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**Living, Resisting, and Playing the Part of Athlete:  
Narrative Tensions in Elite Sport**

*David Carless (Leeds Metropolitan University)*

*Kitrina Douglas (University of Bristol)*

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*Correspondence:*

Dr David Carless  
Institute of Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Fairfax Hall  
Headingley Campus  
Leeds LS6 3QS  
[d.carless@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:d.carless@leedsmet.ac.uk)

### Abstract

*Objectives:* To explore: (i) How elite and professional sport culture might steer individuals towards particular stories, identities, and actions; (ii) How athletes navigate or respond to these cultural pressures. *Method:* Narrative interviews and focus groups with 21 elite and professional athletes followed by a narrative analysis of structure and form. *Results:* Athletes demonstrated one of three processes. Individuals who *live the part of athlete* story their life and act in ways that conform to a culturally dominant performance narrative. Here, identity is foreclosed, relationships sacrificed in the pursuit of success, and long-term wellbeing threatened. Over time, alternative narrative types may provoke moral reflection on their story and actions. Individuals who *resist the part of athlete* sustain a life story and identity that deviates from the performance narrative, drawing on alternative narrative types. Their resistance is typically overt as they publicly demonstrate actions that align with their multidimensional story. Individuals who *play the part of athlete* modify their story and actions depending on sociocultural context. These individuals covertly maintain a multidimensional life story, but silence this story when powerful others require performance stories. *Conclusions:* Although some elite/professional athletes' life stories revolve around performance outcomes, this is not a prerequisite for excellence. Other athletes achieve excellence while sustaining a multidimensional life story and identity. To do so, they navigate a culture that expects a performance focus, through overt resistance or covertly manipulating their public stories and actions.

*Keywords:* culture, identity, mental health, professional sport, story, wellbeing

## **Living, Resisting, and Playing the Part of Athlete:**

### **Narrative Tensions in Elite Sport**

Over the past two decades awareness has grown in some quarters of a gulf between psychological and sociological understandings of human lives, identities, development, and behaviour. Crossley (2003, p. 288), for example, suggests “there is scant space in mainstream contemporary psychology to investigate questions of self and identity from a perspective that retains a sense of *both* psychological *and* sociological complexity and integrity.” For McGannon and Spence (2010), a key reason for this is that psychology has tended “to conceptualise the self as processes and/or mechanisms within the mind” (p. 18).

Consequently, Crossley (2000) suggests, sociocultural context has historically been minimised, leading the cause of problematic experiences to be located within *individuals* as opposed to *cultures*. Criticisms have also been made (e.g., Hammack & Cohler, 2009) of a tendency for sociological studies to obscure the ways individual agency shapes identity, behaviour, and experience. According to Hammack and Cohler (2009, p. 11), a need exists to appreciate “lives as more than mere products of some biological or psychological sequence” while simultaneously resisting simplistic portrayals of “social structure as inherently ‘driving’ development.”

Two approaches have been employed in recent sport and exercise psychology research to bridge this gulf, both of which give “primacy to the process and outcome of language” (McGannon & Spence, 2010, p. 18) as a way to explore sociocultural phenomena. Discursive psychology has been proposed as one approach that recognises how “living, breathing organisms come to understand themselves and behave as persons as a result of their immersion and participation in particular discourses” (McGannon & Mauws, 2000, p. 153). Discursive psychology has generated new understandings of sport and exercise experiences in several studies (e.g., Thomsson, 1999; McGannon & Spence, 2010).

Narrative psychology provides a second approach on the basis that stories individuals tell of their lives offer insights into the cultural settings in which they are immersed. In McLeod's (2006, p. 207) terms, "the concept of narrative provides a bridge between the stories told by specific persons, and the dominant discourses and narratives within which we all collectively live our lives." In this sense, narrative provides a way of studying lives that acknowledges the "connection between the possible trajectories of development *and the construction of those possibilities by a given social structure*" (Hammack & Cohler, 2009, p. 11). Narrative approaches avoid privileging structure over agency, viewing the relationship between culture and the individual as reciprocal and co-constitutive.

Strong rationales have been offered for narrative research in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2009a; Smith, 2010) and narrative approaches have increasingly been used in recent years across a number of sport and exercise contexts. These include, for example, spinal cord injury (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2003), mental health (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2008; Carless & Sparkes, 2008), eating practices (e.g., Papatomas & Lavalley, 2006; Busanich, McGannon & Schinke, 2012), flow (Sparkes & Partington, 2003), aging (e.g., Phoenix & Smith, 2011), and professional sport (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2009a, 2009b). Building on this growing tradition, we use a narrative approach in this study to explore the stories shared by elite and professional sportspeople; the cultural narratives these stories draw upon; and their implications for identity development and life experiences.

