because they reveal a great deal about their past, present and future health and wellbeing. It is against this backdrop that we argue that a narration of the interaction between coach and athlete has the potential to expand existing knowledge and offer further opportunities to safeguard athletes.

A socio-narratology approach

In order to understand Fanny’s relationship with her coach and its impacts on her personal and career development through storytelling, we adopt Frank’s (2010) “socio-narratology” as a theoretical framework. For Frank (2013), telling stories moves beyond theory on literary narratives and is a matter of sociology. Socio-narratology holds dear that

“being human, and especially being social, requires competence to tell and understand stories” (Frank, 2010, p. 13). Crucially, people’s access to narrative resources depends upon their social location, what stories are told where they live or work, which stories they take seriously or not and especially what stories they exchange as tokens of membership. Rejecting a mimetic understanding of people having experiences and then telling stories of that experience, here “each person has a story; and then, in consequence of that story, she or he has a life that is enacted by that story” (Frank, 2010, p. 75). Following it sets in motion a life lived out in a particular way. By examining this life, Frank’s theoretical framework affords us not only insight into socio-cultural contexts, interpersonal relationships and dominant practices, which reflect and shape stories, but an opportunity to see their impacts. This said, we proceed on the premise that Fanny’s story is reflective of her narrative habitus as a figure skater and her story highlights the problem of living well with stories which are embodied.

For the purpose of analytic meaning-making, we draw upon Frank’s (2010) socio-narratology in three key ways: First, socio-narratology is the study of how people can understand who they are, and how they have become who they are. According to Frank (2010), we “are” the stories that we have heard and lived through. He suggests that stories teach us what to fear and desire, both of which shape belief-systems and affect how we perceive and experience life. Second, socio-narratology examines the power of stories to set boundaries. Our own and others’ stories show us how to live life and act within given social structures. Third, socio-narratology examines how stories *act* as either good or bad semiotic material companions through life. Depending on the ways a story impacts us, the stories that “we are” can reinforce or dislocate a storyline. Narrative reinforcement creates continuity and stability, while narrative dislocation requires individuals to re-write their storylines. In the circumstance of dislocation, stories can cause trouble in lives, rendering narrative reconstruction difficult as it may involve considerable identity renegotiation. In his earlier work, Frank (2013) presents different narrative tales that are available in culture for individuals to take up when a story takes an unexpected turn in response to becoming ill. These narratives are: a) Restitution narrative, which entails a hope to be healthy again; b) Quest narrative, which involves acceptance of an illness and a sense of overcoming; and c) Chaos narrative, which understands illness as chaotic and with no hope for recovery. Even though the stories that “we are” impact how we experience life, a single event (e.g. injury) can change the narrative we follow (Frank, 2013). See, for example, the impacts of spinal cord injury on the narrative lives of rugby players (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In that sense, stories are not set to follow one specific storyline, but can move into other possible scripts.

Movement of thought

A “narrative of self” approach (Richardson, 1994) was adopted in which Fanny constructed written stories of her lived experiences that sought to invite the reader into the coaching relationship with the author. Narrative of self has the potential to (a) create vivid pictures of social experiences, which can sustain in-depth socio-cultural analyses; and (b) serve as a reflective process that can result in personal growth (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008; Toner, Nelson, Potrac, Gilbourne, & Marshall, 2012). Indeed, the process of creating this article’s figure skating stories gave the authors opportunities to make sense of Fanny’s story. For Fanny, this sense-making was disruptive and emotional, and permanently changed her memories and view of figure skating and coaching (for similar findings, see Toner et al., 2012). In Frank’s (2013) terms, Fanny’s figure skating story as a semiotic material companion began to cause trouble in her life. For Carly and Natalie, the research generated insight into what it means to co-author a student’s narrative of self (Fleming & Fullagar, 2007), and one which troubled our roles and responsibilities as supervisors and co-authors, an issue we will turn to towards the end of this article.

