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"Everything Plays a Part Doesn't It?": A Contemporary Model of Lifelong Coach Development in Elite Sport

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Abstract

Coach development is typically considered to consist of a complex mix of experiences, including formal, informal and non-formal. Elements of the early research in this area led to the production of a model of long-term coach development (LTCD) over a decade ago, consisting of three core categories of experience: *athletic*, *coaching* and *education*, later published in a number of significant coaching documents. Whilst this model has clearly been of benefit in providing a framework to consider long-term coach development, it can also be considered to have its limitations in focusing on a somewhat narrow coaching context (typically Olympic sports in North America) and lacking currency. This study therefore attempted to consider and update this model to a professional team sport context away from North America by investigating the life stories of head coaches in English rugby league. Data collection consisted of a novel life story approach, whilst analysis utilised elements of constructivist grounded theory. Though supporting elements of the original LTCD model, results here provide an additional category of experience occurring prior to athletic experience, *childhood*, consisting of a number of sub-themes, alongside several other novel elements with implications for both research and practice. This work points towards a need to further understand coaches' lifelong developmental journeys across a range of sports and contexts.

Keywords: sport coaching; learning and development; lifelong learning; coach education; coach learning; informal learning

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1. Introduction

The evolution of sport coaching as an academic discipline in recent decades has seen the development of a multitude of models, including Chelladurai's (1990) multidimensional model of leadership, Abraham et al.'s (2014) who, what, how model and, more recently, Stodter and Cushion's (2017) filter model of coach learning, amongst many others. These models can be useful in describing, analysing and potentially predicting various aspects of the realities of coaching and may take the form of a 'model for' or a 'model of' coaching (Cushion et al., 2006; Lyle & Cushion, 2016). A model *for* coaching can be considered to be an ideal conception for effective practice (e.g., Abraham et al., 2014) and a model *of* coaching is one formed from a deductive analysis of what actually occurs in practice (e.g., Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Though these models may be widely published, provide value and be applied within the coaching field, they are not without their critics. They can be

considered to be too reductive and simplistic, provide two-dimensional representations of very complex realities and underplay essential social and cultural elements (Cushion et al., 2006). Together, these criticisms may go some way to explain why models have not been overly central to the ever-expanding field of research on and in coaching more recently. A perhaps lesser-known model that could be considered to have been under-utilised given this broader landscape of coaching research is Côté et al.'s (2013) model of long-term coach development (LTCD), to be expanded on below.

The move towards professionalisation in coaching in recent decades (North et al., 2019) has seen national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) and academics pay increasing attention to the knowledge, skills and understanding required by coaches, in addition to how these are developed. Much of the early research on coach development strongly suggested that formal coach education programmes, as short-term interventions typically led by NGBs and often de-contextualised in being held away from coaches' typical work environments, initially considered to be the crux of coach learning, have limited influence on coaching practice or coaches' beliefs about coaching (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2009; R. L. Jones, 2006) and that coach development is a much broader, complex, multi-faceted mix of experiences including formal, informal and non-formal (Nelson et al., 2006). Numerous studies have investigated, typically through descriptive means, this mix of experiences in order to understand how coaches learn to coach and to inform future coach education and development programmes, including Erickson et al. (2007), Werthner and Trudel (2009) and Koh et al. (2011), amongst others, each highlighting key elements of experience in coaches' developmental journeys.

Côté et al. (2013) synthesised elements of this early research into a model of high-performance coach development (later to be titled the LTCD model) in order to provide a framework that details the experiences coaches typically go through in becoming elite coaches, consisting of three core categories of experience. Each of these was considered to equate to 3000–4000 h, made up of (1) athletic experience, (2) coaching experience and (3) education (both formal and informal) which each, in turn, consist of three more-specific experiences: Athletic experience typically includes being an above-average athlete in a specific sport *and/or* playing a variety of sports *and/or* having a formal leadership role. Coaching experience typically includes being a head coach of developmental athletes *and/or* being an assistant coach of developmental/elite athletes *and/or* coaching other sports. Education typically includes having a coaching mentor(s) *and/or* obtaining coaching qualifications *and/or* formal education in sport/physical education.

This model has since been incorporated in a number of significant coaching publications, including two versions of the *International Sport Coaching Framework* (ISCF) (International Council for Coaching Excellence & Association of Summer Olympic International Federations, 2013; International Council for Coaching Excellence et al., 2015) and, most recently, the *European Sport Coaching Framework* (ESCF) (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017). The first of these was published in response to 'the need for a common set of criteria to inform the development and qualification of coaches' (International Council for Coaching Excellence & Association of Summer Olympic International Federations, 2013, p. 5), whilst the second provided 'an authoritative and flexible reference document that facilitates the development, recognition and certification of coaches' (International Council for Coaching Excellence et al., 2015, p. 5). The third, in recognising increasing collaboration across the European continent within the coaching community, was created 'to enhance sport coaches' learning, mobility and employability across the European Union through the provision of a shared reference point and language' (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, p. 9). With specific reference to coach development and the aforementioned model, the latter also suggests that '. . .expertise development takes time and effort. Coach development must therefore

proceed in a progressive and sustainable way. There is thus a need for long-term coach development (LTCD)' (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, p. 42). These publications have undoubtedly played a significant role in coaching and coach development, as noted in the introduction to the ESCF, in stating the range of countries including Japan, Italy and the USA and the range of international federations, including the International Tennis Federation and the International Golf Federation/PGA World Alliance, that have utilised them (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017).

The LTCD model can be considered to be a model *of* coach development, in adding to our understanding of the long-term nature of the process and the complex mix of experiences involved. It can also be considered as a model *for* coaching in providing a framework for coach educators, developers and NGBs to consider when designing coach education/development programmes. However, though it has value, it also has, as all models do, its limitations. It was produced well over a decade ago, thus could be considered rather dated, and was built on a body of research on coaches primarily from North America. In addition, this research centred on coaches from a limited sporting context (primarily from Olympic sports) and it includes a possibly too-simplistic, quantitative aspect in stating hours spent in each category of experience, no doubt influenced by Ericsson's much-maligned 10,000 h concept. Though the most recent of these documents includes the caveat that the LTCD "...may look different for each country, sport or discipline, because it needs to be tailored to specific needs and available resources" and that "Coaches may also have different developmental pathways due to varying personal circumstances and exposure to diverse sources of learning"(Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, p. 42), no further adaptations or developments of this model have occurred in the years following.

Subsequent work has, however, explored components of the developmental journeys of coaches, in a sense through a reductivist lens, e.g., social networks (e.g., Lefebvre et al., 2021), mentors (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Banwell et al., 2021), formal coach education (e.g., Wood et al., 2024), short-term coach development interventions (e.g., Eather et al., 2021), fast tracking (e.g., Leeder, 2024) and reflection (e.g., Downham & Cushion, 2022), but not fully explored the whole picture. Whilst no doubt beneficial to our understanding of these components, such work could be considered to be ignoring the well-attested complexity of coaches' development, as noted by Lyle (2018) in relation to the commonality of reductivist approaches to coaching research more broadly.