### *Narrative theory*

In common with discursive approaches, narrative theory challenges "the notion of a *natural* and *obvious* separation of self and society" (McGannon & Spence, 2012, p. 18). Instead, self and identity is seen as influenced by social categories that precede the individual (McLeod, 1997), shaped through interactions in specific sociocultural contexts (Holstein &

Gubrium, 2000), and therefore socially constructed (Gergen, 1999). Critically, identity is understood as developed and sustained through story telling processes – as Smith (2007, p. 391) puts it: “people understand themselves as selves through the stories they tell and the stories they feel part of.” Thus, identity is construed not as residing within the individual, but as a sociocultural project created through stories (Crossley, 2000).

From the perspective of narrative theory, stories are understood not merely as *portrayals* of lives but as active agents in the *construction* of those lives. In Frank’s (2010, p. 3) terms: “Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided.”

Particularly significant are those narratives that have become culturally dominant – stories that are widely and routinely told and retold within a particular context. When a single narrative type becomes dominant, it overrides or silences alternative stories. As a result, it can come to exhibit a disproportionate influence on individuals’ lives, to the point that it may “‘colonize’ an individual’s sense of self, constricting identity options to those that are problem saturated” (Neimeyer, Herrero & Botella, 2006, p. 132). A potential solution is the availability of alternative types of story that provide narrative resources to support a ‘re-storying’ of self and identity through resisting a dominant narrative (see McLeod, 1997; Sparkes & Smith, 2003; Carless & Douglas, 2008, 2009b; Frank, 2010; Freeman, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Busanich et al., 2012).

### *Narratives in elite sport*

The need to integrate sociocultural and psychological perspectives is particularly acute if we are to better understand the lives of elite and professional sportspeople. Athletes inhabit a culture awash with public stories relating to (preferred) identities, (expected) behaviours, and (assumed) developmental trajectories. These stories are widely circulated and amplified by the sport media. We have suggested, however, that one particular narrative

type is dominant within elite sport culture: a *performance narrative* (Douglas & Carless, 2006a). The plot of performance stories revolves around achieving performance outcomes (e.g., winning and/or being the best), underlying many stories recited by the media, coaches, sport policy makers and governing bodies, and athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2012). It is a story of single-minded dedication to performance to the extent that phrases like “winning is everything” are routine. In this narrative, performance-related concerns come to infuse all areas of life while other areas are diminished or relegated.

Drawing on narrative theory, we have suggested (Carless & Douglas, 2009) that the performance narrative is a *monologue* “distinguished by a strong but rigid hierarchy of self-positions with one or a few positions dominating the repertoire” (Hermans, 2006, p. 152). The self-position that dominates the repertoire in performance stories is that of athlete or sportsperson, and it is from this position that life is narrated. Because performance stories are oriented towards a singular outcome, they can be understood, in Ezzy’s (2000) terms, as a *linear* narrative which assumes people can control their lives, tending to “down play the significance of other people and of environmental constraints on their actions” (p. 616). Monological or linear narratives often privilege the individual and personal agency, encouraging separation over connection (see Josselson, 1996). This may be considered a further hallmark of performance stories.

Although a ‘performance discourse’ has been discussed in relation to youth sport pedagogy (Ingham, Chase & Butt, 2002), we have found no published studies specifically using narrative approaches to explore elite athletes’ experiences (aside from our own work). However, the concept of athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993) is relevant as an exclusive athletic identity is often portrayed in performance stories. Warriner and Lavalley (2008, p. 302) articulate a widely held view that: “Achieving excellence in elite sport typically involves incredible sacrifice and dedication, which often prevents athletes from

engaging in adequate exploration of different roles and behaviors associated with identity formation.” This belief falls in line with the performance narrative, but is troubling when it is recognised that: “Commitment of one’s identity to the sport role without exploration of alternatives indicates a state of identity foreclosure” (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008, p. 302). While our research with professional golfers (Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2009a; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009) supports the second statement, it challenges the first by demonstrating how some golfers achieve excellence without sacrificing identity development. These individuals are able to resist the performance narrative by storying their lives around the contours of a *discovery* or *relational* narrative and, by doing so, mitigate the dangers of the performance narrative and an exclusive athletic identity. To achieve this, however, athletes must navigate considerable cultural pressures.

