Stories of success: Cultural narratives and personal stories of elite and professional athletes

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Abstract

Using a narrative methodology to explore the stories Olympic and elite athletes tell about success, we identified three alternatives to the dominant conception of success as the achievement of performance outcomes. In these alternatives, success is storied as: (i) "I did the best that I could" – a controllable and sustainable story of effort and application; (ii) "It's the closest thing you can get to flying" – a story where success relates to embodied experience and discovery; (iii) "People I made the journey with" – which prioritises relationships and connection between people. We reflect on three key insights: (i) success is a multidimensional concept, broader than the singular conception encapsulated within the dominant performance narrative; (ii) through various narrative strategies, experienced athletes resist cultural pressures towards a singular conception of success; (iii) for long term performance and well-being, it is necessary to work towards multiple forms of success over time and across contexts.

Keywords: elite sport, identity, narrative, story, success, well-being

Introduction

Success and how it can be achieved generates a great deal of interest and discussion in sporting circles. A question that is less commonly asked, though, is: *What is success?* For some, the answer is winning. This orientation towards success – that it is about beating individual/s or teams – is ubiquitous within sport culture and in the media. Increasingly, it seems to be the most stridently voiced perspective among coaches, managers, governing bodies, sport psychologists, athletes, fans, as well as in policy documents. For example, in *Playing to Win: A New Era for Sport* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008), the UK Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport says: "When you play sport, you play to win. That is my philosophy. It is also at the heart of this plan that, over time, seeks to change the culture of sport in England." This perspective is not unique to the UK, but holds a good deal of international currency. The following remarks made by the Director of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) during a BBC *Horizon Special* television interview in 2006 provide a further clear example:

> The main drive of the AIS is we are here to win. Getting a personal best and trying your hardest is fantastic and you would never knock an athlete for doing that, but you are here to win. Getting on the Olympic team is fantastic and getting a green and gold tracksuit is fantastic, but you're here to win. No athlete comes in here without fully understanding and being absolutely committed to winning, winning, and winning. That's what it's all about.

Parallel perspectives have been found in recent sport research (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009, 2011) which identified a dominant type of story – termed a *performance narrative* – among elite athletes. This narrative type revolves around performance outcomes (i.e., winning or being the best) which forms the backbone of the story plot. In performance stories, the purpose of sport is competition and the outcome of achieving a win is the point of playing sport. Performance

outcomes, therefore, are considered the ultimate (or only) criteria for success. The words of a successful professional golfer provide an illustration:

> I just like competition – I suppose to see how good you can actually be, so you can stretch yourself. I need to stretch myself to see how capable I am. I need competition – that's what it is, that's what you chose to go into. At the end of the day there is a trophy and there is a cheque and another notch in how many wins you've had. (Douglas & Carless, 2006, p. 19)

In the performance narrative there is also an assumption or belief that prioritising performance outcomes above all else is the *only* way to be successful. This is illustrated by the following statement:

> I couldn't be successful without it being the most important thing in my life. My golf is more important than anything. If I was in a relationship I would have to say to whoever that was, this is huge – it is not a job. It's much more than that. It is not just a career. I think that all of us, it becomes our whole life. Because I don't think that you can possibly be successful without it being the most important thing. (Douglas & Carless, 2006, p. 20)

As this excerpt suggests, performance stories are totalitarian in the sense that they implicitly exclude or reject alternative stories which prioritise other values, plots, or ways of being. They also exclude other ways of conceptualising success. Tellers of performance stories present their own (personal) story as a universal story shared by *all* elite athletes. Within this story, success depends on winning. But is this the case? Is success solely about winning? Or can success be storied as something else? Further, *should* success be storied as more than winning? It is these questions we now consider.

Stories and Narratives Matter

Insights from the fields of counselling and psychotherapy suggest that problems are likely when particular narratives become dominant because, in Neimeyer, Herrero, and Botella's (2006, p. 132) terms, dominant narratives, "'colonize' an individual's sense of self, constricting identity options to those that are problem saturated." By 'transmitting' cultural meanings and perspectives, dominant narratives shape personal stories. This is because, as McLeod (1997, p. 94) puts it, "Even when a teller is recounting a unique set of individual, personal events, he or she can only do so by drawing upon story structures and genres drawn from the narrative resources of a culture." Thus, an individual's story is constructed on the basis of both personal experience *and* the narrative forms that are available within their particular culture (Carless, 2010).