Fanny’s figure skating career was characterized by significant amounts of training and competition. She was eight years old at the time of the “I want to be an ice princess” story presented at the beginning of this article. At the age of 21, she retired from competing because of a serious injury. At age 22, she left the sport for good and one year later, she wrote this article’s narrative of self. This narrative of self includes several other actors. The head coach and training colleagues play significant roles. The inclusion of these persons poses ethical dilemmas, specifically regarding their anonymity and the requirement that researchers must inform research participants (Swedish Research Council, 2002). To address anonymity, we have given the individuals included in the story pseudonyms. With regard to informing research participants, Fanny met with her former coach to tell her of the “self-narrative” research project. Upon telling her, this former coach appeared suspicious, and she questioned whether this research would jeopardise her coaching employment, a reaction that may indicate that the coach was aware that her actions had deeply affected Fanny. The coach did not object, however, to the research intentions. Ellis (2007) argues that researchers’ informing research participants and gaining consent should include their deliberation of ethical dilemmas. For us, this meant that we carefully considered how details presented in the non-fictional stories could cause Fanny’s coach and training colleagues emotional harm. We felt that as the coach was particularly implicated in Fanny’s story, we would need to take extra care to prevent any harm towards her. Fanny was thus careful in disclosing information to her former coach, outlining

her auto-ethnographic approach, but not detailing any expected findings. Since Fanny's meeting with the coach, she has not had any further contact with her.

Moreover, we regularly discussed Fanny's view of her coach, the relationship she had and the non-fictional stories she produced during the two and a half months of writing the stories. In these discussions, it was important to critically reflect on Fanny's position and interpretations, especially in view that others (i.e. the coach) may understand the events in different ways. We are also aware that self-narratives pose a risk to exaggerate or misrepresent experiences as authors are emotionally invested in their stories (Medford, 2006). In an attempt to "truthfully" present one athlete's perspective of her interaction with the coach, one of Natalie's key roles as Fanny's supervisor was to act as "critical friend" through continuously challenging Fanny's memory recollections, writing, reflections, and interpretations (Frank, 2010; Toner et al., 2012).

Memories become stories

Fanny generated data through four memory work steps (Markula & Friend, 2005): First, she wrote down "triggers" (Markula & Silk, 2011) characterized as small memory episodes that related to the moments Fanny recalled having had with her coach. To support this recalling of triggers, Fanny read through the old diaries (read "life documents", Plummer, 2000) she had kept from age 8 to age 12 and spoke to a former training colleague about the shared figure skating experiences they could remember. Altogether, this memory work collated 57 triggers, which ranged from: "My coach believed in me and made me feel special", "My coach did not acknowledge other skaters as much as me", to "I received no more attention from my coach", and "I trained despite injury to win back the attention of my coach". Second, Fanny arranged the triggers in chronological order to gain an overview of the time she had shared with her coach. Through this step, and in discussion with Natalie, two relationship turning points (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) could be identified. These turning points allowed us to divide Fanny's story into three distinct career phases: 1) Coach's pet, age 8–12, which was characterized by a desire to become a professional figure skater and being the coach's favourite; 2) Worship without questioning, age 13–18, characterized by trying to please the coach's demands; and 3) Alone in the corner, age 18–21, characterized by being injured and trying to hold on to the vision of a professional career. Third, Fanny chose significant triggers from each of the three phases with relevance to the research's purpose to understand the impact the coach had on her personal development (Markula & Silk,

2011). In this step, Fanny composed 11 stories using a creative non-fiction writing style, which filled a total of seven single-spaced A4-pages. This type of writing style allowed Fanny to present the chosen real-life events (Richardson, 1994). Of these 11 stories, six stories were selected as most suitable to “truthfully” reflect the subjective experiences in each of the three career phases, with a main purpose being to examine the coach-athlete relationship and the coaching she received, and to consider how the resulting experiences impacted Fanny’s personal development and career pathway. To contextualise the six stories of the 14-year long career, we decided to include a prologue (I want to be an ice princess) and an epilogue (The end, and a new beginning).