Despite these insights, a number of questions remain unanswered: *How* does sport culture act on individuals to steer them towards particular stories? *How* do individual athletes navigate or respond to these cultural pressures? How do these processes unfold in sports other than golf? What might be the *consequences* for individual athletes? These are the questions this study explores, with a view to generating new insights into the psychosocial dynamics of elite and professional athletes’ lives.

## **Methods**

Working within the interpretive paradigm we aim to *understand* and *illuminate* human experience, striving to elucidate meaning and interrogate existing assumptions regarding social experience. We see knowledge as socially constructed and therefore our goal is “to sustain conversation and debate, rather than attempt to act as a ‘mirror to nature’, as a source of foundational, universal truth” (McLeod, 1997, p. 142). In keeping with this position, we advocate the ‘relativist’ position described by Sparkes and Smith (2009) as the most suitable way to judge our research. Here, criteria are selected to suit the particular



purposes of the study. For this study, we suggest the following criteria, proposed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998, p. 173): (i) *width*, which relates to the comprehensiveness of the findings; (ii) *coherence*, which concerns whether different parts of the interpretation create a meaningful, complete picture; (iii) *insightfulness* through a sense of innovation or originality in the presentation and analysis; (iv) *parsimony* through offering a succinct, elegant, or aesthetically appealing analysis.

### *Participants and procedures*

The data for this study were collected during a research project commissioned by the UK Sport Council (Douglas & Carless, 2006b) and approved by the ethics committee at Kitrina's 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 program. Participants were drawn from the following sports: track and field athletics, rowing, rugby union, swimming, cricket, judo, canoeing, hockey, and netball.

Because researching 'elites' raises challenges in terms of access and recruitment (Hertz & Imber, 1995), we needed to be flexible and adaptable in terms of, for example, how and when we collected data to take account of participants' schedules and geographical location. To balance this requirement with our aims, 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 to suit those individuals who were unable to attend a focus group. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We utilised a similar approach in the interviews and focus groups that sought – in line with narrative life story approaches (see Lieblich et al, 1998; Crossley, 2000; Plummer, 2001) – biographical, historical, and cultural context for each participant's current life

situation and experiences. Kitrina conducted the in-depth interviews and led the focus groups. As a professional sports person, Kitrina 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. David played an active role in focus groups, noting key issues as they emerged and engaging in the conversation to clarify, contrast, or prompt further narrative development. Being an ‘outsider’ to the population, David brought an alternative perspective to the focus groups and subsequent analysis and interpretation.

### *Analysis and interpretation*

After immersing ourselves in the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts, we collaborated in a two stage processes of analysis and interpretation. The first stage was a within-case *thematic analysis* (see Riessman, 2008) conducted to identify and explore moments when participants’ stories portrayed narrative tension. Because, as previously discussed, stories are both personal and social, moments of narrative tension can provide insight into times when psychological and sociocultural factors interact or collide. These moments could, for example, be when an individual’s story of personal experience clashed with a cultural story operating around them.

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”. Here, we focused on building an understanding of the processes through which (i) sport culture steers participants towards particular stories and (ii) individual athletes respond to these cultural pressures. Examining the narrative organisation and plot/s of participants’ stories extended our understanding of how culturally available narrative types informed each individual’s personal story and behaviour. (For in-depth accounts of the kinds of analytical and

interpretive practices we employed, see Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009b).

### **Findings**

We found three distinct processes in action as athletes negotiate and respond to the culture of elite sport. For clarity, we summarise these here, before exploring them in detail by drawing on the stories of three particular participants who serve as exemplars that demonstrate these subtle and complex psychosocial processes in action. This representational strategy has been used in several narrative studies (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2003; Phoenix & Smith, 2011).

Individuals who *live the part of athlete* story their life and act in ways that conform to the plot of the performance narrative. At certain times, however, they experience moments of significant tension, typically when their personal experience deviates from the performance script. The availability of an alternative narrative type (a counter-story) may provoke reflection on their story and actions. Individuals who *resist the part of athlete* maintain a life story that deviates from the performance narrative, drawing on alternative narrative types. Their resistance is typically *overt* as they publicly demonstrate a range of actions that align with their multidimensional story. Individuals who *play the part of athlete* consciously modify their story and actions depending on sociocultural context. These individuals *covertly* maintain a multidimensional life story (demonstrating alternative narrative plots) but silence their story in public settings when they perceive powerful others expect a performance story.

