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***My eyes got a bit watery there:* Using stories to explore emotions in coaching  
research and practice at a golf programme for injured, sick and wounded  
military personnel**

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless

Leeds Beckett University

Corresponding author

Dr Kitrina Douglas

Research Institute for Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure,

Leeds Beckett University,

Fairfax Hall,

Leeds LS6 3QS, UK.

Email: [kitrinadouglas@gmail.com](mailto:kitrinadouglas@gmail.com)

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## **Abstract**

Recognising the importance of holistic approaches to sport coaching pedagogy there has been a move to include and understand more fully emotional and subjective features of coaches' work. Our research here seeks to advocate for and support this pedagogy. Ethnographic data were collected at a golf intervention where civilian sport coaches worked among serving injured, sick and wounded military personnel in a recovery context. We adopted a storytelling methodology to render present aspects of sport coaching that have previously been absent, particularly those of emotional and empathic understanding. This form of analysis and representation allowed multiple, dialogic meanings to evolve and a more sophisticated understanding of the role and contribution of the coach/leader in this unusual disability sport context. Through a series of vignettes which represented different aspects of the intervention, the story shed light on how emotions are evoked, hidden or made visible depending on different situations and relationships. The stories also show some of the potential costs or risks of becoming more empathic and caring. Feedback from the coaches and programme participants suggested the stories illuminated some aspects of their lives, work and relationships that remain difficult to articulate and share.

**Key words:** disability sport coaching; recovery; injured, sick or wounded military personnel; emotion; stories; narrative.

***My eyes got a bit watery there: Using stories to explore emotions in coaching research and practice at a sport and adventurous training programme for injured, sick and wounded military personnel***

It is generally recognised that we need to include, within our field of reference, human subjectivities – particularly feelings and emotions. Indeed, emotions play a leading role in interpersonal relationships (Dallos, 2006) and have been described as messengers from the self that provide a medium to interpret and respond to one's own and other people's actions, behaviours and experiences (Hochschild, 1983). If we accept that effective coaching has at its heart an effective relationship (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Lyle, 1999; Jowett, 2005; Wang, 2013), then we must also accept that in any given coaching scenario we have a 'thinking, feeling, human being' interacting with other 'thinking, feeling, human beings' and emotions will be 'at work'. Yet emotional dimensions of sport coaching have often been marginalised or even absent from sports coaching research and educational provision (Potrac, Jones, Purdy, Nelson, & Marshall, 2013). Recognising the importance of holistic approaches there has been a move recently to incorporate emotional knowledge in sport coaching and physical activity pedagogy (Douglas & Carless, 2008; Jones & Turner, 2006; Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne & Llewellyn, 2012). Our research here seeks to advocate for and support this pedagogy.

**Coaching within a disability sport context**

Antoine (1996) and DePauw (1990) have suggested disability sport coaching requires a coach to develop a greater awareness of human subjectivities and emotions as each

individual brings a somewhat unique challenge. Yet, as noted by DePauw and Gavron (2005), there is a lack of specialist education within disability sport. Our experience in mental health and coach education illustrates this lack of awareness (see Carless & Douglas, 2010). Seldom had the coaches we worked with considered how stigma and discrimination might have influenced their own emotional responses to an individual diagnosed with a mental ‘illness.’ Indeed, it seemed many coaches were only aware of public stereotypes of, for example, ‘a schizophrenic’. It was not unusual for coaches to be fearful of such individuals while also showing a lack of understanding for their lives. Along with DePauw and Gavron (2005), we support moves for more specialised education, and especially with novice and inexperienced coaches, before they enter disability sport coaching environments, which brings us to our current research.

### **Sport coaching among injured, sick and wounded military personnel**

For several years we have been researching a successful intervention named ‘Battle Back, Lilleshall’ aimed at supporting the recovery of wounded, injured and sick military personnel (e.g., Carless, 2014; Carless, Peacock, McKenna, & Cooke, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2015a). The belief that sport can support recovery from physical and psychological injuries among military personnel is not new and numerous types of activities have been used (e.g., community fitness classes, mountaineering, surfing, fly-fishing, yoga). These activities are not an exhaustive list, but rather, provide examples of projects where a skilled practitioner provided specialist sport coaching and leadership.