Practice of criticism

To interpret the six stories that characterised Fanny’s figure skating career, we adopted Frank’s (2010) dialogical narrative analysis, which accompanies socio-narratology. Dialogical narrative analysis studies the mirroring between the story’s content and its impacts – or the events being narrated and the narration. Frank (2010, p. 74) does not detail this analytic procedure, because he argues that step-by-step analytics “do little to encourage thought to move” and prevents stories from animating and breathing. Importantly, he notes that dialogical narrative analysis is not a method that is prescriptive and productive in a final sense; it is instead a practice of criticism and movement of thought inspired by a set of questions of storytelling practice. For us as readers of this story, analytical questions of storytelling practice included: What does the story make narratable? What is the force of fear in the story, and what animates fear? Who is *holding their own*? What is the impact of Fanny getting caught up in her own story whilst living alongside the coach caught up in other stories? Whilst some have taken a critical view of narrative works as lacking in thorough analytic procedure, order and outcome at the expense of celebration (Atkinson, 1997), Frank (2010) asks what a method can or should be, advocating a procedure that is more ad hoc and less prescriptive to allow movement of thought as it is interpreted. One thing Frank (2010) and Atkinson (2017) agree on is that social research is advanced by ideas. We maintain our position as analysts working with ideas (conceptual tools) and the flux of dialogue concerning the practices and problems of Fanny’s life. The purpose is to establish a deeper and reflective understanding of how the world is perceived according to the individual’s “truthful” subjective experiences whilst not forgetting that narrative acts are shaped by socio-cultural resources and conventions of storytelling (Frank, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2012; Tsang, 2000).

In order to make sense of Fanny's stories, and to understand the impact it had on her personal development, we followed four analytic guidelines. First, Frank (2010) advocates interpretation, which for us involved continuous critical reflection on how Fanny's story shaped her (Frank, 2010), and how this narrative changed over time (Frank, 2004). The intention here was not to overtake the story, but instead to leave Fanny's subjective experiences intact and interpret them using Frank's narrative conceptions. Second, and to promote the process of interpretation and critical reflection, we drew on one of Frank's (2010) analytical questions: "What is the force of fear in the stories and what animates desire?" In considering this question, we were encouraged to understand how these emotions impacted Fanny's belief system. Third, we used Frank's (2013) three illness narratives to make sense of the relationship changes during the different figure skating phases. Fourth, to ensure that this process remained critical, reflective and thought-provoking, Fanny met with Natalie on a weekly basis during the formalising of the project and writing of the stories, and Carly acted as a more distanced critical friend advising primarily on methodology and ethical issues. As Natalie has researched the coach's impact in similar sporting contexts to the one Fanny participated in, this approach added an "expert" opinion and offered a way to counter the risk of exaggeration because of emotional investment (for a similar impact, see Toner et al., 2012). In addition, Natalie and Carly exchanged experiential dialogue about advising the project, acting as one another's critical friends, on a regular basis.

Figure Skating Stories

Three phases characterised Fanny's career – a) Coach's pet; b) Worship without questioning; and c) Alone in the corner. In each career phase, we present the relevant stories. The stories contain Fanny's thoughts, conversations with the coach, training colleagues, and her parents. Interpretive sections that intend to provide meaning follow each career phase section.

Phase 1 – coach's pet

Story 1

The skating session is over, and I am leaving the ice together with the other skaters from my training group. The training session was so much fun, and I am already excited about the next one.

"Could you stay for a second Fanny?" I hear my coach call my name, and while the other skaters move towards the entrance, I spin around and glide back to my coach. She gives me a big smile.

“Great work today! What do you think about some extra training tomorrow morning at 9am?” Immediately, I get excited. *I want more practice. I have school tomorrow, but so what? I just need to convince my mum.*

My coach continues: “I do not want you to mention this to anyone, ok? It’s our secret, otherwise the others will be jealous of you getting extra training.”

I nod and she gives me a big hug before I skate back to the entrance, feeling proud to share a secret with my coach.

Story 2

I have been asked several times whether or not she is my mother. I am so proud every time somebody suggests that I am her daughter. I look up to my coach and I would want nothing more than to look like her. To be like her.

“Thank you for letting me borrow your child.” My coach says with a smile to my parents when they drop me off at the rink for a private session. I am skating to the music “Winter of Vivaldi” and we have been working on details for weeks to prepare for an upcoming competition. I am so satisfied with the work we have done so far, and I cannot wait to do my first competition with my new program. After the training, we sit down on the bench and start chatting while looking out over the slashed surface. Suddenly, my coach stops talking and reaches for her bag.