### **Living the Part of Athlete**

The story shared by Suzanne (a 29 year-old member of the British hockey team) provides an illustration of the process by which some individuals *live the part of athlete*. This excerpt portrays a distinct sense of tension arising from this:

I have to say that relationships have suffered because of my hockey. So if I hadn't been playing hockey then I still think maybe I would have still been with a certain person. So I chose hockey really ultimately. Yeah. But things like family illnesses, cause with hockey you do so much travelling and you know you could be on the other side of the world, and if something happened I'm sure within the drop of a hat I'd be home. But then when I was younger, sometimes you can be so blinded by the fact that it's so good to be an elite sportsperson that you'd sacrifice absolutely anything for it. I've seen things where people have done certain things and I think: will you regret that in, like, a couple of year's time? *Can you give us an instance of that?*

Yeah, I probably can. A teammate's sister had a miscarriage and she was away on a training camp and her sister really wanted her to go home. And the coach kind of suggested she shouldn't go home so she didn't. And, you know, as her teammate I – [pause]. It's your sister – you can't ever forget that. If someone needs you at the time then – [pause]. To them it's just her sister. It's: she's away playing hockey. And hockey's just, you know, pathetic. And in the grand scale of things it is just a game. And I think a lot of people just lose sight of that. I think you do just have to keep one eye on reality because when you are surrounded by people who want the same goal you can be blinded by it. And coaches can be blamed for that, totally for that. They can totally blind you and in some instances they can, you know, emotionally bribe you about things.

Suzanne's life story largely conformed to a performance script. This is illustrated above when Suzanne says, "you can be so blinded by the fact that it's so good to be an elite sportsperson that you'd sacrifice absolutely anything for it." Here, her story connects to the values of a performance narrative where *being* an elite athlete is storied as desirable and achievable only through sacrifice. The magnitude of sacrifice Suzanne describes ("absolutely

anything”) is in line with the tendency for performance stories to be totalitarian, prioritizing sport performance ahead of other values, story plots, and ways of being.

We suggest that particular characteristics of the performance narrative discussed earlier (e.g., monological/linear story, privileging the individual and personal agency) underlie the tension in Suzanne’s story, present from the first sentence (“relationships have suffered because of my hockey”). By contemplating no longer being with a previous partner and whether or not to be with family members at times of illness and miscarriage, Suzanne evokes a counter-story – a *relational* narrative – which prioritizes interconnectedness, relationships, and living or being *with and for* another (Douglas & Carless, 2006a). These characteristics are, at a fundamental level, at odds with the individual agency that underlies the performance script, directly challenging the monological and linear nature of the performance narrative. Therefore these two aspects of Suzanne’s story exist in some degree of narrative tension.

According to Frank (2010, p. 14), “Stories *act* in human consciousness, with individuals sometimes being aware of what story is acting and sometimes not.” Suzanne’s story portrays how the culture of elite sport acts upon not only athletes’ thoughts and stories, but also their behaviours. In this example, Suzanne experiences expressions of the performance narrative *by others* as shaping her own actions, as well as those of teammates (“the coach kind of suggested she shouldn’t go home so she didn’t”). When Suzanne says, “you do just have to keep one eye on reality because when you are surrounded by people who want the same goal you can be blinded by it,” she reveals how, as recent research has also shown (e.g., Busanich et al, 2012), sport culture operates through relationships between people via the circulation and reproduction of a dominant storyline. Suzanne’s account suggests that immersion and participation in a culture where performance stories were told and retold over time “blinded” her to alternative stories.

Within Suzanne's story, however, is a sense of personal change over time. Like several of the older and more experienced athletes we interviewed, Suzanne came to question the performance script as she moved through her sport career. Evident in her reflections ("when I was younger...") and the questions she asks ("will you regret that in a couple of years time?"), is a sense of temporal progression that sees her *weighing* or even *judging* her own and others prioritization of sport ahead of family and personal relationships. "The challenge," Freeman (2010, p. 12) writes, "is to identify the ways in which these cultural narratives have permeated one's being and, in the process, to break away from them and sap them of their coercive power." Suzanne's account reveals how she came to recognise the ways the performance narrative had permeated her own life and reject some of the moral and ethical assumptions that underlie it. For Freeman (2010, p. 5), the narrative reflection possible through hindsight "plays an integral role in shaping and deepening moral life." Similar to some other elite sportspeople (see Douglas & Carless, 2009a, Carless & Douglas, 2013), Suzanne seemed to achieve – through reflection over time – new self-understanding of a moral and ethical kind that led her away from a performance story and towards the values of a relational narrative.

