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Transition-based Reflections of a Scientist-Practitioner

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A Better Version of My Similar Self:

Transition-based Reflections of a Scientist-Practitioner

For Peer Review

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Abstract

In this invited commentary, I reflect on the development of my approach to practice and the career-based transitions and opportunities that have shaped me as a professional over the last 30 years. I illustrate how I started and continue as a scientist-practitioner in the ways and means that I attempt to make a purposeful contribution to the profession of sport psychology. Drawing upon historical changes and momentum shifts in the availability of professional knowledge, I reflect upon how 'doing sport psychology' has evolved greatly over the last three decades. Sharing the journey of how my applied research has been a consistent and reciprocal influence on my practice, I try to make sense of how my experiences and environments have changed me for the better while recognising that my core values, approach and purpose remain largely intact.

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Introduction

Writing this reflective piece of work has allowed me to reconnect with how fortunate and blessed I have been to be part of this profession. Young (and older!) professionals will be realizing that this profession is not easy; qualification routes are long, clients and contracts can be sparse and competitive, income can be inconsistent and our work hours are often unsociable. In addition, our places of employment and contexts of service do not always welcome us with open arms. The whole science in sport psychology on 'Gaining entry' goes way back (Ravizza, 1989), as if we've been invited into the building but need to climb a mountain first for a set of keys to unlock the door (i.e., win coaches and athletes over). We quickly recognize that few people immediately love us being around the place, and so the art of building relationships before even getting down to business is a vital craft. Yet, beyond all of the stressors, obstacles and challenges that can characterize our profession, they can fade (more) into obscurity when we gain that enriching sense that we have helped someone. I assume we all internalize this purpose of being, and for myself at least, it has been an interesting and fortuitous journey of contextual transitions that has enabled me to pursue such a purpose.

I've produced a few other reflective and autobiographical-type pieces of my work as scientist-practitioner over the years (see Harwood, 2008a; Harwood, 2014; Harwood, 2016a; Harwood, 2016b). However, I was fortunate to deliver a second inaugural Professorial lecture at Nottingham Trent University in 2024 where I reflected on managing my 'double life as a double agent' in practice and academia (see Figure 1). The creation process enabled me to reflect more deeply on how my career transitions had impacted on my evolving approaches to practice, who I was as a practitioner, and how I had become that person over 30 years of the changing landscape of sport psychology. In this time, there has been (at least) self-assessed failure and self-dissatisfaction, organizational frustrations, and emotional struggles (let's be

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honest) from working in environments short of warmth and safety. There have been the more effective, receptive and buoyant periods too which make you look forward to going to work. To that end, this article will take a slightly more scientist-Practitioner with a Big P focus, and explore how transitions I have made as a practitioner into new contexts have augmented my scientist-Practitioner identity, influenced my self-worth, and perhaps made me more 'street smart' and selective in terms of how I seek to go about my work. I will also illustrate how my applied research as an academic remains a consistent and reciprocal influence on my practice as the Siamese twin who completes my whole.

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Personal Background and Student-Athlete-Coach Transitions

To understand and make sense of who I am now requires me to appreciate how it all started. I began studying for a degree in Physical Education, Sports Science and Recreation Management in 1989 at Loughborough University. I had no psychology background at that time, and had studied French, Latin and Ancient History 'A' levels at high school. I came as a Regional/State level tennis player from an early diversification, multi-sport childhood. I myself (and my parents) lived the organizational culture and competitive demands of tennis as a junior in the system. Such a youth sport childhood would have a considerable influence on my approach to work. However, my undergraduate degree program introduced me to key mentors such as Rod Thorpe and David Bunker, both of whom developed the Teaching Games For Understanding approach (TGFU; Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) and who taught applied sport science and coaching modules. During this undergraduate period, I became immersed in the interdisciplinary nature of sports, and studied the demands of sport from psychological, physiological, biomechanical and sociocultural/organizational dimensions. In tennis, for example, the implications of court surface, climate, equipment, technological advancements and ranking systems represented a few of many relevant themes with respect to human performance. This knowledge shaped a key part of my subsequent working

philosophy as a practitioner, and particularly one that valued a knowledge of sport science beyond psychology alone.