It would seem reasonable to assume that delivering a rural monthly community exercise programme places different demands *on* and different

considerations *for* a course leader/coach compared with a nine-day mountain expedition. Yet, to date, little attention has been devoted to understanding the unique challenges of coaching in these contexts. Despite research indicating that coaches and leaders are highly valued, that unique relationships are established, and that the coach was an integral part of the intervention (e.g., Carless et al., 2013), we know very little about the men and women behind delivery, their philosophies, motives or education. Nor have we accrued knowledge about the emotional demands this type of work brings. For example, there has been a paucity of research addressing the emotional costs or potential risks to individuals engaged in such roles. Such a state raises a number of concerns. What type of emotional demands surface when coaching wounded, injured or sick military personnel? How might we better prepare or support novice and/or inexperienced coaches? And how do those who fund such programmes justify and recognise the unique contribution of civilian coaches? One way to answer these questions is through stories.

### **Storytelling methodology**

Qualitative researchers in sport and physical activity have found that traditional research methods are not well suited to exploring and or representing emotional connection, empathic understanding or embodied experience (Carless, 2012; Douglas, 2014a; McGannon, 2012). Indeed, Midgley (2001, p. 83) has observed that, ‘scientific concepts are not adapted to focusing on subjectivities’ and that ‘many of them have been carefully adapted to exclude it.’ We have thus been challenged to find ways to preserve the multiplicity of human feeling we experience or witness through field research, and to communicate it without diminishing, devaluing or diluting its

complexity or impact.

For us, a storytelling methodology sits within a broader narrative framework that recognises and values the creation and sharing of stories. For numerous authors (e.g., Frank, 2010; McLeod, 1997; Nelson, 2001), stories provide a way to make sense of our own and each other's experience, to give meaning and coherence to life's events and shape our sense of identity and self. It is not our intention to advocate here for all the potential contributions stories and storytelling within a narrative theoretical approach. That said, there are three issues that we would like to draw out.

Firstly, stories make it possible to convey emotionally significant information (Bruner, 1990) and this is important in terms of understanding the demands civilian coaches face working in a military recovery context. Stories used in this way have the potential take the reader into unfamiliar scenes, scenarios, relationships or issues with the characters in order to feel and experience *with* him or her, what is emotionally significant and why, as well as what is familiar and/or what might be unusual about this setting. If done well, the reader brings her own life experiences and interest to bear, broadening and extending her own horizons, as she gains a view of life from a different standpoint to her own. It is from such consideration that storied accounts have the potential to develop ethical and moral reflection (Frank, 2010) and to extend our awareness of emotional dimensions of coaching sport.

Secondly, sport is dominated by a hegemonically masculine type of story (Anderson, 2005) and a performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2015b) where winning is the most highly prized outcome and being tough, strong and powerful are highly valued assets. If stories about emotional engagement, loss, weakness, shame, empathic awareness or sensitivity do surface they are often then silenced, hidden, devalued and or rendered taboo. One consequence is that there is a dearth of stories to

validate alternative ways of living and being in sport. Frank (2004) expands on this point suggesting that,

Stories do not merely narrate events. They convey on action and actor— either one or both—the socially accredited status of being worth notice. To render narratable is to claim relevance for action, and for the life of which that action is part. (p. 62)

In short, our lives only gain the status of ‘being worthy’ when they are noticed and valued by others. Without social accreditation, our actions become ‘as if’ they were invisible and worthless. Narrative research among high performance athletes (e.g., Douglas, 2009, 2014b; Douglas & Carless, 2015b) has shown that, for some athletes, relationships, care and connection are more important than winning. Amplifying these stories challenges the performance narrative, a narrative plot where there is but ‘one way’ to ‘be’ or ‘find success’ in sport. Dialogical storytelling, therefore, has an important role to play by rendering present what would otherwise be absent in coaching pedagogy, through validating the actions and stories of those who live with alternative values or whose actions go unnoticed.

A final ethical and moral benefit is that stories have the potential to remove artificial boundaries that research often creates between participants and the researcher. A storytelling methodology can be an effective way to preserve and reveal the intimacy we develop with a participant that is usually obscured in research findings. This makes it possible to also stand with participants on the page, and in the unfolding action and goes some way to showing the philosophy underpinning our research.