### **Resisting the Part of Athlete**

In contrast to individuals like Suzanne whose stories align with the performance narrative, some athletes' stories *do not* follow the performance plot. Instead, their stories and actions overtly resist and contravene its script. The following excerpts shared by Alex (a 29 year-old British Paralympic swimmer) provide an illustration:

Where I live is a prime example. I live there because I want to be happy. And I have to travel 8 miles to get to my training venue, which isn't far anywhere else in the country, but I have to do it through London traffic so sometimes it can be a 45 minute journey and I knew that when I moved to London. But I thought I would much rather be in London

and be surrounded by all of my friends and able to almost check in and out of a swimming training session. I can just leave it behind. I knew that when I moved to London, that just my sort of living costs would go through the roof but I thought it would be worth it in terms of just being happier. Cause I was training in Manchester before and it was all swim, swim, swim. I'd moved to Manchester and, as you can tell, I'm not from the north, and I moved there and I didn't ... know anyone who lived in Manchester.

Education was very important to me ... I didn't want to be beholden to swimming because sometimes the people you get mixed up with in sport at a management level are just the worst people on earth. They're bad managers, poor communicators ... I'm talking about performance managers, team managers, performance directors. Sport is littered with them. One of the things that has been great when I've been on the team is I've just thought if I want to I can just quit this now and I can go out and I can get a job earning the same amount of money and my life, where I live, isn't in danger and all that sort of thing. There are, you know, a lot of people on the sports teams now, on the swimming team now, and I think in a lot of sports now, where they haven't got an education, any sort of further or higher education, and you do kind of look at them and think, what are you going to do if you don't swim? Literally, what are you going to do?

Within Alex's story is a sense of deviance – even mischievousness – as this multiple Olympic medal-winning athlete is able to disregard the terms of the expected performance script, yet still reach the highest level in sport. His story challenges the argument that achieving excellence prohibits exploration of alternative roles and behaviours (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008) and requires the sacrifice of relationships (Holt & Dunn, 2004). It also contravenes a core premise of the performance narrative that the *only* way to be successful in elite sport is to place sport performance at the center of one's life story (Douglas & Carless,

2006a) in four ways: Alex (i) puts happiness before performance; (ii) places maintenance of friendships alongside or ahead of training; (iii) believes there is more to life than just “swim, swim, swim”; and (iv) refuses to be “beholden to swimming.”

According to McLeod (1997, p. 94): “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.” In other words, personal stories draw on culturally available narrative scripts. Evident within Alex’s story are (at least) two alternative narrative types. As other studies suggest (e.g., Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Busanich et al., 2012), these alternatives are important because they provide a point of resistance to the dominant narrative. The first of these is the previously described relational narrative, in which relationships with others are storied as equally important as – or more important than – training or performance outcomes. Gilligan (1993) describes a host of positive developmental consequences that arise through successfully sustaining a relational orientation. The second is a *discovery* narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006a) that may be considered “the antithesis of the performance narrative” (p. 22). In discovery stories, self-worth is not related to sporting achievement and the need to explore and discover a full life takes precedence over the need to perform in sport, regardless of the expectations of others.

The two excerpts illustrate how Alex’s story, rather than being linear and monological like the performance narrative, is instead *dialogical* or *polyphonic*. According to Lysaker and Lysaker (2006, p. 59), dialogical models of the self:

conceptualize the self and its many narratives as the products of ongoing conversations both within the individual and between individuals. According to these models, complementary and opposing aspects of the self, or self-positions, are thought to bring significance to one another through their interaction or dialogue, leading to the experience in the moment of a sense of personal depth.



In much the same way, Ezzy (2000, p. 613) describes polyphonic narratives as characterized by “overlaid, interwoven and often contradictory stories and values.” Alex’s story is notable in that it is told from multiple self-positions, in contrast to the singular self-position from which performance stories are articulated. In contrast to tellers of linear or monological stories, Ezzy suggests, “polyphonic narrators embrace many of the contradictions and tensions in their accounts rather than suppressing them” (p. 613).