Additionally, others have focused on segments of the lifelong journey; for example, Watts and Cushion (2016) explored the journeys of eight experienced British football coaches, though focusing primarily on their careers in elite football, including playing. Similarly, Cooper (2023) identified four key elements of experience in exploring the transition of seven non-professional football players to professional coaching, these being starting a coaching journey, learning and developing as a coach, progressing to development environments and progressing to professional football. Meanwhile, Darpatova-Hruzewicz et al. (2024) investigated the career pathways of Polish Olympic coaches, in particular focusing on transitions between coaching roles in an Eastern European context, whilst Cooke et al. (2023) analysed the developmental journeys of eight high-performance athletics coaches in Northern Ireland through an ecological lens, identifying individual aspects (athletic experience and experiential learning through coaching), interpersonal aspects (social networks and mentoring), organisational aspects (formal learning, NGB support, the high-performance system) and the sociocultural context (Northen Ireland's unique position, dual nationality options and religious traditions of sports) as being key components. In addition, Duarte et al. (2020) 'mapped' the development of Canadian wheelchair curling coaches in a novel and creative manner through utilising a landscape metaphor consisting of a range of *hills* (incl. personal life hill, disability hill and professional career hill), though

not considering coaches' lives before they began coaching, for example, as children or as participants in sport pre-coaching.

Of the few studies to address the role of childhood in coach development, Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) explored the life stories of 17 'serial winning coaches' (SWCs) as part of their broader work with this cohort, with one element of the findings pointing to early captaincy of teams. Holmes et al. (2020) focused purely on early life experiences, in particular the sociocultural environment and participation in youth sport, noting a similar point regarding leadership of sports teams at an early age. More recently, Christian et al. (2023) explored the development of epistemic beliefs in a case study of one high-level adventure sport coach from which childhood arose as a significant shaper of the coach's practice later on in life.

To a degree, Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) present an element of crossover with Côté et al.'s LTCD model (2013) in outlining experiences throughout the life course, as do Perondi et al. (2025) in exploring the common learning experiences of expert Brazilian judo coaches (though appearing to exclude childhood experiences). However, in summarising the work referred to above, it is clear there is a need for more contemporary evidence-based models, driven by explorations of coaches' full life stories across a range of different sports, continents and contexts, particularly if such models are to be included in internationally significant documents, such as the ISCF and ESCF discussed previously. This study, therefore, explored the life stories of six professional head coaches in the elite division of the sport of rugby league in the UK (the Super League), three English and three Australian, with the aims of (i) identifying the key developmental experiences that combined to make them the coaches they were and (ii) to develop a contemporary model of lifelong coach development that can be used as a framework to consider coach development across other sports in both research and practice contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The study outlined here was one element of a broader project exploring coaches' developmental journeys, their beliefs about coaching and their coaching practice. It was driven by a relativist ontology and a subjectivist/constructivist epistemology. Following University ethical approval, invitations were sent via email to 12 head coaches working in the Super League (SL), the highest of three divisions in professional rugby league in England. Seven of these replied positively, with six eventually fully consenting to participate having had opportunities to discuss the project more fully and ask questions. A pilot interview and analysis was carried out with one additional coach (not an SL coach) prior to the initiation of the full project to test out the interview framework and probes. Following the data analysis of this pilot, in particular the challenge of coding line-by-line of lengthy chunks of data, a decision was taken to move from a strongly systematic grounded theory approach that has its origins in the positivist/post-positivist tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to an approach centred on elements of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) to be detailed below. This approach was considered to be more aligned to the ontology and epistemology stated above and the selected data collection method, consisting of semi-structured, conversation-based, life story interviews (also to be detailed below).

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in the study, involving the researcher choosing participants and settings that will specifically aid the understanding of the particular research question (Creswell, 2007). Here, given that the broader work (that this paper is

one element of) was exploring elite professional male rugby league coach development, beliefs and practice, as noted earlier, participants needed to be (i) currently working at head coach level in the Super League or (ii) have coached in SL within the previous five years and currently be coaching in the Championship (the second-tier level immediately below SL). Six male rugby league head coaches took part in this study, as outlined in Table 1 below—three English and three Australian.

Table 1. The six coaches.

Pseudonym	Background
Bob	An Australian coach with a successful playing career who spent most of his playing and coaching career in England.
Mike	A successful Australian coach who had a limited playing career due to injury. Mike has coached at a number of English clubs, won major trophies and coached with a number of international teams.
Steve	An experienced English coach who had a lengthy career as a player. Steve has won major trophies as a coach and worked with a number of international teams.
Paul	An experienced English coach, who has also coached in the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia and won major trophies. Paul had a lengthy playing career and has also coached internationally.
Dave	A successful English coach who also had a lengthy and successful playing career. Dave has coached at multiple levels of rugby and won major trophies as both a player and coach. He has also coached at international level.
John	The youngest and least experienced of the six coaches, John, an Australian, had a lengthy career as a player in England prior to becoming a coach.

2.3. Data Collection

Data collection was led by a life story approach. Atkinson (1998) defines the life story as

> . . .the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person wants to remember of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime. . .A life story gives us a vantage point from which to see how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time. (pp. 125–126)

Sparkes and Smith (2014) suggest that human lives are storied and the self is constructed through the narratives that we tell, both to ourselves and to others. In addition, Atkinson (1998) suggests that storytelling is a fundamental form of human connection in which stories bring meaning to our lives. Though Potrac and Jones (1999) and R. L. Jones et al. (2003) highlighted a need for life story research in coaching some time ago, little changed in this respect up until a number of published papers co-authored by Bettina Callary, typically with female Canadian coaches, began to fill this void (including Callary et al., 2011, 2012; Callary & Werthner, 2011, amongst others). A life story methodology, including timelines, was also used by Duarte and Culver (2014) in investigating the life-

long development of a single disability sailing coach. As might be expected given the life story approaches utilised, many of these studies also drew on elements of Jarvis's (2009) theory of lifelong learning to frame their studies. Others, including Douglas and Carless (2008, 2015) and Carless and Douglas (2011), have also suggested there is value in using the broader method of storytelling in coach education and development. In addition, Watts and Cushion (2016) investigated the long-term development of eight experienced professional football coaches and suggested that. . . "Coaches' journeys are an under-utilised resource and have implications for future coaching practice, coach learning and coach education development" (Watts & Cushion, 2016, p. 1). More recently, Wood et al. (2023) explored the individual biographies of eight neophyte cycling coaches with a view to understanding how these stories shaped their engagement with coach education. In addition, the chronological approach to questioning utilised by Cooke et al. (2023) in exploring the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northen Ireland, and Cooper (2023), with professional football coaches from non-professional playing backgrounds, hold obvious similarities in terms of data collection approach, though not referring to life story explicitly.