“I have something for you.” She looks at me and smiles while she grabs a small box from her bag and hands it to me. I start to open the small box containing four hairclips, decorated with white roses.

“I want you to have them, they will match your dress. It’s for your next competition. I saw them and I thought of you.” She said still having a warm smile on her lips. “You are like a daughter to me.”

I look up from the hair clips in my hand and give her a big smile.

* * * *

Frank (2010) argues that a story can either be a good or a bad semiotic material companion, depending on whether or not a storyline is in alignment with the intended goal. In Fanny’s first career phase, having been identified as talented and being the coach’s favourite, her experiences aligned with the storyline of early specialisation and talented athletes wanting to reach sporting success (Owton & Sparkes, 2017). It is, however, also a storyline that demonstrates how a coach holds the key to success, which Norman and French (2013) regard as a form of gate-keeping that provides favourable circumstances for reaching success to athletes that are considered most likely to succeed. Getting special treatment, more

attention and additional training can have significant positive impact on an athletic career, and in an athlete's early career phase, is a good companion as it aligns with the storyline of a successfully developing athlete. The early career phase Fanny experienced was also characterized by hope for a successful future. Frank's (2010) restitution narrative, a storyline that provides concrete hope that current actions will lead to a desired outcome later on, also applies. While Fanny's story does not involve a hope to return to health from illness, it does involve the movement between past, current and future timeframes. Particularly, Fanny's commitment and hard training follows an investment logic, which entails action that is taken (e.g. sacrifices) in order for a future return and characterises this athlete's approach during the coach's pet career phase (Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, Lee, & Barker, 2014).

Phase 2 – worship without questioning

Story 3

Michaela, a skater in my training group, is sick. She has been for over a week now. I feel for Michaela because she has missed a lot of training sessions. She also has a bad knee, and because of that, she is not allowed to jump. Doctors order.

“Where is Michaela today?” Our coach asks us.

“She's sick.” One skater answers. My coach smirks, and rolls her eyes. She sighs deeply and slowly says: “Well, as always. She's not really that sick, if she wanted to be here she would be here right now. As an elite athlete, you should always be in some sort of pain. She's just exaggerating.”

No one says a word, everyone is just eagerly nodding their heads in approval. My head is spinning. *If I am sick or injured, will she think that I am not dedicated enough? My coach is probably right about Michaela. If she wanted to become a figure skater, she should be here.*

Story 4

It is the second week of summer camp and my figure skating friends are sitting on Linnea's bed, detailing what our coach has said to her this morning at practice. They are laughing in agreement, while Linnea loudly complains about her experiences and expresses her dissatisfaction with our coach. I am sitting on my bed in the corner, listening while thoroughly writing the training journal that our coach has decided that we have to write. *I want to sit with them, laugh with them. I cannot. I'm scared that my coach might find out. I know that my club mates think that I am a suck up.* I never take part in conversations like the one Linnea is leading. I have tried to defend my coach in the past, but that was met with mocking giggles, and I had seen how the other girls glanced at each other. Today,

I am quiet. Listening. *Yes, my coach had been hard on Linnea, but it was probably because of her behaviour. She deserved it.* I'm not going to jeopardise my relationship with my coach by agreeing with the others. My coach trusts me, and I have no intention to break that trust just to get my figure skating friends to like me.

They had stayed out late last night even though we are not allowed to leave our training camp accommodation. They went swimming, sneaking out the window to meet up with the boys that were staying further down the hallway.

"Are you coming?" Michaela asked me as she was on her way out the window.

"No, thanks. I'm tired." I am not tired and I really want to go with them. Have some fun. It's better this way. If my coach finds out about this, which she probably will, I want her also to find out that I had been sleeping. I do not want to break her trust, and I want her to be proud of me.

Story 5

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself." She tells me in the middle of our session. I am fighting back tears. She is frustrated with me; I can feel it. We had been working with the steps sequence for almost one hour, and she has showed me the steps repeatedly, but I cannot get the pattern right. I am more than frustrated with myself. Every time I skate back to her, she appears to be more disappointed with me. She sighs, steps on the ice and hastily grabs both my wrist and drags me through the intended step pattern.