Research suggests that the distinction between a monological (linear) story and a dialogical (polyphonic) story has implications for both psychosocial wellbeing and long-term personal development (Ezzy, 2000; Hermans, 2006; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2006). Not least of these, Ezzy observes, is the assumption underlying linear narratives that individuals can control their life, minimizing the significance of other people and of environmental constraints. “In contrast,” Ezzy (2000, p. 616) writes, “polyphonic narratives recognise the limited control humans have over their environment and that outcomes are contingent on these environmental and social factors. In polyphonic narratives people are both active agents and passive recipients, pushed around by forces beyond their control.”

A sense of this two-way or reciprocal psychosocial process unfolding is present in Alex’s story when, although recognizing the limits to the control he has over his sport career (e.g., through the influence of managers and directors), he creates and sustains future options for himself through conscious, concrete actions. Critically, these actions (e.g., choosing to live where he can maintain relationships, continuing his education) provide the embodied material or resources for authentic relational and discovery stories. These actions are important because, as Gergen and Gergen (2006) note, building a life story is never simply a matter of inventing a discourse. Rather, they suggest, the individual’s story need to be *believable* (i.e., connected to current life conditions) and *actionable* (i.e., can be put into practice). In this sense, we are never entirely free to invent our life story; instead, our

personal story is shaped and constrained by our embodied experience of the world. At the same time, through the process of *interpellation* (Frank, 2010), stories call on a person to behave or act in ways that are appropriate to its plot. The two – embodied experience and story – therefore exist in a reciprocal relationship, with each affecting the other.

On this basis, and in light of career transition research among elite sportspeople (e.g., Sparkes, 1998; McKenna & Thomas, 2007; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless 2009a), Alex's story may be regarded as a positive one from the perspective of long-term development and psychosocial wellbeing. A particular feature of his story is a refusal to adopt an exclusive athletic identity in favour of sustaining a broad-based, multidimensional identity. While at times this places Alex's story in tension with elite sport culture, he reasons that this friction is worthwhile for the benefits it brings.

In previous work (Douglas & Carless, 2006a), we have shown that the dominant performance script insists that, to be successful at the elite or professional level, athletes must be single-minded, resist other facets of life, and relegate relationships. For tellers of performance tales, "So total is the focus on sport performance, that the person and the job become inseparable" (p. 20). This is clearly not the case for athletes like Alex who achieve excellence while overtly resisting the monological performance narrative, storying their lives instead around the contours of a dialogical relational and/or discovery narrative. They exhibit an overt form of resistance that has much in common with the *regular and dyadic resistance* reported among some ageing bodybuilders (Phoenix & Smith, 2011).

### **Playing the Part of Athlete**

A third group of athletes consciously *play the part of athlete* by publicly telling and enacting performance stories, while privately sustaining a multidimensional life story and set of behaviours based on alternative narrative types. Tony (a 24 year-old professional rugby union player) is one such individual, whose life story demonstrates relational and discovery

threads. This excerpt, shared while talking about his attempts to regain a place in the first team following an injury, provides an illustration:

[I] went to see him [the coach] and said, ‘Look, I thought I’ve been playing well for the second team, what’s happened the last couple of months?’ And he said, ‘Well, you haven’t been to see me. Your attitude stinks.’ Basically my fitness coach had snaked me and said I hadn’t done any extras and what killed me was I had to go and see him for him to tell me this. If I had known that that was the way I was being perceived then I would have done something about it. I wouldn’t have done anything drastic because I felt like I was working hard anyway but I would have probably done something so that they know I’ve been working hard, sort of thing. For an example, they do a core group – like core stability through here every morning at 8 o’clock. There’s special people need to do it, so once I got this bollocking for being last, being perceived as being lazy, the next day I went to this core group – and to be quite honest with you I don’t think it makes any difference – and I went and did it for a week.

*So the sole reason you’re doing it is to be perceived as more serious?*

Yeah. So I go in there, get my folder, I’m in there at 8 o’clock every morning with one other bloke, something like that, and then I got a tick for saying I’m in there and then I’m perceived for doing work. It’s not really made that much difference to my body, but to the way they perceive me it’s massive. By the end of the two weeks: ‘Oh, his attitude has really changed.’ Know what I mean? And it was bollocks and we knew it was bollocks! Every Wednesday we sit around after eating talking about perception and how it’s happened to every one of us, how we’ve all gone in and seen our fitness coach and he’s said something to me like: ‘You haven’t done this.’ And then you’d have to prove it to him, you have to go up and say: ‘I’ve been working really hard on this, I need another program cause I’ve just been working really hard on this one. I’m on the end of my

phase two, can you give me another program for phase three cause I feel like I'm putting on loads of muscle?' And he'd be, like: 'That's really good, really impressed with you.' Then the next meeting ... he'll say to the coach: 'Tony is just outstanding at the moment, I really think you should give him a go. His body is unbelievable.' He hasn't even seen my body! He hasn't done any caliper testing! He just knows from what I've said to him.