Coaches were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way, starting with their earliest childhood memories and early involvement in sport, running through to the present day and their current roles in elite rugby. Such stories would aid in enabling an understanding of how the coaches came to develop their beliefs and practice, and the influence of particular experiences on these, as per Sparkes (1993) and Watts and Cushion (2016), amongst others. Whilst coaches were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way, several probes were used to address particular issues identified from the existing literature on the range of experiences involved in long-term coach development, including social, cultural and institutional elements such as the involvement of siblings in their lives, the communities they lived in and experiences of physical education at school. Probing questions can be 'central to eliciting rich, deep data from participants' (Robinson, 2023, p. 382), when used appropriately in qualitative, interview-based research.

Life stories were typically completed within a single interview, but for two coaches this was split over two interviews and, for the final coach, three interviews, primarily due to ever-changing work requirements. Mean aggregate interview duration was 95 min (±22.6) and these together generated a total of 153 A4 pages of transcribed data.

2.4. Data Analysis

The completed life story audio recordings were each listened to on three occasions prior to transcription, in order to develop familiarity through immersion. Marshall and Rossman (2011, p. 210) suggest 'There is no substitute for intimate engagement with your data. Researchers should think of data as something to cuddle up with, embrace and get to know better'. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and fully transcribed interviews were sent to the participant coaches via email for content verification and/or correction.

As noted above, analysis drew on elements of constructivist grounded theory, which Charmaz (2014) herself considers to be flexible:

> The strength of grounded theory methods lie in its focus and flexibility and that one must engage the method to make this strength real. Researchers can draw on the flexibility of grounded theory without transforming it into rigid prescriptions concerning data collection, analysis, theoretical leaning, and epistemological positions. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 320)

The first step, initial coding, involved the study of fragments of data—words, lines, sentences and segments of potential significance. This process began immediately following initial interviews to ensure Charmaz's first feature of CGT was met—data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously in order to drive future data collection. The second step,

focused coding, involved a focus on and aggregation of existing initial codes across large batches of data to select particularly important ones or develop new codes that represent a selection of initial codes. Once two or three data sets were analysed, it quickly became clear what some of 'the most useful codes' were (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). The third step, memo writing and categorising, involved the development of informal analytical notes to explain what each code or theoretical category appeared to represent.

Though many authors (including Creswell, 2007; Pitney & Parker, 2009; Charmaz, 2014) consider the process of data analysis in qualitative research to be primarily inductive, the existence of existing work and theory could be considered to influence researchers working on any data set. Sparkes and Smith (2014) noted similarly in observing that most qualitative research *begins* with induction, though may not remain entirely inductive. As such, research that begins inductively but progresses deductively may be considered 'abductive' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 27). Here, the Côté et al. (2013) model described earlier with its three key categories of experience very much framed the thematic analysis and shaped, but did not define, the resultant model to be outlined below. As Sparkes and Smith (2014, p. 27) go on to suggest, there is 'something of a half-truth in the claim that qualitative studies are inductive'.

2.5. Quality and Rigour

As Smith et al. (2014) highlight, there are numerous options available to qualitative researchers in terms of criteria to judge research quality, including Lincoln and Guba's (1985) much-used notion of *parallel* criteria. This approach proposes the use of alternative qualitative criteria in place of each of the traditional quantitative criteria: objectivity, validity and reliability, referred to as 'the holy trinity' by Spencer et al. (2003, p. 59). Whilst issues such as time in the field, the naturalistic setting, reflexivity, triangulation (of methods and theories), member checks and transferability (all concepts associated with the parallel approach) were all considered here, instead, we present a selection of the 'letting go' criteria presented by Smith et al. (2014), drawing on the work of a number of authors, including Barone and Eisner (2012) and Smith and Caddick (2012), amongst others. The 'letting go' perspective was first introduced by Sparkes (1998) in a paper addressing validity in qualitative research and was later developed by Sparkes (2002) and Sparkes and Smith (2014). Its foundation lies in the researcher letting go of traditional views of validity that appear to provide certain techniques with privilege over other techniques and provides more relevant and appropriate criteria for judging qualitative research (Smith et al., 2014). The criteria to be discussed here include *substantive contribution, width, dialogue as a space of debate, credibility,* and *transparency.*

A *substantive contribution* can be claimed by research which contributes to our understanding of social life (Richardson, 2000). According to Tracy (2010, p. 845), readers should ask questions such as "Does the study extend knowledge?", "Improve practice?" or "Generate ongoing research?" when considering this contribution. The reader here is probably best placed to answer these questions. *Width* refers to the 'comprehensiveness and quality of evidence' provided by the researcher in the presentation of their research (Smith et al., 2014, p. 195). The depth and quality of data here is, hopefully, there for the reader to see. It was always the intention to remain true to participants and include as much of them, in their own words, as possible to allow the reader to see where the evolving model is grounded. Holman Jones (2005, p. 773) refers to research which 'create(s) a space for and engage(s) in meaningful dialogue among different bodies, hearts and minds'. We trust this paper, in particular the model presented, will initiate further dialogue amongst agencies involved in coach development, and representatives of them, to continue discussions that have already taken place as the study unfolded and the model was developed. *Credibility*

refers to the 'trustworthiness, verisimilitude and plausibility of the research findings' and includes thick description, concrete detail, triangulation, multivocality and member reflections (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Given the relativist ontology here referred to previously, in sending transcribed interviews and initial data analysis to the respective participant coaches, 'member reflections' were obtained rather than the 'member checks' espoused by realists (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). Finally, *transparency* here included the maintenance of a research log including audit trails to detail methodological decisions, and discussions with critical friends (primarily the second and third authors here), to assist in development of theoretical explanation and interpretations (Smith et al., 2014).

3. Results

The results here provided a reasonable fit to the existing LTCD model (Côté et al., 2013), with five of the nine sub-themes apparent and two of the nine partly present, as can be seen in Figure 1 below. However, two additional sub-themes (coaching other sports and formal education in PE or sport) were not apparent to any significant degree in this cohort of coaches. Only one coach taught other sports through his work as a PE teacher, in addition to just one being educated to degree level (in movement science).