Alongside my undergraduate and graduate studies, I completed my professional tennis coaching qualifications while continuing to compete as a national player. This enabled me to gain income as head player-coach at Loughborough University while simultaneously studying for a PhD. During my Masters degree, I had read the first edition of '*Motivation in Sport and Exercise'* (Roberts, 1992). This was a career-defining text for me and one that shaped what remains a core approach to my work all of these years later. Glyn Roberts alongside his contemporaries such as Joan Duda, introduced students and young practitioners to achievement goal theory (AGT) – one of the hottest 'social-cognitive' approaches in town during the 1980s and 90s. AGT and its twin henchpersons – task and ego orientation - resonated greatly with me based on my playing experience. Tennis is a highly ego-involving sport which externally rewards normative performance outcomes over task-focused personal improvement and offers a poverty of individualized feedback. It is so easy to get caught up into personal theories of achievement, competence and 'success' being about beating someone else or at least not losing or performing in ways that risk the embarrassment of being the worst player (i.e., performance avoidance goals; Elliot, 1999). Social systems and the structure of tennis can feed the cognitive belief that it is more immediately necessary to 'prove' versus 'improve', and significant others (e.g., coaches, parents, officials) can serve as unintentional co-conspirators shaping such an ego involving motivational climate for a young player (Ames, 1992), This study of young athletes' competence-based cognitions, how the social system influenced such thoughts, and the emotions and behavior that followed, would represent the next 4 years of doctoral study and 15+ years of applied research (see Harwood & Swain, 1998, 2001, 2002; Harwood, 2002; Keegan et al., 2010). My field work into achievement goals ultimately culminated in a multimodal intervention program for players,

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parents and coaches (see Harwood & Swain, 2002) which has endured as the most significant influence on my subsequent work as a practitioner. I will come back to this study in due course.

My brief career as a coach to county junior players and student-athletes heavily impacted my belief that [in an ideal world] coaches should be responsible for introducing psychological strategies to athletes. The challenge in the 1990s, and one that surprisingly remains today in some quarters, is the lack of attention that coaches devote to psychological preparation and skills training (PST) *over and above* a focus on technical, tactical and physical components of performance. In tennis specifically, Gould and colleagues (1997) reported that this was often a matter of perceived confidence around psychology and coaches' lack of knowledge in how to integrate mental skills into coaching practice. Given how well informed and resourced we are in terms of scientific knowledge around psychological strategies, it still surprises me how the 'psychological' or 'mental' segments of national coach education qualifications trail significantly behind other disciplines in terms of time and attention for coach development. For myself, as a dual role 'tennis coach-aspiring sport psychology practitioner', introducing my players to goal setting, attentional routines, cognitive restructuring, imagery, breathing techniques and other exercises within the canon of stress-management and self-regulation, was simply a matter of being a good coach. I was a coach who happened to have training in sport psychology, but still - where time existed - I believe that this was a performance-focused coaching role.

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Over the years, I have benefitted from working alongside some very psychologically-informed coaches who are masters of employing constraints, conditioned games and simulations in their practices to mentally great effects. They are skilled communicators, expert in the use of cultural anecdotes and metaphors that are 'made to stick' (Heath & Heath, 2007) with players who can thrive from understanding a difficult or worrying concept

that is made simple to them. My early experiences here served to cement a strong belief in an integrative approach as a practitioner (see Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Sinclair & Sinclair, 1994) where I would want to work closely with a coach on an athlete's mental skills as opposed to being the 'at distance' psychologist who may never even meet the coaching team.

In 1998, I transitioned out of coaching into a full time academic role as a lecturer/assistant professor in sport psychology at Loughborough University. I had also recently completed supervised experience to become an accredited sport psychology practitioner with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES). However, while I left my brief performance coaching career behind, my competitive experiences and physical education and sport science training, had begun to shape a more performance-enhancement oriented philosophical approach to my practice. When I compare what approaches dominated the 1990s in terms of sport psychology practice to the levels of philosophical understanding, maturity of processes, and knowledge amassed on service delivery typologies nowadays, we have developed vastly and diversely as a profession. I've reflected on the many changes in working practices between now and then trying to make sense how they have come about.

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Narrow but a start! The Era of Practitioner-led PST

When Richard Keegan, my former PhD student [in achievement goal theory], published the superbly informative 'Being a Sport Psychologist' (Keegan, 2016), he produced a heuristic figure that summarised the various philosophical positions of practitioners and what this meant for the type and focus of services to clients along a continuum. At the top level put very simply, was the degree to which a service was 'Practitioner-led' versus 'Client-led'. When I saw the figure presented, the positionality resonated immediately with me possibly as a result of being haunted by actually how Practitioner-led I believe myself and most other practitioners were in the 1990s.