This account offers valuable insights into psychosocial dynamics within elite sport culture – particularly the ways athletes both *shape* and are *shaped by* the expectations, perceptions, and behaviors of (powerful) others (see also McGannon & Spence, 2010). When Tony describes how “my fitness coach had snaked me and said I hadn't done any extras,” he alludes to a widely shared assumption or belief within sport culture (here, on the part of coaches) that ‘hard physical work,’ dedication, and doing more than asked is required to perform at the highest level. This orientation is consistent with the contours of the performance narrative where dedication is considered essential and sport is storied as ‘work’ (Douglas & Carless, 2006a). In Tony's account, two members of the coaching staff are portrayed as subscribing to the values of this narrative type, expecting – or demanding – dedication (i.e., a particular attitude) and hard work (i.e., commitment to additional physical training) as a prerequisite of being a professional athlete.

This excerpt also reveals that as a professional athlete Tony considers it is, firstly, *necessary* and, secondly, *that he is able* to control, manage, or influence the decisions of powerful others. As he put it: “If I had known that that was the way I was being perceived then I would have done something about it.” Here, Tony works in a planned, active, self-conscious, and targeted manner to manipulate the perceptions of powerful others whose decisions exert a very real influence on his career development and earning potential. These decisions, in Tony's account, are subjective judgments made on the basis of Tony's behavior

and talk. In other words, the coach's observations of what Tony does and the stories he tells (publicly) provide the basis for the decision that Tony is not ready to return to the first team.

To effect change in the coaches' perceptions, it is less that Tony sees a need to change what he actually *does* (in a concrete, embodied way), but rather that he sees a need to publicise, market, or promote those aspects of himself that are communicated as desirable by the coaching staff. In his account: "I wouldn't have done anything drastic because I felt like I was working hard anyway but I would have probably done something so that they know I've been working hard." Thus, Tony consciously and deliberately changes the kinds of stories he tells the coaching staff and adjusts aspects of his behavior (such as attending the morning 'core training' session) to appear in a way that is consistent with their expectations. Tony makes these changes even though they do not, to him, result in perceptible improvement in performance. The direction of change or realignment is, we suggest, towards the script of the performance narrative: Tony realigns his *public* stories and behavior to fit more closely with the kind of performance story that is expected – or demanded – by the coaching staff.

Tony's actions can be understood, in Goffman's (1959) terms, as a particular *presentation* of self designed to manage or influence the responses of others. In Butler's (1990) terms, his actions can be seen as the *performance* of a particular identity that is valued and rewarded within a specific cultural setting (of professional sport). Butler (1990, p. 25) argues that: "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result." In the preceding excerpt, we see this process in action as Tony 'performs' (or 'presents himself' in) the role commonly expected of professional athletes. This is *not* an identity or self that Tony stories outside of sport culture, but rather an aspect of self that is performed when required, a role that he plays which fits with the script of the performance narrative. Thus, Tony 'plays the part' of athlete (as defined by the terms of the performance

narrative) while immersed in professional sport culture, where his career and earnings depend on decisions made by powerful others who subscribe to the performance narrative.

Yet this is not a part that Tony takes as his 'authentic' self; it is not a story he routinely tells elsewhere. Rather, Tony is consciously aware that he is giving a performance. Within different cultural settings – where there is no need to tell this story or fulfill this identity – Tony (like Alex before) presents a broader, multidimensional, dialogical self. During the interview, for example, Tony variously shared stories of his family, his partner, his passion for cooking and desire to train as a chef, and his love of theatre and dance. These diverse stories demonstrate that Tony has established a repertoire of self-positions from which he narrates his life. It is not that case that Tony's life is storied from the singular, monological position of 'athlete'. Rather, Tony achieves a dialogical self that is constructed through stories told from multiple self-positions (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2006).

Through this process, Tony is able to both survive (or thrive) in professional sport culture while covertly resisting cultural pressures towards a singular athletic identity. Without at times playing the part of athlete, it seems likely that Tony's sport career would be hindered through his continued exclusion from the first team. On the other hand, by adopting or internalizing the performance narrative as his own story or 'authentic' self, he risks sacrificing valuable and important aspects of his identity. This is important given the threats that adherence to the performance narrative poses for identity development and wellbeing (see Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2009a).