## **Writing stories**



When used as a methodology, stories provide one way of drawing together, presenting and making sense of – in an accessible and visceral account – field notes, interviews, action and events that a researcher witnesses in the course of her research. Such accounts can provide a mood and feel of how the data was collected, and invite dialogue such that the audience is not forced or channelled to accept a single finalised perspective (Clough, 2002; Frank, 2010).

Kitrina adopted such an approach to write: '*My eyes got a little bit watery there*' following fieldwork at the first Battle Back golf skills course in 2014 where she also carried out life-story interviews with two coaches, three members of the On Course Foundation team, and seven military personnel on the course. Additional sources of ethnographic data were observation, field notes, a reflexive diary and discussion from sharing our research with the group and receiving feedback. Space limitations prohibit a full description of the methodological and ethical considerations of this approach but these can be found in Douglas & Carless (2015b).

Saldaña (2011) provides an insight regarding how we approach writing stories:

If you write with a message, moral or lesson in mind, the result is most often a heavy-handed, theme-driven fable rather than a character-inspired and story-driven drama. (p.121)

Similarly, the story that follows is inspired by the lives of five characters and based on actual events, people and happenings. Our belief is that when we describe well the drama of life that the emotional dimensions will be revealed in an authentic and contextual way that will shed light on the questions we raise and our aims for this work. Namely, to understand the emotional demands of working among injured sick

and wounded soldiers and to better support coaches in this area of disability sport coaching.

### **My eyes got a bit watery there**

#### **1. Packing**

‘Right love I’m off,’ Alwyn called up the stairs. Annie’s head came into view over the bannister, smiling.

‘And are you’re not taking these?’ She held a pair of shoes in one hand and a wash-bag in the other.

‘Oh heavens,’ he said coming up the stairs again. They met on the landing, where she threw her arms round his neck, still holding the shoes and wash bag, as he slipped his arms round her waist. There was a sense of security here, and normality, of deep respect, care, love, but it seldom came out in words. There was so much they didn’t say, there was so much he couldn’t seem to put into words.

It was like that the first time he’d come back from coaching injured soldiers. During the actual coaching he felt he’d done a good enough job. It had been challenging all right, trying to find a way for a man with two prosthetic legs to make a backswing and keep his balance, and then helping another man with other complex injuries to find his rhythm. Oh, and the man who’d lost three fingers, and...it went on. He held himself together despite some of the stories the men had shared about their injuries. Then, at the end of the week, just before they all left, one of the men came up and just grabbed him, gave him the biggest hug he’d ever experienced. This huge burly soldier nearly squeezed the life out of Alwyn. Then he said something that left

its mark. He said, 'Mate, you've changed my life, you've given me my competitiveness back, you've rekindled the fire'.

That experience, of being held and completely enveloped in another man's arms, brought a deeper level of understanding about what he'd been doing all week. He hadn't thought about rekindling a fire in someone's life. The enormity of *that* only took hold of him when he finally got home and stopped. Then, he sat down and just sobbed. Where did those emotions come from he wondered? How could he explain *that* to Annie? They'd been together for forty years. Bit-by-bit he shared snippets with her and of late, when he'd come back from coaching the war 'vets', Annie had got into the habit of pouring him a little whiskey, closing the door and slipping out to leave him alone for a moment-or-two in quiet contemplation. After half an hour or so, when he'd composed himself, let the emotions pass, he would find her and they'd begin to talk.

'These boys are so young,' he would say to her. Coaching injured soldiers had now coloured life in a certain way, it changed him, humbled him, and sometimes troubled him.

He broke off the hug.

'I need to get going, it's a new group called *Battle Back*, so I don't want to be late!'

Annie put the shoes and wash-bag into his waiting arms and kissed him once more, this time on the forehead. 'See you Friday,' she said, and he was off.

\*

There were six different piles on the bed. The first was a pile of socks, the second a pile of underpants, the third a pile of shirts, and so on. Each pile was extremely neat, in-line and ready to pack. Peter had become aware that, the more he

was able to control his environment, the less he would be troubled by his anxiety. Going down a day early to Battle Back was absolutely perfect for him, as he couldn't cope with fast balls, the unexpected, of being asked to do something without having time to think. His anxiety increased even as he thought about not knowing the times for meals, where his room would be, what would be expected of him, and of interacting with other people. On a scale from zero-to-ten, the packing had raised his anxiety from zero-to-four, but at least he could take his time.