For narrative scholars, personal stories are important not least because identity and sense of self are created and sustained through narrative means (McAdams, 1993). More specifically, as Spence (1982) describes, telling stories of our experiences over time allows the development of a 'narrative thread' which constitutes the core of identity and sense of self. Thus, cultural narratives come to shape each individual's identity and sense of self which, in turn, serves to open or close particular lifestyle possibilities and horizons. The upshot of all this is that, in Somers' (1994, p. 614) terms, "people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives." Thus, stories and narratives matter.

Narrative Research in Sport

The ways stories and narratives matter in sport have been charted and explored in recent research which shows the dominant performance narrative has very real consequences for long-term mental health and identity development. In-depth longitudinal research with professional

golfers reveals how significant problems (in terms of mental health and sense of self) can result when an individual rigidly follows the contours of the dominant performance narrative, excluding other ways of storying (and living) life (see Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2011). Other narrative types – termed *discovery* and *relational* – have however been identified which legitimise alternative ways of living and negotiating life in elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Douglas, 2009). While documented during interviews with professional athletes, these story types tend to be marginalised, trivialised, and/or silenced in sport culture and, therefore, rarely reach the public domain.

The purpose of this study is to explore success stories among elite and Olympic athletes, to establish whether alternative ways of conceptualising success are possible for high-achieving elite sportspeople. On the basis of studies cited above, in addition to personal experience of elite sport (reference removed for anonymity), we suspect that diverse conceptions of success are possible but that these stories are silenced within an elite sport culture which prioritises performance outcomes. Our focus is therefore on athletes' stories of their own experiences of success – that is, accounts that elite and professional athletes have offered which shed light on what they consider success to be. At times, this is expressed as what it is they aim for in their sport; at other times through descriptions of what happens when things go well. By considering individual stories of success experiences in this way, we hope to generate a more complex and multidimensional conception of what success *is* and *might be* for elite and Olympic sportspeople.

Methods

Participants. This study draws on data collected for a research project funded by the UK Sport Council (reference removed for anonymity) which was granted ethical approval by a local ethics committee at Name of Author's (NoA 2) institution. The participants comprised 21 elite and professional athletes (11 female, 10 male) between 18 and 44 years of age and registered on

the UK Sport Council's athlete support programme. Participants were drawn from the following sports: track and field athletics, rowing, rugby union, swimming, cricket, judo, canoeing, hockey, and netball.

Procedures. It is widely recognised that researching 'elites' raises several distinct challenges particularly in terms of access and recruitment (Hertze & Imber, 1995; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). It was therefore necessary that we were flexible and adaptable in terms of, for example, how and when we collected data to fit in with individuals' often busy schedules and geographical location. To balance this with the aims of our research, we employed two methods of data collection: focus-groups and one-to-one interviews. Initially, a series of five focus groups were arranged and conducted for those individuals who were able to make pre-arranged times and locations. Subsequently, five one-to-one interviews were conducted at a time and place which suited individuals who were unable to attend a focus group.

While there are sometimes differences in the conduct and purposes of interviews and focus-groups, we utilised a similar approach within both which sought – in line with narrative life story approaches (see Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Crossley, 2000; Plummer, 2001) – biographical, historical, and cultural context for each athlete's current life situation and experiences. NoA 2 conducted in-depth interviews and led focus groups. As a professional sportsperson, NoA 2 is an 'insider' to the population of study and this, we felt, increased the depth of conversations, helping participants feel sufficiently secure to be candid in the stories they shared. During the focus groups, NoA 1 noted key issues which emerged, engaging in the conversation when clarifying or contrast questions where needed. Having no personal experience of professional sport, NoA 1 is an 'outsider' to the population, which helped bring a further critical perspective to the focus groups and subsequent analysis and interpretation.