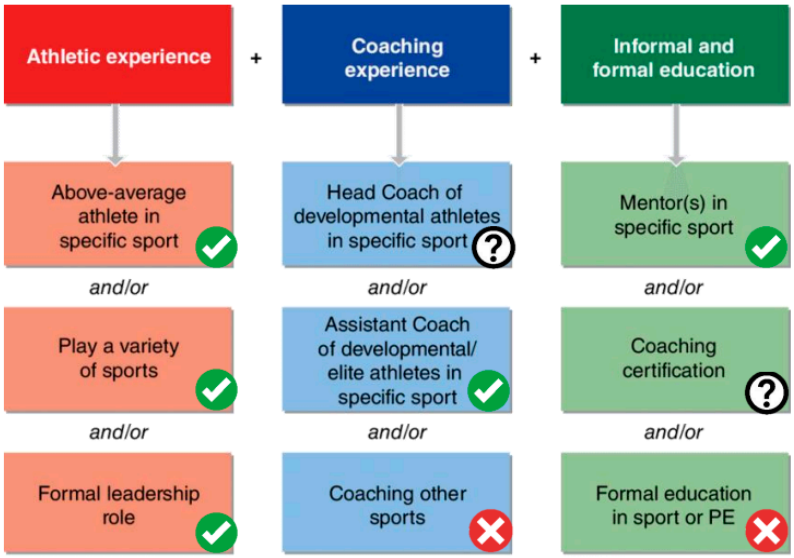

Figure 1. Mapping the data to the existing LTCD model (Côté et al., 2013).

Another key category of experience (childhood) appeared to be significant, whilst other sub-themes within the key categories of the existing model appeared to suggest differences. Together, these differences pointed to the need to develop a revised model, as presented here, consisting of four key experiential categories, each consisting of a further four sub-themes, as can be seen below in Figure 2.

These key categories and sub-themes will now be outlined in detail and supporting data presented. It should be noted here that though there was significant commonality apparent, there were also elements of idiosyncrasy in each coach's developmental journey, as per Abraham et al.'s (2009) observation regarding the individual nature of a typical coach's journey. Sub-themes within each category refer to commonly encountered experiences, not necessarily experiences encountered by all six coaches.

Figure 2. A contemporary model of lifelong coach development.

3.1. Childhood Experiences

Childhood experiences centred around being born into the sport, experiencing extensive free play and competition as children, developing early talent and leadership, and becoming obsessed with the sport at an early age.

The coaches were typically born into families with strong rugby league connections, including dads, uncles and brothers who played rugby league—many professionally and some for leisure. Each had family members who supported local teams and would go to watch them play on a regular basis, including dads, aunties and grandmas. They typically recalled being taken to watch their local teams and/or watching dads, uncles or brothers play from around the age of six and had developed a strong bond with the game by the early years of primary school. Bob (below) explained his family's playing involvement in Australia, whilst Paul (following) gave an English perspective:

> *My father played rugby league. He ended up going to the city and played down there. He went on to represent the city and our state. My cousin went also to the city and played there. He represented the state and national team. My brother was also a rugby player, he went on to captain the state and played in the city. So we all played, all eventually went to the city and played for the same club.*
>
> *We'd go and watch him (my dad) play and my mother would take us into the tea room before the game. Obviously, she'd have a cup of tea or whatever she was drinking with the rest of the wives. We'd play with the other kids. We'd take a ball. If we didn't have a ball we'd get an old beer can and after the game we'd go on the pitch and kick the cans over the sticks (meaning goalposts).*

Playing freely, outdoors, appeared to be the most common pastime the coaches experienced during their childhoods. A vast amount of time was spent playing sport, quite often, though not solely, rugby league, in gardens, on streets, in local parks and fields. Additionally, such activities were typically very competitive, potentially developing an element of desire to win that would run on into their coaching careers. The coaches stressed the importance of winning and getting one over on their peers, especially brothers, even at primary school age. All six coaches had brothers, with four of the six having older brothers. Paul (below) and John's (following) experiences were typical:

> *In the town, there's a miner's welfare facility where there's a cricket field, a rugby field, a soccer field, which was a ten-minute walk away. We'd walk up there in the summer holidays and we'd play rugby games, and I'm talking for an hour/two hours on end. We'd*

> *take our Australian kits up and our Great Britain kits, so it would be Australia versus Great Britain, and we'd take the Vaseline up, tape our heads up, put our boots on, and we'd knock seven bells out of each other! But I'm certain. . .well, I know that a lot of my skills were picked up then, you know. . . It's probably no coincidence that a lot of the guys that played with me then were creative players in the teams they went on to play (professionally) with.*
>
> *It was a competitive upbringing. My brother and I were competitive. Good memories really. We didn't fight too often. We did some ridiculous games, but they were always games where there was a winner. They weren't friendlies, they were competitive. While we didn't fight over it too much, we understood we didn't want to lose.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this regular sporting activity from a young age led to the coaches being talented in a range of sports including rugby, football and cricket, amongst others. All represented school teams from primary school through to high school, whilst they also typically played in teams at a higher age group, for example, playing under-13s when aged 11. They were also selected to play at representative level in a range of sports for their town or area during high school years. Such experiences could be seen to be testing them more in terms of the various demands of sport (physical, technical, tactical, psychological, etc.), and, in relation to representative level, potentially experiencing better coaching. All six coaches in their early rugby playing careers either played in key decision-making positions, such as scrum half or stand-off, and/or had leadership roles as team captains. Steve highlighted this with the following:

> *I felt more mature (compared to my peers) from a game perspective, not just in rugby league but in any game that we played. That was because I was such an avid fan of it and also...I like to think I was reasonably bright, so I could understand it as well, and I mean... I always was either captain or vice-captain of the school team going right the way through. You just . . . you were the boss or the leader, you know, in that little group.*

The coaches considered themselves to be obsessed with rugby league from an early age—possibly due to a combination of being surrounded by it from an early age in terms of their communities and families, watching successful local teams, having role models to aspire to and being good athletes themselves. Though they played other sports, childhoods were typically spent playing, watching, reading and talking rugby. Steve (below) explained one particular factor in his obsession, whilst Dave (following) shared the comprehensive nature of his:

> *I went to school just around the corner (from my local club) and when we played rugby league, which they did then as 13-a-side even at junior school, we played on the club's training field, so there's a link there. They (the professional club) used to train Tuesday and Thursdays, and I used to always go down and watch them, and play touch and pass behind the posts, and see them. I mean... it was just... my whole life has been steeped in it (the club and rugby league).*
>
> *. . .where I lived it was very. . .you were out all the time. . .. like school holidays, first thing in the morning. 'Cos I never slept (great), I'd be out all day 'til last thing at night. . .I used to get them Rothmans (rugby league) yearbooks and I was obsessed with it and the first year we (the team I watched as a child) played at Wembley, I knew the players and what score it was and what the crowd was. So, I knew all the details. I was obsessed with reading it. . .best presents I ever had were those books. Every annual I got I was in awe. Going to watch matches and going on the pitch and being near a player. You know I was obsessed with it. . .I was obsessed. Like now in my job. . .I feel like it's not a job. . .it's an obsession. . .I never stopped doing it.*

3.2. Developmental and/or Elite Athletic Experience

This key category refers to experiences playing rugby at a developmental level such as age level for their county, state or nation, and/or experiences playing professionally. It consists of four sub-themes: holding leadership and/or core roles in teams, having learnt the game and what success looks like, having experienced good and poor coaching, and having begun to develop a network of contacts.