There is an explanation for this. In the early 1990s, sport psychology was very much a niche, emerging profession when sports themselves were going through a professionalising process. One could name the role models whose books we all read and who perhaps represented the first generation of 'professional consultants' on the back of your hand – Steve Bull, Dorothy Harris, Jim Loehr, Shane Murphy, Ken Ravizza, Terry Orlick, Bob Rotella, Peter Terry. Indeed, it takes such an historical reflection to realise the genuine lack of gender and ethnic diversity in 'professional practitioner' models at the time; a concern that I feel the profession continues to work hard on to improve (see Kensa Gunter's 2025 Invited Expert Commentary). Some of these and other prominent academic-practitioners who were key models at the time (e.g., Dan Gould, Robin Vealey, Bob Weinberg, Jean Williams) were also still working and publishing at Universities as researchers and educators. Few at that time would have been sole trader consultants, fully independent of University employment and salary. The growth of applied sport psychology in terms of paid consultancy work grew mainly from a successful, educational model of sport psychology at a time when psychological skills had a growing utility value. Applied researchers and practitioners were borrowing heavily from a cognitive-behavioural model because the salience of sport psychology lied in its contribution to performance enhancement in athletes. Athletes and national federations (as they still largely are today) were becoming interested in those individual factors and strategies that could explain differences in performance, and could make a difference to performance. Sport psychology would not survive as a profession if it offered something else, nor at that time did it actually have that much else to sell perhaps. Witness the birth, therefore, of the Psychological Skills Training (PST) era where the late 1980s and 90s were about implementing the benefits of goal setting, imagery, self-talk, relaxation, routines and cognitive-behavioural strategies and techniques that would be central to motivation, confidence, stress management and emotional self-regulation in sport. Goal

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setting, multidimensional anxiety, and imagery research dominated journals, and the book 'Psychological Preparation in Sport' (Hardy et al., 1996) epitomised this era of 'Sport Psychology has arrived to help your pursuit of performance excellence as an athlete!'.

I want to be bold and state that the approach that others including myself took here was very much 'we are the experts; we have this new shiny product called sport psychology; we know that sports are cognitively and emotionally demanding, and there are some strategies you need to know that we can teach you'. This is Practitioner-led, nakedly stated. Such an approach was not borne out of arrogance, more than necessity. It was the era where 'fitness coaches' were saying the same thing about their profession, and coaches were able to start focusing on their technical and tactical duties and delegating an athlete's 'fitness' to the strength and conditioning expert. Hence, as the professionalisation of sport began to take hold in this period, the knowledge of the athlete and the coach was assumed to be limited around psychological preparation and performance. Therefore, in line with Keegan's model, the 'assumed need' to best serve the client was to educate, to teach, to lead and deliver a PST programme to plug the skills gap. At that time, my fellow young practitioners and I were impressionably served by informative models of the consulting process (e.g., Boutcher & Rotella, 1987) which largely represented a PST agenda. To that end, much of my 'spare time' work as a practitioner focused on athlete self-report assessments of psychological factors (e.g., anxiety; CSAI-2, Martens et al., 1997) or psychological characteristics and strategy use via the Psychological Skills Inventory for Sport (PSIS, Mahoney et al., 1987); the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28, Smith et al., 1995) or the Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS, Thomas et al., 1999). Within individual work, these would enable me to target appropriate PST interventions through a psychoeducational approach. However, qualitative attention to the client via the use of thorough intake interview or collaborative interview protocols lay entirely in a future decade. Indeed, much of my practitioner-led work with

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British tennis and squash was often focused on group-based PST education within training camps, often in classroom type settings. In the United Kingdom, lottery funding had given national federations money to develop sport science support services for their talent pathways, and sport psychology provision frequently amounted to direct PST education with coaches and/or athletes as opposed to individualised needs analysis, case formulation and intervention.