Analysis and interpretation. Both researchers collaborated in a two stage processes of analysis and interpretation, incorporating different narrative analytical approaches suited to the purpose of this study. After immersing ourselves in the data, the first stage was conducting a *thematic analysis* (see Riessman, 2008) to identify themes, typologies, or instances of paradigmatic categories. This cross-case analysis allowed us to compare and contrast themes and issues evident in the accounts of different participants. During this stage, we identified those stories which, in some way, referred directly to the *experience of success*. The second stage of analysis comprised what Sparkes (2005, p. 195) terms a *narrative analysis of structure and form* in recognition that "the formal aspects of structure, as much as the content, express the identity, perceptions, and values of the storyteller". This within-case approach allowed us to focus on one story at a time, reflecting on the underlying theme/s, organisation, and plot and considering how broader cultural narratives informed the story's construction. It is the outcomes of this analysis that we present here, in the form of three ways participants storied success which differ from the dominant conception of success as winning.

"I did the best that I could"

A first alternative story of success – subtly different in emphasis to performance stories – is captured by one participant's phrase: "I did the best that I could." Whereas performance stories generally include accounts of "hard work" and "dedication," these are typically portrayed as essential steps for talented individuals in their ultimate journey towards winning. In contrast, stories which prioritise effort or application portray the *process* of 'being effortful' as a defining characteristic of the teller's sense of self, and a valuable outcome in its own right which (at times) is more important than winning. This sense of evident in the words of Martina, a recently retired rower:

> I've just been to the world dragon boat championships, yeah, and we got a silver and two bronzes but I did 10 minutes training a week. Now I know that medal is sitting on my drawer at home but it has no comparison to a medal that I would get rowing in the rowing World Championship because of the amount of training commitment which has gone with it … Its about being able to put a value on it, saying it was worth me doing that, there's so much I learnt from it and I can look back on it and say you know I did absolutely everything I could, I did the best that I could and it's something I can be completely at peace about.

This story is notably different from the performance narrative in two key ways. First, the application of effort is largely *controllable* and *sustainable*, whereas performance outcomes, generally, are not. A significant problem for tellers of performance tales – over time – is the eventual and inevitable loss of perceived control that occurs when they are simply unable to win. At these times – whether due to opponent quality, injury, ageing, illness, de-selection, or career cessation – athletes can find themselves disempowered, feeling impotent or ineffectual. Effort stories, in contrast, are sustainable over time – through injury, poor form, and even career transition. The sustainability of this narrative has long-term implications for identity and well-being because, as Spence (1982, p. 458) notes, "the core of our identity is really a narrative thread that gives meaning to life provided – and this is the big if – that it is never broken." Being able to maintain a story which revolves around a controllable behaviour is therefore desirable.

Second, as this excerpt illustrates, the teller demonstrates a personalised sense of value and meaning. To achieve this, we suggest, it was necessary that Martina *resisted* the plot of the dominant performance narrative (which would story winning the medals as "the whole point" of sport) to create a personal story that more closely fitted her own experiences and values. In telling this story, she not only reinforces her own story, values, and identity, but simultaneously shares

with others an alternative conception of success which allows for value and worth regardless of performance outcome.

We describe this narrative type as *subtly* different to the performance type because effort and performance stories may share some similar features and, therefore, are likely to co-exist more comfortably than other narrative types. Whereas discovery and relational stories tend to be excluded or silenced because they challenge and contravene the core foundations of the performance narrative (see Douglas & Carless, 2008), it may be that effort/application stories are less threatening. For example, Carrie a judo player, put it this way:

> It's weird, the more that I did the more I felt that had one up on people. I don't know, you've probably done the thing when you go out for a run and you see a lamp post and that lamp post is someone else and once you'd made it you'd beaten them. I still do it now. Like I'd go training on Christmas day, I still do it, so I know that no one else in the country or in the world could have done any more than me. I always wanted to make it feel that there were no minutes in the day that I hadn't been used that someone could have done more than what I'd done.

For us, this excerpt demonstrates the subtle (yet potentially important) difference between the two story types. While Carrie's story shares certain language with the performance narrative (a description of "beating others"), the underlying plot seems to prioritise the application of effort evidenced here by training on Christmas day. Within the effort/application stories we heard, individuals often portrayed talent and ability as secondary to effort and application. This point also marks a departure from the performance narrative which often stories success as being largely down to 'natural' ability (see Douglas & Carless, 2006). Carrie had this to say:

> My mentality was that if I was training or trying hard enough I could be as good as those people with natural ability anyway. And then people seemed to be confused thinking that I

> was actually good at the sport and it was like I'd convinced them that was the case. It was a big game I think now looking at it!