"Can you do it right now?" She asks me with a firm voice, still holding on to my wrists. I am nodding, with my head down. I do not want to look at her. I do not want her to see that I am about to cry again. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself!* I am able to hold back my tears for the rest of the session, but as soon as the door to the locker room closes behind me, I burst into tears. All that I have been holding in during the session is now coming out. Somebody is entering the locker room. *No one should see me like this!* It is Emily, from my figure skating group, and her smile disappears the moment she sees my face.

"What happened?" She asks me. "Nothing" I answer, hoping that she will go her way, but instead, she sits down next to me. "Is it Coach?" she asks me. I nod. But I do not want to complain about my coach to Emily. *It's not my coach's fault that I am crying. It's me that's a worthless skater.* "I don't want to talk about it." I answer slowly. Emily nods, and gives me a big hug. I am anxious when I come back to training the next day. *Is my*

coach still mad at me? I have been worrying about it since last night. When I enter the ice, I search for signs that tell me whether or not my coach is still angry with me.

“Can I talk to you?” My coach asks me when I am about to hug her goodbye after training. Instantly, I feel bad and I leave the ice to sit down on the bench beside her. “Heard that you thought I was mean to you yesterday”. She says with a firm voice. *I never said that to anyone! How did she know?* I panic, and I do not know what to say.

“No.” I answer slowly.

“Ok, because I received a call from Emily’s mother yesterday and she was telling another story.

Emily had jumped to conclusions and told her mother. Why? I am angry. I feel as though I am about to burst. I feel betrayed. *How can they do this to me? It’s not their business. They have gone behind my back. I hate Emily and her mother for what they have done.*

“I was only mad at myself yesterday.” I explain to my coach. She nods, and she does not look as angry anymore. “I’m only hard on you because I believe in you. If I don’t pressure you, that means I don’t care.”

No harm done. I am relieved.

* * * *

Athletes develop personal characteristics that are beneficial for their athletic performance and sporting career (Barker-Ruchti, Barker, Rynne, & Lee, 2012; Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014). The investment narrative that Fanny adopted in phase one was a good companion as it followed the prospected path towards athletic success (Frank, 2010). In this second phase, Fanny desired to align her experiences with the previous storyline by behaving in ways that would allow her to remain the coach’s favourite, and get extra attention and special training. Fear, however, also emerged as Fanny observed the social interactions between the coach and other skaters. For instance, Michaela (story 3), and Linnea’s (story 4) experiences demonstrated the consequences of no longer aligning with the storyline of being a talented figure skater. Her desire to align her story to the investment narrative, and her fear for her coach to treat her like Michaela and Linnea, impacted Fanny to adopt behaviour that was beneficial to receive her coach’s approval, which included her to train while injured (story 3), prioritize training over education, friends and family (story 4), and not question the coach (story 5). These behaviours created the boundaries for how Fanny could successfully navigate the figure skating context. In turn, the investment behaviours actively created Fanny into who “she was” (Frank, 2010).

Phase 3: alone in the corner

Story 6

I have spent two hours in the patient ward. I am in the doctor's room and the X-ray pictures of my hip are on his desk.

"What would happen if I train anyway?" I ask the doctor, trying to hold back tears. I can handle the pain, but I need to know the consequences of training with pain.

"The pain will get worse, and it could also lead to permanent damage to your hip." The doctor patiently answers.

"How long would I be out of training?" I ask, no longer able to hide my tears.

"You have problems in both hips. That would require two separate operations. So, it's hard to say." The doctor continues; "I would really recommend you do this operation Fanny. I cannot force you to do it, but you need it. Call this week and we can schedule the operation as soon as possible."

I say goodbye to the doctor and wander down the hallway. *Now what? How can I possibly tell this to my coach?* I feel numb, and I start to think over the last three months. I have been in so much pain, but I have not missed a single training session. My parents have begged me to tone down the training, but I have refused to do this. Recently, my leg started to fold due to the pain. I cannot put weight on my right hip anymore. My coach put me in the corner to practice the one thing that worked – spins. I could be stuck in the corner for hours practicing spins over and over again without a single comment or correction from my coach. I heard her scream out to the other skaters: "nice jump" or "extend your knee". All I desperately needed was one comment like that, something telling me that she had not forgotten me in the corner of the ice rink. I did my best and tried to perfect my spins. I tried to be in motion all the time so my coach would see that I was dedicated. While doing the spins repeatedly, I repressed the feeling of pain. It did not matter.