The coaches typically played in positions that held important roles in their teams. The notion of a 'spine of a team' is commonly used today in sport in respect of the positions that play crucial roles in terms of organising the team and making key decisions. In rugby league, this typically refers to fullback, halfbacks (stand-off and scrum-half), hooker and loose-forward. All but one of the coaches, Steve, consistently played in these positions during their professional careers. Playing in these positions appeared to have aided the coaches in giving them a strong understanding of the game as a whole, including an array of technical and tactical elements. Although team captaincy was common with the coaches during childhood sport, most were not captains at the professional level. However, at this professional level, teams typically over recent decades have relied on a shared-leadership model, whereby multiple informal leaders are present. Bob (below) explained the key role he played defensively, whilst Paul (following) shared an outline of his role offensively:

> *As a full back, because you are the captain of the defensive side, you've got to organise where your defence is going and what I learnt pretty early was that you have to be loud as a full back to push people around. When I came to England as a young lad, Barry, who was captain and an international player. . .every game we used to fall out with each other because I used to abuse the shit out of him because he was a lazy bastard. I shouted at him to move and what have you. So, I've never been shy as a player, and people in front of me just become pawns in what I'm trying to achieve defensively, and that's where the leadership came from, loud to get people in position and what have you.*
>
> *I'd always been a main player in a team. . . I needed the support around me, but I could help everybody else. If I had good players around me, I could really help them, put them into position, tell them what to do, (be the) eyes and ears for them.*

The coaches typically played professionally for over a decade, with just one exception who retired early due to injury. Each experienced successful periods, in winning trophies, but also experienced difficult times. These mixed experiences could be seen to have helped to develop a pragmatic view of life in professional rugby and a level of resilience in working their way through the difficult periods. Playing alongside a large number of players over a lengthy period also helped the coaches to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful players in terms of necessary qualities. On one particular player who influenced him, Steve stressed, 'It was just a desire to win and the fact he'd leave nothing unturned in order to win. . .it was the work ethic combined with the competitiveness', whilst Dave, having played with numerous hugely successful players, reflected on one in particular:

> *His blinkered attitude to winning. . .I think I've got that. Nothing else really matters. I know every rule in rugby league and I try to. . .not break them. . .bend them to my advantage (as a coach). We'll work on things and get the maximum out of everything to give my team every opportunity to win. And he had that attitude. I don't know if I've got it off him, or it's in me, or if he brought it out of me. I definitely got it off him . . . the will to win.*

Playing careers also contributed to their learning as coaches through experiencing elements of good and not-so-good coaching. How not to coach appeared to be as significant as how to coach, with negative experiences providing key moments. Each referred to elements of coach behaviour and practice that they later avoid (such as running drills

without expressing the rationale), along with elements they would take on (such as creating an environment where players were expected to provide some input). This was summarised overall by John (below), whilst Steve (following) referred to positives from two of his coaches and Paul (third quote) shared a particularly negative experience:

> *I think every coach helps build the type of coach you are. . .whether it be your perceived good things they do or the bad things. You just know what you think is right and what's not, and what you think is a good idea and what's not. It's not just the good things; it's the bad things.*
>
> *(From the Head Coach). . .it was just a desire to win and the fact he'd leave nothing unturned in order to win. From the Reserve Coach, I got very much tactical expertise. He was really clever. . . I mean you just got different things from different people.*
>
> *He was a lovely guy, but he wasn't my type of coach. . .he was crazy, just fucking crazy! I was a bloke that wanted to understand about the game, wanted to be coached. He was just a mental case. Yes, bullying and intimidating. He was embarrassing really. He just wasn't a coach. He just didn't know the game. Fundamentally he was quite a nice guy, but I've seen him lay his hands on players. He was just all about intimidation and fear.*

In addition to providing experience of coaches, athletic experience also initiated the development of a network of contacts that would benefit them in the future—through both coaches they played under and fellow players. Dave spoke particularly fondly of one coach, a New Zealander (below), and an ex-teammate (following), both of whom would go on to influence him significantly throughout his coaching career:

> *He was the one. And he's said things to me which I use to this day. And he was very much into repetition. And I'm very much into repetition. And it's not about doing it, it's about doing it right . . . perfect practice makes perfect. Repetition but not only that . . . but breaking them down. So like. . .it's that bit. . . doing that bit. . .doing that bit and all of a sudden you put it all together and you get it. That's the way I've done things for years and years. He's the one.*
>
> *I value his view on things. He gets me as well. He understands me. He's a deep thinker. I think about things a bit differently than a lot of other people and I feel he understands that. He understands what works for me and what doesn't work for me. So I lean on him quite a bit and I speak to him quite a lot. That was him on the phone just then... I speak to him about six times a day!*

3.3. Coaching Experiences

Coaching experiences include beginning coaching informally whilst still playing professionally, coaching at lower or developmental levels, being an assistant coach to a successful head coach and learning from players.

Paul's entry to coaching was through an old friend whilst still playing part-time, professional rugby at his final club (below), whilst John's first experience of coaching came during a period of injury when he could not play (following):

> *He said to me "Will you help me do some sessions for England students?" And I'd done bits and bobs for him. I'd gone down and helped him take sessions, but this was really the start of it all. I went down and I helped him coach the England students. So I was taking sessions and I was genuinely hands on coaching then, and that was. . . I wanted to have a go. I wanted to test myself and see what it was like.*
>
> *I helped him (the head coach), sat next to him every game, spoke to him about different players, what I saw during the game. And we stayed in contact, and he offered me the*

job (as his assistant coach) a few years later. I was finished as a player. . . I was only 29, maybe 30. And that was it.

A number of the coaches coached for the first time at amateur, academy, reserve or lower league level, prior to becoming Super League coaches. For some, this was during their playing careers, whilst for others it was following retirement. This was typically the first time each coach had taken responsibility for a team themselves and had to make important decisions in relation to this team. As such, this experience was their first opportunity to learn through experience as a head coach and make mistakes that they could learn from. For some, coaching at a lower level, with limited financial support and associated facilities and equipment, was a strong grounding in providing experience of the realities of rugby below the elite level, as Steve (below) and Paul (following) noted:

You got the nitty gritty that it isn't just about coaching and education (of players). There's also a bigger picture about finance, and resources, and facilities, and that really did come to me, first of all as a reserve team coach at the club I played at, but more so at the lower league club where they hadn't got two halfpennies to rub together.

I look back when I got that job (at a lower league club)...it was all my way. . . I didn't have the understanding of technicalities. . .of principles like the very top coaches had at that point. But what I was doing. . .I was gaining tremendous on-field experience of managing, recognising when a session or a drill wasn't particularly working.