Once again, this shift in emphasis reveals a way in which individuals might be able to build and articulate a life story in which a greater degree of control and sustainability is possible.

"It's the closest thing you can get to flying"

A strong narrative thread within some athletes' stories was of success being the actual *embodied experience* of sport, or aspects of it. For some, this was conveyed through stories which focus on the intrinsic pleasure of physical movement. Sam, a Paralympics swimmer, offered this account:

> For me, it's the closest thing you can get to actually flying because on land you can only move in two dimensions – unless you jump and then you're momentarily in three dimensions, not truly in three dimensions. But when you're swimming you really can move within this cuboidal space … When I get a good training session it still feels brilliant. I think what it is, it's the ability to get hold of something that you can't get hold of. The water's got this sort of incredibly kind of illusive nature and if you fill up a sink of water and put your hand into it you can't get it but when you swim through it it's solid like a wall. And you know the harder you hit it the harder it will hit you back and it's got this permanent dynamism – it's never the same twice. And I think that's what I really like about it – all its strange kind of vortices and things.

Evident in this excerpt is a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), comparable to that described by Sparkes and Partington (2003) in their research with members of a university canoe club. Also strongly evident is the sense of taking pleasure or enjoyment through *embodied* movement. There is no reference here to competition, opponents, talent, or performance outcomes. In this sense,

these stories are distinct from the performance narrative because success is conceived of here not as winning, but as *doing* the movement which relates directly to the individual athlete's sport.

For some participants, success as experience stories revolved around learning or discovering through their sport. Brandon, a rugby union player, shared this account:

> [The coach] said: "Right, I'm just going to take you and we'll do a bit of coaching." And I blinked. And he said, "Come on," … and he took me to one side and just coached with me for an hour. He said, "What are you like with balls along the ground, rolling balls?" And I said I think I'm alright and he said, "Well, we shall see." So he just stood there, he'd chuck balls over my head and I'd turn round and go, you know, and jump down on it and stand up and kick it to touch. I was useless! … But it didn't matter because here was someone – the coach – actually helping me to be a better player. And I came home absolutely ecstatic, you know, having gone there sort of full of woe and lack of sleep, I came back absolutely buzzing, buzzing and saying, "Look! They took an interest in me! They've accepted that I'm not the be all and end all international player," which I knew I wasn't. But rather than saying, "You're the international – you sort it out," they've said, "You're the international that's why you've got to learn even more."

Once again, absent from this story is a performance outcome achieved through competition with others. Instead, success is realised through solitary practice. Whereas athletes who tell performance tales draw pleasure from their strengths, from doing something better than others, Brandon describes feeling "absolutely ecstatic" as a result of identifying (and responding to) a *weakness*. Inherent in stories like Brandon's is a sense that despite already having reached the elite or professional level, the teller prioritises personal improvement, learning, and/or discovery. Success for him, therefore, is through experiencing personal development. While, at times, this

might be measured or documented in terms of self-referenced performance outcomes (a faster time or a clean execution of a skill, for example), it does not depend upon beating others.

Common, then, to all these type of stories is a tendency towards self-reference rather than other-reference for assessing whether or not one is successful. While experiencing sometimes includes others (in the form of a shared experience), it in no way depends on the demonstration of superiority over those others. These stories have much in common with the discovery narrative described in detail by Douglas and Carless (2006) and Carless and Douglas (2009) where life is oriented towards exploration and new experiences rather than externally set performance or achievement. Tellers of discovery stories, Douglas and Carless (2006, p. 22) suggest, see:

> self-worth in terms that are not related to achievement in [sport], that bad [sport] scores need not reflect negatively on self-esteem, and that a need for discovery can take precedence over a need to perform in [sport] regardless of the expectations of close relatives, the media, the [sporting] world, and popular western culture.

It is on the basis of these defining characteristics that tellers of discovery stories, while sometimes experiencing tensions within elite sport culture (through *not* subscribing to the dominant performance narrative), are likely to experience a greater sense of alignment and continuity in their lives outside and after elite sport. It seems likely to us that storying success as 'experiencing' – as in the examples above – might be a useful way to move towards the long-term advantages of the dialogical discovery narrative (see Carless & Douglas, 2009).