Help for practitioners like myself to emerge out of the narrowness, and embrace the client's view more, came in the form of Performance Profiling (PP; Butler & Hardy, 1992). In the same way as it seemed like the whole academic world was researching multidimensional anxiety theory or achievement goal theory in sport, performance profiling became the tool of choice for a generation of practitioners seeking a new toy. Importantly, based on Kelly's personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955), a client needs analysis began with asking the client about their 'interpretive' components of 'performance excellence' (or another chosen concept) in the sport. After developing a meaningful list of features with ratings of ideal self, current self and importance to self, the practitioner and client could arrive at a clearer, subjective-objective view of what areas needed priority attention. Unfortunately, as I reflect back, I feel we heavily misused performance profiling, misdirecting the client in practitioner-led ways back to PST being the only solution. Having completed the profile, like a hammer seeing a nail, the answers would always lie with one or more of the 'Fantastic 4' – namely, goal setting, imagery, self-talk or relaxation strategies (see Jones, 1993 for a multimodal intervention). What also started to emerge were 'ready-made' or 'pre-filled' performance profiles with the key 'practitioner-led' ideas of the key psychological components in the sport for athletes simply to then fill in their self-ratings, 'spider's web' or 'radar' figure. This was starting to become 'paint by numbers PST assessment' that completely missed the clients construction of their world!

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A more humanistic approach using PP would have more deeply explored clients' views of each self-generated component, the circumstances of its being, and sought the client's own perceptions of possible solutions and actions that might further mastery. To that end, strategic recommendations and ongoing client-practitioner work could have been more tailored with a more palpable sense of 'client-led'ness representing the client-practitioner relationship. Frankly, at that time I was neither experienced enough nor sufficiently trained in that type of approach; nor was it a time perhaps where clients were that ready to explore things more deeply and find the answers for themselves. Remember, this was the era when, despite its intriguing appeal, the use of sport psychology remained quite heavily stigmatised by association to its more clinically-viewed parent discipline (i.e., psychology), and so athletes and coaches were perhaps ready for mental skills training education, but venture more deeply at one's peril!

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Imprints of Achievement Goal Theory: My Social-Cognitive-Behavioural Approach

I've noted in past articles that my dominant model of practice reflects what I would call a 'social-cognitive-behavioural' orientation. I believed then, as I do now, that thinking processes governed behaviour in athletes and achievement goal theory left the indelible impression that such cognitive processes and behaviour is associated with or underpinned by substantial social-environmental influences. My own playing experiences in tennis as a junior, and to this day as a veteran/masters competitor, convince me of the same philosophical position. My interactions with junior athletes, their stories and experiences (which I deeply listen to qualitatively) continue to convince me too. Personal conceptions of our own competence are absolutely central and where athletes struggle to see the world in task-oriented ways (Nicholls, 1984), or with incremental beliefs/growth mindset (if you are a Carol Dweck enthusiast; Dweck, 1999), then there is work to be done!

Parents, grandparents, coaches, peers, and organisational systems can shape the way we think and act in terms of our achievement goals through their use of language, behaviour, actions and reactions to events. All too often such external behaviour is an ego-involving influence on the athlete, and to be honest in the highly competitive world of sport, people find it quite difficult to behave or react in task-involving ways. Indeed, I would say it takes a lot of skill and discipline for a parent to craft language around task-involving process goals and use such a lens to help a child to set up and reflect on their learning experience and achievements in matches. I remember my own mum asking me, with some frustration and bewilderment in her voice, "how come you lost to him? I thought you would sail through that match. You are a better player." I'd just lost a close three set match as a 16 year old to a very talented younger opponent; I'd given my best efforts, but nerves got the better of me possibly because my overriding mindset had been 'I can't lose to him'. I was giving myself that impression – that achievement expectation - that ego involvement - and the social forces around me were giving it to me too!

Do you detect some emotional scarring here?…..crikey I do as I write this! Nonetheless, the collective of these experiences and factors led me to a pretty immovable standard or premise that my work with an individual would always seek to understand or proactively take account of the current or past behaviour and involvement of parents, coaches and peers/teammates. In Harwood and Swain (2002) I worked with four coach-athlete-parent triads to introduce each to the *'Competitive Performance Programme'* – a multimodal intervention based on psychoeducation around task and ego involvement, adaptive process goal oriented mindsets for training and matches, the use of task-involving parental and coach language, and post-match goal review and reflection processes. This field-work lasted for about 4 months with desired changes in the motivational climate and improvements in

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players' cognitions and experiences of the game. I have found myself repeating and finessing several elements of this approach ever since in my work.