Each coach worked as an assistant coach to successful head coaches, including Mike (below) with an Australian widely considered to be one of the most successful coaches of modern times, whilst Bob (following) worked under a very successful English head coach for seven years, split over two clubs:

He was a huge influence on me. I worked with him for nine years. . . and I suspect a lot of his mentoring and his philosophy. . . I think I've probably taken on board as well. Massive influence on my career, very caring man, always taught me to get the office in order first, get the staff organised and the players will follow after that. I guess it was the early 90s where I thought "maybe I do want to be a coach" and he was giving me more and more leeway, he was more flexible, he was involving me more. . .I was being 'groomed' (to be a head coach) and I probably didn't realise it.

What I really learnt from him was to sit down at the end of each day and review what we'd done and discuss what we were going to do the next day...its planning...as a team. . .what we've done, what we've got out of it. . .if that was any good or was it shit? How the players were. . .were they intense or were they not intense? But also, we'd go onto organising what we were doing the next day, so when we came in the next morning and we'd have our 10 min meeting in the morning, everything is planned out. . ."You're doing this, you're doing this and you're doing this. . ." Sorted!

These experiences were seen as providing an essential apprenticeship to the role of head coach, in addition to providing relationships with mentors that would run on well into the future. John's first role as an assistant coach led to a working relationship with his head coach that lasted five years, over two clubs, but also became an ongoing informal mentorship:

So it was a good grounding for me. I got to do some of the stuff. The head coach, Paul, was good. . . he had plenty of time for me. So the time I had with him was a real good grounding for me. . .And as time got on and I got better he gave me more reign. Eventually at the end, I did my stuff, he did his stuff and there wasn't too much looking over anyone's shoulder. It worked really smoothly. . . I speak to Paul a lot still. Paul had a big one (influence). He's the only bloke I've been under as an assistant coach.

The coaches typically referred to learning from the players they coached, through discussions they had in their day-to-day roles, including informal everyday chats, in addition to more formal discussions such as team meetings or video sessions. Mike was particularly aided by such conversations, possibly due to having a shorter playing career due to injury:

> *I think understanding the player was a big thing for me. . .understanding what makes a player tick. . . understanding what their needs are and what they want. It wasn't just about tactics and strategies and about periodization, planning and about nutrition and biomechanics and sports medicine. It was about understanding how to manage the player. . .managing people. What I learnt very quickly was that the higher the level of the player, the more that person wanted off you . . .the more they demanded off you and that's an interesting thing a lot of people don't think about that. If you think about some of those Australian internationals (that he worked with). . . the greats of that era, you just think they went about their business without. . .it was naturally gifted. But it's not. . . they actually worked harder than most, they wanted to be challenged and they wanted to you to challenge them and at the same time, they were challenging you.*

3.4. Intentional Learning

Intentional learning consists of four sub-themes: an extensive network of support, having a number of key sport-specific mentors, self-selected sources of learning and more formal/traditional coach development opportunities including coaching qualifications and courses. As such, this brings together elements of formal and informal learning.

In terms of support networks, John outlined the diversity within his:

> *There's obviously Paul. . .I speak to Paul a lot still. Sharpie's (one of the most successful SL coaches in recent years) been good to me. I've got those coaches in Australia, obviously my brother (also a professional coach). There's plenty of people to talk about different ideas and how things are going. When I was in France a guy, Danny, he's like a psychologist, so the mental side of the game. He's done some good books on things, worked in Premier League football and different places. He was good. Jamie (a leadership expert), who used to work with us and he's in Australia, I speak to him now and then, he's been good.*

Steve explained the value he saw in having a strong network developed throughout his lengthy playing and coaching career:

> *I've been in the game so long, so you build up many, many, many contacts, and you get lots of anecdotal evidence, and you read books and you go and visit people as well. So there's that ongoing professional development as well. I'm a firm believer, just as you rightly pointed out, you learn more with the informal sit down and have a chat, you know, like Craig (former Australian head coach). I spoke to Craig the last time he was over here with the Australian team. I went and spent an afternoon with him and it isn't so much going watching them train. It's more a matter of sitting with him over a cup of coffee and seeing what he thinks about. . .because you build up contacts over such a long period of time, you can ring people up or visit people without any problem at all.*

In terms of sport-specific mentors, these typically included a number of senior rugby coaches who had been involved in supporting them for many years, as Paul detailed:

> *When I coached at my first club we pumped a top SL club in a pre-season friendly and Sharpie came to after and said he was really impressed with how we played and "Here's my phone number." I rang him up that weekend and said, "Thanks for that." He said, "Any time you want to come up to our training ground, come up." So I went. I was there at 6.00 a.m. when Sharpie gets there and I went to a game and then another game. To be fair, we're great mates now. I kept in touch with him ever since. I wasn't afraid to*

ring him if I felt "Mate, I'm struggling to get my team to do this. What do you think?" And he'd just talk through the processes he'd go through and been a real help. Still do it today. . .I'm not afraid to say I wouldn't hesitate to ring Sharpie up about owt. I speak to . . . Three or four of them I'm really good mates with, but if I've got some issues, serious issues, Sharpie is the one I talk to.

In self-selecting sources of learning, Bob likened his learning journey to a search for the Holy Grail:

It's on-going. . .you're never the complete coach. I don't think you could say that. I think you've always got to be striving to be better than your opposition. I think you've always got to be striving to find the Holy Grail that improves your team, improves your players, improves you as a coach. It's never out there. You can never find it, so that's probably something I'd always say is that you're always in search for the Holy Grail as a coach. In searching for that Holy Grail, you're going to find a whole lot of different things that you can use.

Though very explicit about his dislike of formal coach education, Dave was clear in stressing the need for self-selected ongoing personal development to ensure he continued to learn:

I'd rather pick and choose what I want to do. I'd rather do my own thing. My experience of previous courses is I've got nothing out of it. If I'm gonna spend five weekends doing a course, I want to get something out of it. If I do a speech to a group, they have to get something out of it. It's (formal coach education) just a tick-box bullshit thing! I can't do with that. I would never miss an opportunity of having somebody come in and not asking. . .when I first met you. . . I asked you why you were doing what you're doing. And me? I need to get something out of it. I wanna learn and try and get better. . .. You've said a couple of things about me you've noticed but I've not thought about that (before) and it has got me thinking about it.

Though Dave (above) and others were not particularly positive about traditional coach education and formal learning opportunities, this view was not entirely unanimous. Paul valued the cross-sport element of his UKCC level-four course:

I went back to University shitting myself! It was all electronic learning. . . It was a different world and you'd got to master that in order to progress and go on. Again, like I was saying, I was out of my comfort zone but that's part of my comfort zone (in regularly challenging himself). But it wouldn't have been if I wouldn't have accepted that challenge of learning in a different manner, in a different way, at a different place. It was linked with other sports. I watched numerous hockey sessions and...(I was) really impressed with their coaching philosophy down there, and how they were very much "you learn through doing", and again, they did lots of scenarios within games for them to . . .