His mum popped her head round the door. 'What time you off pet?' she asked. Peter had been living with his mum since his divorce. His mum had, in many ways, always been a rock, a person he could depend upon, and at the same time she was the glue that helped hold him together. He didn't necessarily confide in her, but it was comforting knowing she was *there*, wherever *there* was.

As a boy he'd been aware of a deep fear about becoming nothing, empty, black, devoid of love, touch. He was aware such thoughts might sound silly to others, so most times he didn't talk about them. But he could trace when it started. He remembered one night lying in bed when he was about six-years-of-age and becoming consumed with the thought that, *you're not just dead for a million years, but for millions and millions of years*. Somewhere in his being the meaning of this was like being caught by fingers of death and being dragged away. It was too much – he burst into tears and ran downstairs crying.

'What is it love?' his mother had asked, collecting him in her arms.

But he couldn't tell her. He couldn't give shape to the fear, to name what it was that troubled him. All he felt able to say was something quite different: 'I've a pain in my legs mum'. He remembered how his mother tried to soothe the pain away by stroking the palm of her hand down his shins, along his little bare feet, up over his

calves all the while cradling him in her arms and gently rocking him back and forth with his head tucked under her chin. Did she know there was more? Could she tell there was something unspeakable troubling her little boy? And did she know now that her grown son was experiencing more profound panic attacks and acute anxiety, with physical manifestations, a fear that made his heart race, his stomach retch, and his whole body tremor. Did she know it was triggered while he was serving his country, standing with his brothers in some desert miles from home?

He knew most times he could hide it, up to about a seven and at this moment, as his mum popped her head round the door, it was still four and he felt safe. He looked at his watch and responded to her question. 'I'm leaving now!' There was no more time to procrastinate.

## 2. Fear

'Right,' said the tall, slim man rubbing his hands together and looking round the room. His voice was slightly louder than the upbeat background music, slightly louder than conversations, and slightly louder than he would talk normally. Faces turned as he attempted to make eye contact with thirteen men and one woman seated round the periphery of the bright room, which at that moment was bathed in sunshine.

'My name is Greg, and I'm the course leader this week. This is the first time we've run a golf skills course, and I for one am looking forward to it.' He smiled while pointing a remote control towards the music to kill the sound. With that he sat down and lowered his voice. Greg was a keen golfer and had worked with several pro golfers over the years, helping them improve their mental skills and performance.

That knowledge, he thought, would be useful now as he considered how to steer the morning session.

‘I wonder,’ he asked leaning forward on his chair and looking at the faces before him, ‘would it be alright if we begin by everyone introducing themselves?’ His voice had become softer. ‘And maybe, if you wouldn’t mind telling us what you’d like to get out of the week? Or,’ he paused and smiled, ‘what would make it a really good week for you?’

\*

Peter had been counting the number of people to his right in the circle, he knew there were three men left to speak before he would be expected to say *what would make this a great week*. It was like a shadow creeping towards him as he became increasingly more anxious.

Walking into the room had set him off. Now he could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his hands becoming wet and his body hot. A knot of tension was growing, as were feelings of self-consciousness. He knew the beads of sweat forming on his forehead were visible. He was being sucked down into whirlpool of mud, soon to disappear like a shoe sucked beneath the surface. There was no escape.

*Everyone else is answering*, he told himself. *I have to*. Suddenly, it was his turn. Peter swallowed.

‘I lost interest,’ he said, trying to speak slowly, to not show he was anxious. But he could hear *it* in his shaky voice. He continued trying not to stumble over his words. ‘It would be good to see if I can get the bug back.’ He hoped that would be enough, and it was. The man next to him took over.

‘Bit like me, mate,’ Hugh smiled towards Peter. ‘I haven’t played golf for two years because of my injury.’ Hugh then looked towards other members of the group,

sharing his burden with them all. ‘A big thing for me this week is to see if I still can play.’

Peter felt relieved, a little safer – he’d done it. Speaking out, he realised, made him feel good, it gave him a little boost, his heart was still racing but the wave had passed, and he had floated. *Not bad for a man who won’t go outta the house*, he thought.