From 1999 at Loughborough University, I worked with the Women's 1st team Hockey squad for two immersive seasons. True to facilitating task involvement at a collective team level, I was drawn towards a system of performance management and group reflection whereby units would set and review the execution of valued mastery goals and agreed performance behaviours match after match over the course of the season. To shape and contain this system, I managed the production of '*Hockey's the Winner*', the team's weekly mental toughness magazine that encompassed all of the open match reviews, coach's report, humorous columns edited by the players, and learning/motivational points for the next match. With attendance at a weekly training session, weekend match observations and post-match reviewing, this experience formed my apprenticeship as a more embedded team psychologist. The later article 'From Researcher to Waterboy' (Harwood, 2008a) reflected my diverse roles supporting the players and coaching staff while holding down a full time job as an assistant professor and academic.

Professional Sport Transitions and Holistic Awakenings

In 2002, my transition to working at a UK professional soccer club considerably accelerated my growth as a practitioner. The project started with necessarily commissioned objectives around team performance enhancement as the club and manager's mandate to me. In this respect, psychoeducational work with the team, video-based strategies illustrating and agreeing relevant psychological behaviours on pitch, and process-oriented team performance reviews followed the core principles of team productivity and group dynamics theory (Carron et al., 2011). I felt a sense of practitioner efficacy from my Women's Hockey apprenticeship and I'd like to think that the more tangible psychologically-informed environment helped the team to develop a more cohesive and resilient identity. We made the league play-offs in the

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first season, narrowly missing promotion but more than all the strategies and results, I grew as a practitioner because of time with the players as people and the chance to understand them as human beings first as opposed to merely club assets.

The education and professional development of sport psychologists was also accelerating at this time with the arrival of a number of universally helpful products for students, educators and practitioners. Mark Andersen's Doing Sport Psychology (2000; 2021) and his follow-up text, Sport Psychology in Practice (Andersen, 2005) offered readers exemplar insights into the person and process elements of more client-led, interpersonally-skilled sport psychology support in action. We gained a much greater feel for qualitative intake interviews, the application of different philosophies (Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Hill, 2000), questioning/listening skills, and actual conversational dialogue between client and sport psychologist within case work (Virtual brands, 2000). These books and videos also targeted relevant athletic themes (e.g., career transitions; injury; eating disorders; crisis management; relationships), theories, populations, and contexts that practitioners would come across in the real, messy and complex world of professional practice. Reinforcing the need for more professional processes and competencies in supporting a diverse range of clients, Gardner and Moore (2005) raised the bar on more systematic procedures for psychological assessment, theoretical case formulation, and subsequent classification of client's intervention needs. Their classifications of Performance Development, Performance Dysfunction, Performance Termination and Performance Impairment brought out to young professionals the criticality of fully understanding the person, the athlete and their past and present worlds in order to inform appropriate psychological interventions. Importantly, neither a PST approach nor the 'Fantastic 4' would be the entire answer for athlete-clients, and the noughties helped practitioners to understand and develop a much broader toolbox and more adaptable ways of working. In many respects, I felt that post-Millenium there was a

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significant shift occurring in the identity and capability of a sport psychologist; we weren't just doing 'small p' psychology through mental skills education, but becoming 'larger P' Psychologists with critical contextual intelligence, knowledge of the sport domain, and more mature professional and interpersonal processes.

The young adult players I worked with did not represent society's overpaid footballer stereotype. There was the dressing room banter but they were respectful human beings whose self-confidence could be knocked by poor form, non-selection, emotional criticism, negative chants from fans and denigration by the media. Through trusting relationships built with players, I found a place for my counselling skills to develop and a shift from a performance expert with the answers to a listener walking alongside a player as we explored options and ideas in relation to managing particular stressors. To me, this was the period of my life where I was able to engage being a practitioner who supported the mental health and well-being of the athlete over and above a performance-focus. The sizeable professional growth during this time also came with adversarial growth as I often struggled to encourage coaches to work on their own psychology and to individualise their communication, feedback and leadership style to players with whom I was working. During my second season, albeit temporary more than pervasive, there were periods where I felt very low emotionally due to the taxing and hostile culture created around poor results and failure to meet performance expectations.

The battle scars here strengthened a resolve to convince coaches of their role in player development and well-being, and my applied research endeavours reflected this goal. From 2005 onwards, working with Matthew Pain and Simon Middlemas as doctoral students, we investigated the performance environments of football teams and how to optimise their components (Pain & Harwood, 2007, 2008, 2009). We also explored how we could help coaches to enhance their video-based feedback to young players, and build relationships with them to use positive modelling as a pre-match confidence building tool (Middlemas &

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Harwood, 2017, 2019). However, one of the biggest resolutions I made was to contribute to a healthy psychologically-informed environment at the professional club's academy where I would work part-time for several years while being back as an associate professor at Loughborough.