"Yes, my hip feels much better today." I said to my coach; I was lying.

I changed bus two times to get from the sport clinic to the skating rink, and the moment I see my coach I start to cry. "My hip requires an operation." I say. My coach looks at me and says calmly: "How long until you can be back on the ice?" While silently sobbing, I tell her what the doctor has told me, and my coach listens and nods.

"Ok. This is how we do it. We will manage it without the operation. That way you don't miss any time on the ice and can continue to practice. I want you on the ice, we will manage this together."

My coach wants me on the ice. I am so happy. She has a plan, and she is going to help me. *She still believes in me.* I immediately decide that I would

not go through with the operation regardless of what the doctor has told me. Everything is going to be okay, my coach says so. I trust her. I give my coach a big smile and hurry back to the locker room to change for practice. My hip is throbbing from pain. I give my coach a big smile as I step out on the ice. *This training will be different.*

“Fanny, I want you to focus on the combination-spin today, there’s a spot for you in the left corner.” I do not say anything, instead I give my coach a big smile, nod, and spin around to place myself in the corner. I continue to smile, but I feel empty inside. Doing one spin after the other, I wait for my coach to notice me. Waiting for the training to be over.

* * * *

Being injured in youth elite sport disturbs the athletic storyline of linear athletic development (Curry, 1993). In order to align to this narrative script, and continue to follow the investment narrative, a healthy body is necessary. For Fanny, her hip injuries wrecked this narrative plot (Frank, 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, research into illness and injuries has shown that sick or injured individuals generally follow three types of narrative scripts: restitution, quest or chaos narratives, which provide different types of hope (Frank, 2013). In the third phase, Fanny desired to once again align with the athletic development storyline. This plot involved hope of being injury-free and becoming a successful skater, which reflects Frank’s restitution narrative and the concrete hope this narrative includes (2013).

In contrast to the previous two phases, the “alone in the corner” phase became a bad companion for Fanny. When physical circumstances drastically change, as when an injury prevents the performance of a particular activity, the change may isolate the body from the previous storyline (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Fanny’s body became excessively disciplined and even more controlled as it was instructed to exist in a monadic state in the corner of the ice rink (Frank, 2013). Figuratively, Fanny felt lost as her injury, and as a consequence the loss of coach attention, disrupted Fanny’s vision of becoming a professional figure skater.

Epilogue: the end, and a new beginning

After retiring, I desperately tried to find a sporting setting that would allow me to continue to live my athletic story. The legacy of my investment and coach’s pet narratives made me want to live this narrative. One year after my wrecked figure skating story, I still struggle to find a setting that suits me. Currently, I am learning how to make my own decisions and I constantly need to remind myself of what I have learnt through my narrative of self to not fall back into the role of obedient athlete. I still feel

as though I need further distance from figure skating, however, I am slowly starting to define myself in other ways.

How stories shape lives: closing thoughts

In this article, we explored the self-narrative construction in the stories told by one figure skater concerning her 14-year long relationship with her coach, providing important insights into the long-term impact of this relationship on her development, health and well-being. The stories and our interpretations of their narrative construction confirm the fundamental role the coach plays in impacting athletes over time (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Smith, 1999). The stories further demonstrate that the figure skating context and the coach impacted Fanny to follow a problematic sport investment narrative (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014). In the context we researched, as has been shown to be the case in other sporting cultures, this investment narrative entails athletes learning to a) submit themselves to coaches; b) change their purpose of performance from wanting to succeed in the sport to pleasing the coach; and c) train when sick and injured (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2005; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Purdy et al., 2008). This investment narrative, however, is risky because the self and behaviours that this storyline demands may contribute to wrecking a story that the athlete must then live with. In Fanny's case, her invested figure skating self and its associated behaviours created a relationship characterised by trust, and dependence and obedience, which prevented her from realising the seriousness of her injury and the detrimental impact on her health, well-being, personal development and sporting career.