### 3. Lessons

If, at the Battle Back centre, Alwyn had been out of his comfort zone, at the driving range he was in his front yard. ‘Can I have your attention?’ he called, drawing the group towards himself. ‘In a minute I’m going to divide you into groups of three, and then you’ll take it in turns to hit balls, and this is what I’d like to you to try’. He mixed descriptions with demonstrations, attending to what he called *the basics*: how to hold the club, stand to the ball, and take the club back. He wanted each person to practice three things and he told them he wanted to *polish* their skills. Then he sent them off to begin hitting balls while he started giving individual tuition.

What might have impressed you, but what you may have missed had you not been there, was how Alwyn, when asking about how an illness or injury might potentially impact swinging the club or playing golf, gently turned each soldier so that his back was facing the public area. That way, it was almost impossible for anyone to hear what was being said. Even so, Alwyn lowered his voice a little as he asked each man about what might be sensitive or difficult things to talk about. Then, as if allowing the information to be processed, he moved to the side and his speech raised

in volume. He'd say something funny and encouraged each player with, 'That's right!' 'Well done!' 'You got it.'

As he worked with each individual he'd ask questions: 'How does that feel?' 'Is that hurting your leg?' 'Did that increase the pain?' 'Are you alright with that?' 'Can you try this?' 'Okay-lets, try this then.' Asking, gently encouraging, tailoring his advice, and when it didn't go right, he'd just go, 'Oh, I am a clot,' placing the blame for poor shots at his own feet, for not understanding each man's situation well enough.

\*

'YES!' Owen called out, as another ball hit the fence at the end of the range. It was followed by another loud crack as his driver hit the next ball. Hugh, in the next bay, couldn't help being drawn in to what Owen was doing.

'Wish I could hit that far,' he sighed to Peter as two synchronised heads turned to watch another ball disappear into the distance. When Owen's ball finally landed he raised a hand as if to salute his supremacy and yelled,

'A-i-r t-i-m-e!'

Was it envy at the distance the ball travelled, or the way Owen's young body coiled up and released power that made Hugh dissatisfied with himself? It was hard to tell by just watching, which was what Jessie was doing. Before her were two men, poles apart in behaviour, one doing what he had been asked by the coach, and doing it well, attending to the non-showy little things, the three little, unspectacular tasks. The other *not* doing what he was asked, he wasn't making progress *technically*, *consistently* or in any pre-determined way. He was *just* hitting each ball as hard as he could, as far as he could, and when they went well, he was loving it. But, he was



influencing how the others in the next bay evaluated their skills, their shots, their swings.

Peter whispered to Hugh, 'Drive for show-putt for dough!'

'I know,' he replied, 'but I'd still like to hit it like that!'

'So would I,' confessed Peter, returning to his next shot.

Then Owen mishit a couple of shots sending the ball sideways. He didn't call anyone to look at those shots. Jessie noticed though. He caught her watching.

'What am I doing wrong?' he asked.

'You'll need to ask Alwyn,' was all Jessie would say. While she could have helped him, she also recognised that *too many cooks spoil the broth*. She wasn't there to coach. She was there as a researcher and didn't want to encroach on what Alwyn was doing. And anyway, Owen didn't appear to really want to improve his golf, or get better, she told herself, by way of excusing her action of *not helping* when she knew she could. He just wanted to belt the ball further than everyone else. Why waste her words?

#### 4. Interview

'What will you do with my interview?' Peter asked Jessie after she'd asked if she could interview him.

'Would you mind if I show you an example?' she replied.

'No that's fine,' he said.

Jessie opened her laptop. 'This is a film from our mental health research, it's one man's story. The laptop sprung to life, as did the seven-minute film. Peter felt awash in a sea of emotions during different parts of the film.

‘See if someone has never had a panic attack in their life,’ he began as soon as the credits came up, ‘they say they can understand what it’s like, but I don’t think they can.’

Jessie waited for him to pause and then asked, ‘Do you mind if I record this?’

‘No that’s fine,’ Peter continued, rather enjoying that what he was saying was important enough to record. ‘If I get a panic attack I get tears streaming down my face, and I can be an emotional wreck, my eyes are welling up,’ he continued.