The developmental health, well-being and identity of children and adolescents in intensive, early specialisation pathways was becoming a topic of increasing interest in sport psychology, and scholars were beginning to emphasise the importance of attending to psychosocial and life skills through sport programs (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Gould et al., 2007). Positive youth development as an approach (see Lerner et al., 2005) was still very new to sport [psychology] contexts, but the goal of creating a 'community' that more intentionally and explicitly introduced and shaped psychological and social strengths in young people through its integrated activities resonated with me. At that time, I also came across the work of Bronfenbrenner (1999) and the role of interdependent systems around the athlete, including of course, the importance of the microsystem of coaches, parents, and peers as the more inner circle of influence on the developing young person. Interest in this model would accelerate steeply with the popularity of Kris Henriksen's Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA; Henriksen et al., 2010) to talent development based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

My own attempt at raising the game on psychosocial development proceeded by creating an entirely different '5Cs' framework to Lerner and colleagues (2005). This was by complete chance because his paper was not published until I had actually completed the first year of intervention work with coaches in 2004 (Harwood, 2008b). My concepts of Commitment, Communication, Concentration, Control and Confidence represented those motivational, interpersonal and self-regulatory qualities that were highly accessible and 'sticky' in sport (Heath & Heath, 2007) but which carried powerful transfer value to non-

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sport domains, social and performative activities. While as a practitioner, I promoted holistic intentions to encourage coaches and parents to introduce behaviours associated with the 5Cs beyond the football pitch, the scientific publications lagged behind the practitioner work (Harwood et al., 2015). Good things come to those who wait though, and our study led by Sara Kramers which interviewed parents in a football academy on how they had applied the 5Cs over the years was testimony to how parents had benefitted from the framework (Kramers et al., 2023). The 5Cs framework started life as a way of injecting confidence into coaches that they could deliver a psychological return on a young player's investment in training. Since then, aided by a coaching and practitioner textbook (Harwood & Anderson, 2015), it has blossomed into a popular approach for introducing behavioural psychology into youth sport and helping athletes, parents and coaches to be on the same page regarding valuable behaviours to demonstrate strengths as processes. Importantly, it is yet another task-involving tool that, in reinforcing the growth of the whole-person here, prevents stakeholders from getting caught up in an isolated and unitary emphasis on results.

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Professional Sport Transitions II: Advocacy for Programs and Parents

In 2010, I entered into another professional transition when I took the decision to be seconded from Loughborough University part time as lead psychologist for British tennis in London. This contract with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) would last for three years but it marked further growth with the sport that I had played all of my life. As I look back at this career decision, I recognise how much as I was sensitive to and aligned with an ecological systems approach. However, my mandate wasn't the whole system of British tennis, it was supporting a defined group of late adolescent players and coaches who were at different stages of the junior to senior transition. Nevertheless, I found myself questioning and then lobbying for more systematic attention to player development psychologically through childhood and early adolescence in the British tennis system. After all, I had spent

almost 10 years in an intensive early specialisation football system from U-9s to U-18s, and so I cared about what was happening to players across these stages in tennis, not just what was happening to them from 18 years onwards.

Those of you who have had the pleasure of working in a national federation or governing body of sport will appreciate the organisational challenges and the political competencies required to navigate the institution. One could be physically five feet away from a head of talent development or performance pathways in an office, but five thousand miles away from being 'on the same page' as them in terms of the psychological needs of players or parents. Being a 'sport psychology lead' is less about how you might support an individual player, than how you can influence a wide number of players, parents and coaches through small systematic, policy-focused changes. At that time, beyond the mandate I was given, I had two intrinsic, policy-focused objectives. First, to get more sport psychology support into the regional and county junior systems. Second, to provide greater support to parents as resources who could genuinely develop expertise in their role across the tennis journey (see Harwood & Knight, 2015). I would say that I failed dismally at achieving the first goal, but I'm proud of the progressive organisational change, attitudes and support towards parents.

My strategic attention to parents started around 2005 with research into parental stressors and the focus on understanding parents experiences (Harwood & Knight, 2009a,b). With a greater emphasis on qualitative approaches as an academic and practitioner, it was a matter of empathising with and knowing the parent's world in order to appreciate what support needs they had (see Thrower et al., 2016). Working with Sam Thrower as my Doctoral student at the time enabled me to be the purer 'scientist-practitioner' in action. We gathered the evidence to inform and create bespoke educational interventions for parents in

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youth tennis (Thrower et al., 2017, 2018) that were tailored and scaled out within a national governing body parent support strategy that has existed since 2018 (see Thrower et al., 2023).