"People I made the journey with"

Across much of our narrative research with different populations, we have found that many individuals who take part in sport and exercise initially did so through a desire to develop

or maintain a relationship, affiliation, or connection (see, for example, Douglas & Carless, 2006; Sparkes & Douglas, 2007; Douglas, 2009). For some, this connection was to significant others (such as friends or family member/s), for others, the connection was to a club or group of some kind. We found similar stories among the participants in this research, when they talked about their early involvement in sport. Shauna, a track and field athlete, offered this story of her early involvement in elite junior athletics:

> We used to have district sports and things like, it was a fun way 'cause we used to meet up with other schools so I used to meet up with cousins and family and friends. On one particular occasion I won and there was a coach for my club at the sideline who gave me a leaflet to join the club and at that age I think I was, "Ooh!" – wowed by the fact that somebody wanted me to join. So I just used to go along. I went down, started off like twice a week, and from the age of 11 until about 13, 14. I was winning everything in the county… I think I used to see the athletes strutting around in their GB tracksuits and I wanted to be one who had a GB tracksuit – I wanted to be a part of that group.

Often, being a part of a group or team was a central component of participants' stories of their youth sport experiences. Carrie, for example, told of her netball experience while at school:

> You'd see the team lists come up like netball team lists come up and because netball really wasn't my sport, and I'd have said it wasn't my sport, but I'd make sure I was on the list and that in itself would be my winning for that week.

Absent, once again, from these examples are the assumptions and expectations of the performance narrative that winning, competition, and talent are the cornerstones of involvement. Instead, these stories have more in common with the plot of a relational narrative (see Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; Douglas, 2009). The relational narrative is a story of complex interdependent connection between two people in which sport performance is essentially a

byproduct and where *being with* other/s is storied as more important than achievement in terms of wins or trophies (Douglas & Carless, 2011).

Douglas (2009) has explored the ways that cultural pressures within sport culture can lead to young sportspeople, as they move towards elite level, to either revise or silence the relational stories that characterised their initial sport involvement. As a result of pressure to conform to the terms of the performance narrative as the behaviours it prescribes are widely assumed to be essential to success, some individuals consciously silence their own story in order to tell a performance tale which satisfies the media, coaches, selectors, sponsors, family members, and/or fans (Carless & Douglas, 2009). A damaging outcome of this is a severing of the 'narrative thread' that, in Spence's (1982) terms, constitutes the core of a person's identity.

Among the participants in this research, however, there were some who continued to hold to the values of a relational story. Martina, for example, reflecting on her sport career, identified relational factors to do with respect as central to her satisfaction and achievements:

> People always ask me: "What was it? Why did you want to win? Was it the accolades?" Because there's no money involved and, you know, I'd chosen a sport with a particularly low media profile. I wanted, I wanted to be able to walk down the road and I wanted respect. But I didn't want respect from *anybody* on the street – I wanted respect from the people I would value their respect. So it was *my* people. So it was the people I had made that journey with, I wanted for them to say to me – the proudest thing would be for someone who I rowed with in my novices boat to say, "Oh yeah! I rowed with Martina."

For others, it was relationships that came to the fore in times of difficulty, de-selection, injury, or other hardship. Dawn, a judo player, told of the important role her mother played in helping her through the emotional disappointment of not being selected for a major event. Shauna described

how while training for an Olympics there was an ethos of care and connection between the athletes:

> Well we train as an 8 – and this is 8 frightened girls all wanting to be part of the team all trying to impress. Even if girls were injured you didn't want to tell them [the coaches/selectors] they were injured because they just wanted to be part of it.

Central to all these stories is a very different conception of success: one that is based around the maintenance and valuing of relationships and connection. It is often these relationships which provide the support athletes need at critical moments in their lives. To sustain not only the relationships themselves – but also an awareness of the presence and value of relationships – requires the continued narration of a relational self which, it appears, can all too often be sacrificed in favour of the kind of performance stories we quoted previously.