Three of the six coaches also supported delivery of a coach education programme at some point, which they typically deemed to be of benefit. For John, this was relatively early in his professional coaching journey:

They had a period where they had a thing called bridging. . . they had to get you to change from the old system (of coaching qualifications) to the new. I did hundreds of them (supporting coaches through that process). I would go maybe to one place one night and do maybe ten people. I didn't know these people from anything. I'd sit there, watch what they did. I had to be able to give feedback, which helped me, to be able to sit there and say "listen, this is what I think" and being able to do it in a way which was constructive without being threatening to them.

4. Discussion

The model presented here, consisting of four key categories of experience (childhood experiences, developmental and/or elite athletic experience, coaching experience and intentional learning), is the first to consider the complete, lifelong journeys of elite head coaches in a major professional team sport, in this case, rugby league. It also considers coaches of two nationalities: English and Australian. As noted earlier, this model presents some broad similarities to that presented by Côté et al. (2013) drawn from work on coaches in Olympic sports in a North American context. But it also presents some novel elements and aspects that are worthy of further exploration, particularly the significance of childhood experiences, the complex mix of various contributory experiences across the lifespan (e.g., the significance of intentional learning and the role of various others within this) and several applied/practical implications. These will now be addressed in turn.

As noted earlier, there is scarcity of research that has explored the influence of early life experiences in sport coaches, barring Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) and Christian et al. (2023). Much of the research on coach learning and development has centred, understandably to a degree, on reductivist micro-elements, e.g., formal coach education or mentors, or have explored the bigger picture, but have only considered this to have begun in adulthood when someone first began to coach. That early life experiences in childhood play a part should, perhaps, not be too surprising given the extensive work of Peter Jarvis on lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009, 2010). However, it was only during data collection and subsequent analysis that this topic began to emerge as a significant factor and Jarvis' work on early socialisation became of particular value. To Jarvis, lifelong learning is

> The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person—body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses)—experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. Jarvis, 2006b, p. 134)

Defined as such, learning can be seen as an ongoing process, driven by the social world in which we live, intrinsic to us and a natural part of everyday life. It is not just the learning that occurs in classrooms or in formal education settings such as schools, colleges and universities, which Jarvis (2007) considers to be vocational, formal and 'work-life long', but is much broader, incorporating the non-vocational, informal and 'lifelong'. Learning is therefore both existential, in coming from our innate need to learn and become, and experiential, in the sense that we learn through making sense of our experiences in life (Trudel et al., 2016).

Socialisation is one of Jarvis' key concepts and occurs on a primary and secondary basis (Jarvis, 2006b). Primary socialisation occurs in childhood, largely involving family, whilst secondary socialisation involves being a member of various groups within our lifeworld, for example, a school class, youth club, rugby club or place of occupation. As Jarvis (2006b, p. 59) highlights, the impact of primary socialisation on our lifelong learning '. . .should never be underestimated', yet here in the coaching world, it appears to have been. In our 'sister' field, physical education, a large body of literature on socialisation exists. Lawson's (1983, 1986) early work identified three stages of PE teacher socialisation: acculturation, professional socialisation and organisational socialisation. The first stage, acculturation, begins at birth and runs through childhood and adolescence—a period that is heavily influenced by those involved in our day-to-day existence, including parents, siblings and teachers. In addition, Capel (2010) highlights how student PE teachers have

spent around 11 years as pupils at school before they decide to begin teacher training, typically following positive PE experiences throughout this time. That their approach to teaching PE may have been shaped somewhat by this experience should not be overly surprising.

Away from the research-centred literature, there is additional evidence within sport coaching sources to suggest how significant the childhood period is in presenting a range of experiences that can be considered to be important. Gilbert (2017) noted as such regarding the early formation of Bill Belichick's (one of the most successful NFL coaches of all time, having won six Super Bowl titles with the New England Patriots) coaching beliefs:

> His coaching purpose was formed early in life, perhaps even as young as 6 years old when he eagerly helped his father, a college football coach at the time, analyze game film. His coaching purpose is rooted deeply in the pursuit of excellence and a love of football. The single core value that has long served as the guiding principle for all the teams he has coached is summed up in the simple mantra "Do your job!" Unwavering commitment to this core value is demonstrated through relentless preparation, incredible attention to details, a team-first attitude, and an intense work ethic. Gilbert (2017, p. 5)

Similarly, in elements of the coach autobiography literature, coaches often connect childhood experiences to their development, albeit sometime later, within elite coaching. Consider Arsene Wenger, the former Arsenal football manager, currently serving as FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, who refers to the many hours he spent as a young boy sitting in his parents' bistro in the Alsace region of France, observing and listening to the conversations of the local men discussing anything and everything to do with football, that taught him as much about human behaviour as it did football (Wenger, 2021). In addition, Eddie Jones, the current Japan rugby union head coach and former England and Australia coach, considered his free play with the Ella brothers as a young boy to have developed an understanding of playing 'what you see' that would shape his approach to coaching at the top level of world rugby union (E. Jones, 2019). Meanwhile, multiple elements of Belichick's early life that connect to his coaching approach, referred to earlier, are discussed in Halberstam's (2006) *The Education of a Coach*. These stories of coaches in football, rugby union and American football, amongst others, provide further evidence to support the four experiential sub-themes that comprise the childhood experiences category presented in the model here.

Moving back to the data here, of additional note within the childhood experiences category is the element of early obsession with rugby that potentially led and/or contributed to these coaches becoming elite rugby coaches. This later developed into an 'always working' mindset, whereby coaches were rarely, if ever, free from the commitments of their coaching roles. The compulsive tendencies of elite coaches were recently highlighted by R. L. Jones et al. (2024) in their convincing discussion of the unsustainability of elite coaching as it currently stands—a world in which coaches are vulnerable actors continuously subjected to prolonged periods of emotional, physical and mental stress (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Is it the limiting structures of the elite coaching world that coerce coaches to be obsessive, as this work appears to suggest, or the nature of the person who is drawn to such a role, with their obsession in full effect, as apparent here? This presents an interesting avenue for future research.

In terms of broader differences to the Côté et al. (2013) model, the rugby coaches here were not typically educated in sport or PE at University, had not previously coached other sports and did not particularly value (in the main) formal coach education (Cassidy et al., 2009). Formal education of any type was only considered to play a small part, whereas a variety of other elements were more significant, notably an extensive support network (not

solely within their sport), a number of key mentors and self-selected sources of learning (reflecting the contemporary digital world with ease of access via the internet)—leading to the creation of the *intentional learning* category of the model presented here. This category overall points to a need to recognise that coaches' intentional learning can encompass a diverse range of sources and others, much broader than Côté et al.'s (2013) consideration of formal and informal education.