This applied research and knowledge exchange project would not have been possible had I not been in an organisational lead role in British tennis at the LTA doing an entirely different job! I use this an example of how you can make things happen for the better 'within an organisation' even if you don't achieve everything you set out to do. It is also a great example of how governing bodies, practitioners, applied researchers and universities can work effectively together to improve the system. Indeed, our longitudinal experiences of delivering the Competition Parenting Course as part of the LTA's strategy led us to investigate parent-child interactions in the naturally occurring setting of the car journey using GoPro cameras (Thrower et al., 2022). This study not only enabled us to inform and improve the delivery of the Competition Parenting Course, but also to introduce applied researchers in sport psychology to Conversation Analysis (CA) as a methodology for the behavioural analysis of natural visual and audio-based data.

Prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, I was seconded to the newly opened National Tennis Academy at Loughborough for a year where I had the opportunity to begin integrating psychological support to the early adolescent players and support their parents. In addition, the head of coach development started to apply the 5Cs framework for the mental strand of professional coach qualifications, and I began to supervise younger practitioners to introduce the 5Cs approach to parents and players at County level. In 2019, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) also took a keen interest in education and strategic support to tennis parents globally, and so we developed a programme for them as well as launching a Joint ITF/LTA research project investigating the critical topic of optimising parent-athlete-coach relationships in tennis (see Tagliavini et al., 2023). So, if you keep persisting, you can get there in the end!

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Finding Purpose and Authenticity as a Scientist-Practitioner

Well, I hope you have enjoyed my trip down reflective memory lane as much as I have in exploring and making sense of the evolutions of my practice. The more experiences that you gather across a diversity of contexts and populations, the more I believe in the flexibility and adaptability of your philosophical approach. However, this reckoning that philosophical flexibility, and some might say 'eclecticism', is valid and important only comes with client and organisational experiences that expose you to its salience. At my core as a practitioner, I still value how a social-cognitive-behavioural lens greatly facilitates my work, my onboarding of clients, and my relationships with them. Of course, I seek always to behave in my interactions with the attentive, interpersonal skills that are often ascribed to being a 'client-centred humanistic practitioner' but I know that I do not fully embody the humanistic or existential approach as a model that is practiced regularly. I strongly believe in the importance of understanding the social systems playing out around clients, and where possible, holistic, integrative interventions are most preferred. I have worked with a number of athletes within close, multi-disciplinary support teams (MDT) including coaches and parents, and I have to say that I find these relational opportunities the most optimal in terms of supporting both performance and well-being in equal measure.

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What has exponentially changed over the course of 30 years, or what I believe experience has taught me, is that you might come to possess a flexible, preferred model of practice, but you can find yourself in multiple roles, settings and situations attempting to execute it. Staying true to my values on how at least I see the world in helping clients, and within ethical limits of competency, I've found myself being an educator and mental coach, a counsellor and sounding board, an MDT support, an advocate, a mediator and a peacemaker. The degrees to which some of these situational roles emerge is often determined by whether you are on the inside or outside of an organisational contract. Being the 'insider' sport

psychologist employed by a sport federation or club creates many more inter and intra-role conflicts than being the 'outsider' sport psychologist whose role is constrained to conducting private teleconsultations over Zoom. As such, the current generation of practitioner is encouraged to gain knowledge and experiences across settings to appreciate and grow the ever increasing range of competencies for 'working roles' with individuals, teams, coaches, parents and organisational staff. What is interesting to note in executing roles with athletes now compared to 20+ years ago is the greater openness to discuss mental health and well-being goals, supported by essentially improved athlete mental health literacy. The pronounced societal movement in this area has almost entirely stripped away the 'taboo' or stigma, and hence more holistic conversations around well-being and self-care are becoming par for the course in supporting the whole person beyond a performance-enhancement only agenda.

Balancing the demands of being a Professorial leader at an academic institution, an applied researcher, educator, supervisor and practitioner continues to get harder. However, when preparing for my second inaugural lecture, my 'reflection on [30 years of] action' led me to realise that my overall purpose was enabling people to have optimal sport-based experiences (see Figure 2). This goal was being facilitated by applied research and publications that tapped into different dimensions of knowledge creation and practice. There were times when it was important to understand participants experiences, to investigate them more fully, learn from experiences or existing knowledge, or improve experiences through interventions (see example studies). I feel that I have conducted applied research through numerous projects in these ways, and each of them have influenced my approach to practice and the practitioner I am today. It has certainly not been an easy journey getting here, but it sustains its colour and appeal when you can find opportunities to be your most authentic self.