When Tony says, "It's not really made that much difference to my body, but to the way they perceive me it's massive," he suggests that particular performances or presentations of self really do work (and may even be necessary) for success in elite sport. They work not because they affect objective performance, but because coaches and selectors (and others) *expect* them. Matching the kind of self an athlete performs and the stories s/he tells to the

preferences of coaches and selectors can be an effective way to modify their perceptions, decisions, and actions. Doing so can significantly affect career development and earning potential. Tony's story suggests these processes are not uncommon: he recounts how, in behind-the-scenes or backstage conversations, teammates shared similar experiences, leading to agreement that "it's happened to every one of us."

### **Conclusion**

This study reinforces research in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2003; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Busanich et al., 2012) which has shown that development, identity, and behaviour are not simply a product of psychological processes located 'within' individuals, but powerfully shaped by sociocultural factors. It extends existing research in professional golf (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2009a; Carless & Douglas, 2009) by making these processes visible in the context of several other elite and professional sports. In addition to showing that these processes occur, our study develops recent research by revealing *how* they occur through identifying and detailing three psycho-sociocultural processes experienced by elite athletes.

We document, firstly, how a dominant performance narrative is routinely circulated within elite sport culture (through being told and re-told by powerful others such as coaches), pressurizing or coercing athletes into narrating their life in ways that follow its particular plot. Because a story calls for or requires actions and behaviors that fit its plot in order to be sustained, some athletes come to *live* this story, excluding or denying aspects of their lives that fall outside the performance narrative's focus on performance outcomes. Our study forewarns of the potential consequences of this as cultural processes exert pressure on athletes to *be* or *become* something that is likely to be damaging to wellbeing and development. We illustrated these processes by drawing on the story of Suzanne who

experienced a degree of emotional tension and regret reflecting on relationships that were sacrificed or suppressed in the pursuit of performance outcomes.

Secondly, our study contributes a new insight to the literature concerning the ways other athletes avoid living, 'buying into,' or internalizing the performance narrative. These individuals overtly *resist* the monological performance plot to sustain instead a dialogical life story. To do so, individuals such as Alex draw on alternative narrative resources sourced from outside elite sport culture, such as *relational* and *discovery* narratives. The scripts of these dialogical narratives call for connection, interdependence, exploration, diversity, and multiplicity over and above individuation, personal gain, singularity, and linearity. While relational and discovery stories are at odds with the dominant performance narrative, our study underscores recent elite sport research to suggest they do not compromise performance excellence but hold positive consequences for identity and wellbeing (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006a; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009).

Resisting a culturally dominant narrative is, however, never easy and rarely without costs. One cost is the risk of being excluded or ostracized from a culture on the basis of perceived difference from 'norms' or expectations. For elite and professional athletes, this kind of exclusion has the potential to lead to loss of earnings and/or career development through, for example, de-selection or loss of sponsorship. Our study documents how a third group of athletes (such as Tony) counteract these risks by *playing the part of athlete* in particular contexts. Rather than *living* the part of sportsperson as scripted by the performance narrative, these individuals consciously *present* or *perform* themselves in ways that align with the performance script, when they perceive it necessary to do so. At these times, through deliberately manipulating their public behaviours and stories they align themselves with the expectations of powerful others (such as selectors, managers, coaches). As a result, they are able to survive within the performance-dominated culture of elite and professional sport.



Importantly, however, the (monological/linear) story they tell and the (singular) identity they enact at these moments is markedly different to the (dialogical/polyphonic) stories and (multidimensional) self evident in their lives outside sport. The extent to which this manipulation may affect long-term wellbeing is a matter for future research.

In light of these findings, we suggest there is a need for those of us who live and work in sport – whether as psychologist, coach, athlete, lecturer, researcher, teacher, official, broadcaster, journalist, or policymaker – to reflect on the kinds of story *we* tell and thereby perpetuate regarding what it is to be or become an elite sportsperson. To what extent do *we* uncritically reproduce the damaging and debilitating performance narrative that dominates sporting discourse on the mistaken assumption that this script is the only way to achieve sporting success? By retelling and re-enacting this story plot each of us – perhaps unwittingly – plays a part in constraining the lives of aspiring athletes. By identifying, sharing, and demonstrating alternative stories – through actions *and* words – we have the opportunity to open up diverse ways of living and being an elite athlete which do not threaten sport performance yet bring significant advantages in terms of long-term development and wellbeing.

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