Additionally, the lack of value placed on formal education could, perhaps, be connected to the typical background of rugby league players and coaches with the sport traditionally being grounded in working-class communities in the north of England (Spracklen, 2016; Collins, 2006) and the eastern coast of Australia (Phillips, 2000). It would be interesting to note the backgrounds of elite head coaches across a diverse range of sports in the future, including those not typically associated with higher education, such as football (soccer), boxing and mixed martial arts, that might be expected to be somewhat similar. Kirk et al. (2024) recently pointed towards such similarities in their analysis of four MMA coaches' backgrounds and practices, but as noted earlier, there is currently a scarcity of research on coaches' development pathways across sports to fully support this finding.

Of additional note here is the vast network of contacts these coaches typically held, including rugby coaches, coaches across other sports and non-coaching advisors, such as sport psychologists, relationships often, though not exclusively, developed during athletic careers. These networks appear to exist at a much broader level than the community of practice level previously given extensive focus in the coach learning literature (see Culver & Duarte, 2022, for an excellent overview of this work), more akin to a landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) as considered by Vinson et al. (2022). International and cross-sport boundaries were not a hindrance to learning, as they may have been pre-globalisation, but instead presented 'dynamic constructs that may help coaches evolve their practice by highlighting and legitimating different approaches and epistemological perspectives' (Vinson et al., 2022, p. 183).

Zooming back out to a broader level, understanding coaches' lifelong developmental journeys, and recognising how apparently similar experiences may produce disparate learning at an individual level (Stodter & Cushion, 2014) have led to an increased focus on coaches' biographies. Stodter and Cushion (2017) presented their model of the mechanistic learning process of soccer coaches consisting of two filters: an individual-level filter, considered broadly to be biography, and a contextual-level filter. If this individual-level filter is, indeed, the primary lens through which coaches view a potential learning experience, understanding coaches' biographies is clearly of significance. Again, this supports the need for further work in the area of coaches' full biographies, not just their lives from the point of entry into elite sport or from entering the world of coaching.

In terms of implications, it might appear obvious that those involved in coach development should understand who their coaches are and what combinations of life experiences have shaped them, as one would expect a coach to know their athletes, given the shift to learner-centred design of many coach development programmes identified by Dempsey et al. (2021) and T. Jones et al. (2023). The role of coach developer has itself drawn much research scrutiny in recent years, including Partington et al. (2021) and Watts et al. (2022), but the apparent lack of empirical work considering lifelong biographies, such as this paper, suggests coach developers' knowledge and understanding of the coaches they are working with (and for) may not be as comprehensive as it could (or should) be. Sport- and context-specific models that are wholly lifelong, as presented here, can be a valuable tool to aid coach educators and developers in being more learner-centred.

At the individual coach level, exploration of a complete developmental journey can be a valuable tool in understanding oneself and how the self has evolved in the broader social

context, as each of the coaches involved here discovered. Dave summed this up well in reflecting on his coaching practice:

> *I speak to people and well. . .it's just what we do isn't it (meaning how he coaches). But it's not is it? It's not just what you do. . . it's come from somewhere.*

As an experienced coach developer, the first author here has observed numerous examples of coaches reflecting on their life stories (as an intentional, structured and supported activity) being a valuable learning experience in aiding their understanding of themselves and their practice—a potential step towards initiating change in the future. Cushion and Partington (2014) noted that coaches are not typically aware of how they operate, given that practice often occurs at a level that is not entirely conscious, whilst Downham and Cushion (2022) note the significant challenge that coaches have in pulling back from their everyday practice to stand outside of themselves and be able to see why they view coaching as they do. It might, therefore, be considered obvious, as Downham and Cushion (2020) proposed, that coach development centred on reflective practice should ensure it considers social and environmental factors that are known to influence coaches' beliefs and practice. There appear to be opportunities here for life story exploration to become a key part of the coach learning journey and more formal coach education interventions.

In considering limitations, whilst this sample provides valuable insights into elite rugby league head coaches' lifelong development journeys and their key experiences throughout these journeys, and does so in a data-driven manner, this study is not without its weaknesses. Clearly this model is limited by its construction on data from a single sport sample and its relatively small sample size, although, as noted earlier, similarities do appear to exist with football, rugby union and American football coaches of various nationalities. It may also be considered to be limited by its retrospective nature in being driven by a life story-based approach centred on coaches' recall of very personal and subjective life experiences, some dating back multiple decades (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), pointing to a need for longitudinal work in the future that follows coaches' developmental journeys over time.

Future research should attempt to explore the transferability of this model to other contexts, including a diverse range of sports, e.g., individual and team, male and female, disabled and able-bodied; a diverse range of coaches across differing levels, e.g., grassroots, participation, developmental and elite; and a diverse range of nationalities across each of the main continents, not exclusively North America, Western Europe and Oceania. As noted earlier, this field has started to expand with Perondi et al.'s (2025) paper on the development of Brazilian judo coaches, Darpatova-Hruzewicz et al.'s (2024) paper on the career pathways of Polish Olympic coaches and Cooke et al.'s (2023) paper on Northern Irish coaches. Further expansion internationally would extend our knowledge of coaches' developmental pathways significantly and provide those involved in sport-specific coach education and development with a wealth of valuable insight that can help to shape future coach development provision around the world. Whilst there is clear value in exploring micro-elements of coaches' journeys, future research should also continue to explore the more complete picture of a life story and how segments of this full journey can together shape a coach's beliefs and practice (as per Christian et al., 2023).

5. Conclusions

We consider this paper to contribute to the existing knowledge in this area in a number of ways. Firstly, it provides an in-depth exploration of the lifelong development of a cohort of elite, head coaches in a major team sport (a rarely accessed group) in the previously little-explored context of Europe (and to some degree, Australia). Secondly, it highlights the complex mix of learning experiences, centred in social situations both within and outside of

sport, that are integrated into coaches' biographies to continually shape them and, in doing so, supports the notion that lifelong learning is both existential and experiential, noted earlier (Trudel et al., 2016). Thirdly, in recognising that coach development is wholly lifelong, it adds to the already-strong argument (e.g., Cooke et al., 2023) that formal coach education programmes may typically play only a small role in the big picture of coach development for many coaches—a point that should be of significance to NGBs of sport when considering allocation of ever-decreasing budgets to such programmes. Fourthly, we present here a contemporary model of lifelong coach development which, though developed through data from just one sport and context, will be of value to those considering lifelong coach development across other sports and contexts, as Côté et al.'s (2013) model has over the last decade or so. As noted earlier, we hope this updated model will act as an instigator for further work in this area and for the model to be adapted/extended to a range of sports and contexts, wherever coaches may coach. Finally, our work adds to the still small pool of literature that highlights how childhood experiences, considered as 'primary socialisation' by Jarvis (2007, 2009, 2010), can begin this lifelong learning process and shape coaches in significant ways that demand consideration given their importance. We hope this long-overdue contemporary model will be a discussion and thought generator that contributes to driving work in this area forward in the future. In addition, we suggest that there is value in the utilisation of life story exploration for coaches to aid in understanding themselves better as a step towards increased self-awareness and continued development.

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