For Peer Review

I know for me this lies in youth sport where there was work to be done 30 years ago, and this remains even more the case today.

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For Peer Review

Figure 1 Title Slide from my Second Professorial Inaugural Lecture in 2024

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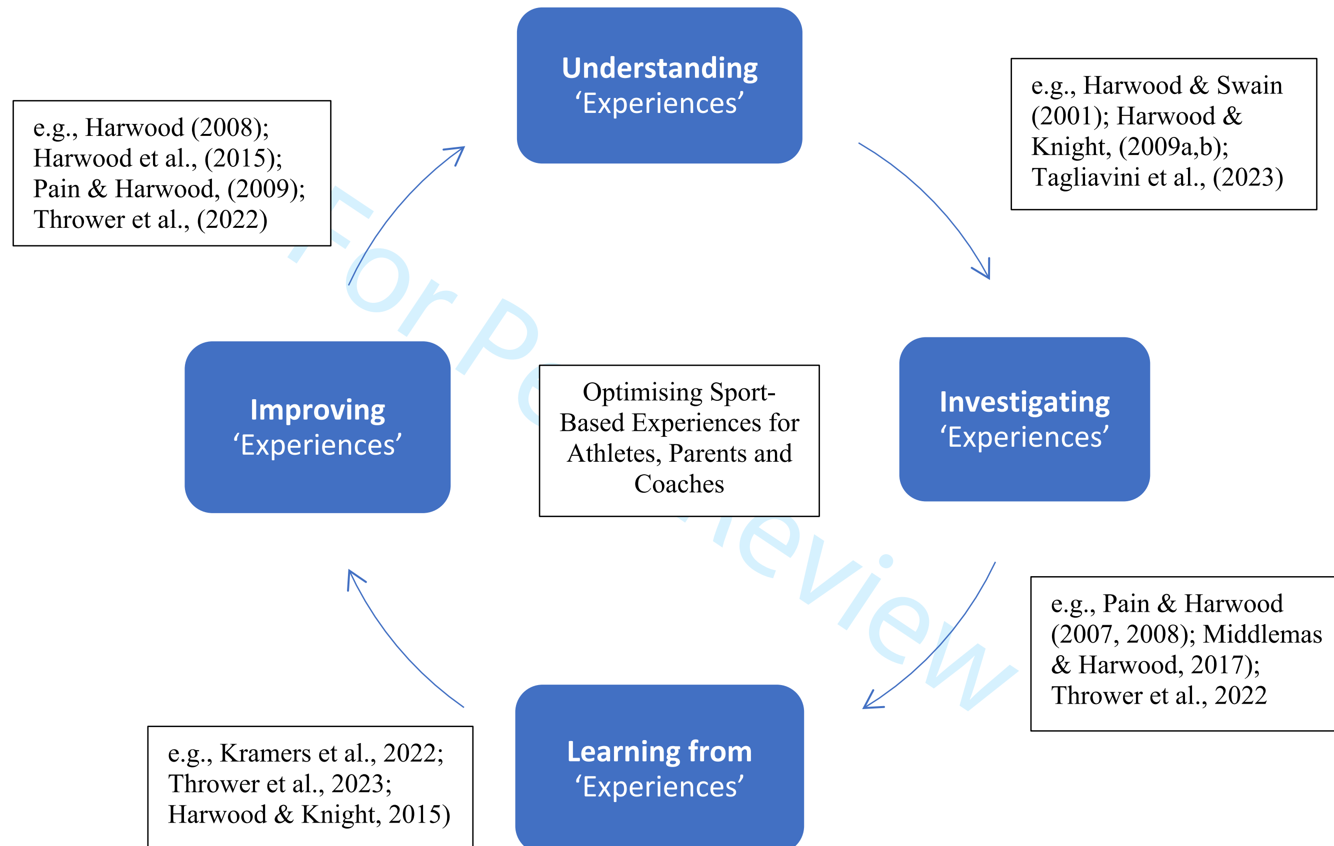
Figure 2 Finding Purpose within my Scientist-Practitioner Identity



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