Fanny's narrative of self, in particular the process of storytelling for meaning-making purposes, has important implications for health, well-being and coaching pedagogy. With regard to health and wellbeing, Frank (2010) claims that the stories we choose to follow and live by "breathe" life into individuals, a metaphor he uses to describe how narrative scripts shape lives. For Fanny, the ice princess story and her subsequent growing up in figure skating resulted in her adopting idealised "figure skating behaviours", characteristics that continue to impact her sense of self and life having retired from this sport. Moving forward, Fanny decided to tell her story, a turning point that has initiated a healing process (Frank, 2013). Indeed, the opportunity to tell her story has not only made Fanny conscious of the idealised figure skating culture, relationships and behaviours she had been a part of, the writing of this article has also helped her to reconstruct meaning about her experiences, something that was not yet the case in the early phase of conducting the narrative of self. Further, Fanny has begun to adopt concrete actions to change the behaviours that she

developed during her figure skating life, such as reminding herself that difficulties are normal and do not represent personal shortcomings. Importantly, such positive narrative resolutions of events in relationships are indicative of heightened health and wellbeing (Frost, 2013).

With regard to coaching pedagogy, and as others have claimed (Carless & Douglas, 2013; McMahon, 2013), narrative ways of knowing and exploring experience can be used, with guidance, in coach education strategies to offer new insights and understandings. One core element of a narrative approach is connecting the personal to the cultural (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). A story told by an athlete, which idolises or demonises the coach as an inherently morally “good” or “bad” person acts to focus attention on the individual and swerves attention away from the problematic sporting environment or culture that frames the lives of coaches and athletes. By exploring the stories of athletes and student-coaches with them, (coach) educators can emphasise that problematic behaviours in these environments are not detached from local and wider structures such as sports organisations, health systems, government policies and societal norms, attitudes and beliefs that create the performance investment narrative. Focusing on the wider coaching context helps to shift attention away from a focus on individual shortcomings (and associated emotional hurt) towards seeing coaches as part of structures that affect how they make decisions and live their lives in sport. Such learning has the potential to develop more socially sensitive practice (McMahon, 2013).

Lastly, Frank (2010) writes that stories have lives of their own and “people do not simply listen to stories, they become caught up” in them (p. 49). The impact of Fanny telling her story on the two advisers offer preliminary thoughts on the work Fanny’s story did in our academic and professional lives. First, it has worked to connect us (all three authors) into a social grouping who bore witness to this story and became a companion in our lives. For Natalie, this companionship was intense and at times caused great concern for Fanny’s wellbeing and guilt for having supported this type of research. Although Carly and Natalie agree that narrative research represents some of the most meaningful and enjoyable work we are privileged to be able to do and advise, we also recognise this as an instance of stories calling to us to recognise, question and act upon who we are as teachers. Our personal experience is that auto-ethnographic work, sometimes justifiably, has raised a number of concerns amongst colleagues, for example, of allowing students to tell emotionally invested personal stories and to have their personal experiences open to academic judgement. Further questions might be raised around the adviser’s role in bearing witness to such stories and the ways in which they act to provide the right kind of support within academic and personal boundaries. We signal a number of actions this story affected and we share these in a process

of becoming more ethically aware advisers of self-narrative as a result of this process. First, Natalie continually emphasized her role of academic support and not as therapist or counsellor. She also signposted Fanny to appropriate support services for further help and encouraged her to talk to other people with whom she felt comfortable. Issues are certainly raised about the preparedness of this type of supervision and we feel sure that appropriate considerations of what we might term the “micro” ethics, especially in qualitative research, are not provided by university ethics forms and need further consideration.

Finally, despite tense moments and emotional upheaval for the three authors involved in this article, we recommend academics to advise, and students to draw on their sporting experiences, to write theses. Students bring with them a wealth of sporting experiences and insights, and to work with this knowledge has enormous potential to teach a number of interpretive research characteristics (e.g. subjectivity, reflexivity, critical reflection, emotional impact), highlight the contextual and interpersonal impact sport can have on athletes, and lastly, develop values and for sport coaching students, coaching philosophy. As was the case for Fanny, and her advisors, it also generates important personal growth and offers exciting opportunities to engage in supervision.

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