Reflections

Having presented three alternative stories of success, the next question might be how might these findings inform athlete support/development initiatives? For us, a first important point to recognise is that success – in the terms of these elite and professional athletes – is a broader and more multidimensional concept than the singular conception encapsulated within the dominant performance narrative in elite sport. Beyond winning, athletes shared stories in which effort and application, embodied experience, and relationships were valued as successful 'outcomes' irrespective of performance outcomes. We see this insight as critical to long-term athlete well-being, development, and performance for the reasons suggested in this account from Dan, a Paralympics swimmer:

> To begin with I was very focused on the outcome, you know, like I said: I'm going to try and win this gold medal. But when I became a full time swimmer I joined an able bodied swimming club … so I trained with an Olympic coach and some Olympic swimmers who

> were getting ready to go to [the Olympics]. And I had it really, really tough. You know, physically tough – just how far we were swimming each week, just so draining. And I had another one of those moments and I suddenly thought: I've only got one reason why I'm doing this and that is trying to win a medal. And that is just not working … I actually came up with five reasons why I did it – a gold medal was one of them … The other things were that I enjoy being fit and healthy, that I like the lifestyle – you know, I like that I travel around the world and represent the country and normally had free time during the day and that kind of thing, I enjoyed the camaraderie of my team, and I had a respect for my coach. So those five things. So at any one time, any one of those five things would make me go to training and train to the best my ability.

This account, for us, is the nub in terms of both motivation and actually *being* successful in the world of elite and professional sport. Rather than rigidly adhering to the terms of the dominant performance narrative – which would demand dedication to the gold medal – Dan came to the realisation that *multiple* successes were not only possible but critical on his particular journey of preparing for a Paralympics Games. Within this account are elements of a performance narrative (striving for gold), a discovery narrative (the lifestyle and travel), and a relational narrative (the camaraderie of my team). As Dan explains, any one of five factors had the potential to motivate him to continue, even at those times when the performance goal may be insufficient.

This example illustrates how to remain healthy, sustain involvement, and to maintain performance at the highest level, athletes need alternative and diverse conceptions of success. Indeed, work in sport (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009) and other fields (e.g., Frank, 1995; McLeod, 1997; Neimeyer et al, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008) indicate that problems are likely when a single story become dominant. In sport, it seems to be a performance

narrative – which revolves around winning/beating others – which dominates, often silencing, trivialising, or rejecting other story types.

As a result of the dominance of the performance narrative, those experienced athletes who *do not* subscribe to the terms of this story type must do narrative 'work' if they are to resist the cultural pressures towards a singular conception of success (or identity) to create and sustain a personal story that allows them to continue despite inevitable fluctuations in form, fitness, and so on. As Carless and Douglas (2009) have argued, this process of resistance is a necessary one if athletes are to avoid the dominant monological story to, instead, sustain a dialogical and multidimensional narrative thread which supports identity possibilities that do not end when sport career ends.

We suggest that coaches, managers, governing bodies, sport psychologists, and other athletes all have a role to play in supporting alternative stories. *Supporting* in these terms means raising awareness of the presence and possibility of alternatives to performance discourse which help individuals to 'thicken' their own life story, in ways that stay close to personal embodied experience. Sharing alternative stories – in particular those of sportspeople who have achieved at elite or professional level – has the potential, we suggest, to serve as an antidote or counterbalance to the dominant stories within contemporary sport culture which prioritise winning and performance outcomes over and above all other facets of athletes' lives including – too often – long-term well-being.

Researchers also have a role to play as the assumptions, methods, and language we employ shape understandings of sport. To characterise the move from initial participation to elite competition scholars in recent years have suggested young performers move from experiencing sport as 'play' to specialization and mastery where sport becomes 'work' (Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004). Thus, it has been surmised that, "Athletes at the mastery phase are considered

to be 'obsessed' by their sport" (Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004, p. 23). This is just one way *we* (as researchers) story – and constrain – athletes' lives, their motivations, and what success is. Evident, however, in the athletes' accounts above are individuals in the 'mastery phase' who maintain strong narrative links to relationships, the joy of an embodied experience, and the satisfactions of application. Stories of 'obsession' and 'work' are notable by their absence. If we continue to only listen for and research 'performance as winning' then we too contribute to an impoverished narrative thread which limits future identity options. Given the accounts presented here we ask, is it time to reconsider?

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