Jessie listened, nodded, watched, then, because they’d been talking about Peter’s weight gain earlier asked, ‘Did you see the bodies of people in the film?’

‘Yeah, I know, I know,’ Peter replied thinking back to the large, flabby runners in the film. ‘It was quite, my eyes got a bit watery there watching it. Stuff like that I can relate to, it means a lot to me.’ Peter realised that, since watching the film, he’d found it easier to open up and remember how he felt and why he didn’t exercise more.

‘See, being in the army, they can’t see what’s wrong, people kind-of look down their noses at you, so people with mental health stuff will keep it to themselves, and that’s the worst thing you can do. You end up just bottling it up inside. What makes me worse is looking at myself in the mirror, and at what I used to look like. But if I can get that thinking through my mind,’ he pointed at the laptop, ‘like that man on there,’ he said pointing again, ‘its never too late to do something, to get back into it.’ Peter paused again. ‘You see, when you have this anxiety and panic attacks it feels like your life is over. Watching that video, it’s given me a wee boost to get back running, ‘cause if he can do it, I can do it. I like watching stuff like that, and I like people to tell me I’m doing good at something. I like a bit of praise.’

## 5. Tuesday morning

Hugh took a drag of his 'rolli' cigarette and stubbed it out on the pillar directly outside the entrance. As he did, Greg walked past on his way to the morning session.

'Last one is it?' Greg asked, partly in jest, partly to allude to his dislike of smoking, but mostly, just to make contact. He winked as he said it, but didn't break his stride and carried on inside.

Hugh thought back to the previous evening when, over dinner, he'd been telling Greg about the past three years. 'My wife would say, *Do you fancy going on a picnic, or shall we go out for the day?* And I'd say, *No, I'm in too much pain.* But it was just an excuse. I was well enough to go, but, I just couldn't, I just got more and more depressed.' By the time he'd finished talking to Greg he realised he was feeling more positive and had begun to make plans.

Hugh smiled and followed Greg inside.

\*

'Not so hard!' Greg shouted. 'You want him to catch it!' Owen had thrown the ball so hard it had slipped through Peter's fingers. But, in a comical way, it had rebounded off his chest and found his waiting hands. 'Now I'm going to introduce a second ball, and then a third and a fourth, to see how many balls we can keep going between us at the same time. Here we go.'

'Al!' Greg shouted throwing the first ball to Alwyn who caught the ball and then threw it on to Owen, shouting his name again. While that ball was going on round, Greg introduced a second ball. 'Al,' he called again, throwing ball number two and, as soon as Alwyn had thrown the ball on to Owen, Greg threw him ball number three, then four, then five.

What you would have seen, if you looked in through the window, was a group who appeared to be working together, with no visible competition between them, no aggression, no hierarchy, no failures, lots of laughter and complete concentration. Each person part of a coordinated effort – memorising names, familiarity being created, sharing *something*, and a sea of colourful balls criss-crossing in mid-air like the Red Arrows. What you wouldn't have been able to see were the seeds of joy and confidence growing. By the time the activity was over, Peter felt like his battery had been filled up.

‘That was like drinking Red Bull!’ he said to Hugh.

‘Just imagine if we started work like that every morning!’ Hugh joked back.

Peter, in shock, realised he'd been standing in close proximity to other people, playing a game and really enjoying it. He hadn't experienced any signs of his anxiety. He couldn't remember the last time he had *that* feeling. It was such fun he felt a huge sense of achievement welling up within. ‘Where did that come from?’ he asked Jessie as they sat down to talk during the coffee break.

\*

It wasn't a Mexican wave, but you would have been forgiven for thinking it was. The only thing Henry, a former soldier and member of the on-course team, had asked was, ‘How many of you are getting a medical discharge?’

There they were, sat round the huge boardroom table at Fordingbrook Golf Club, waiting for sandwiches and then their afternoon round of golf and, in the interim, having their *employment in golf* talk from Henry.

Hugh raised his hand. Next to him, Owen raised his followed by Peter raising his hand. The show of hands continued round the table until every man on the course had raised his hand showing he was being discharged. Each hand signalled a life

trajectory fractured by injury or illness and attested to an *end*. It was a sobering moment.

‘My wife’s boss has got some work for me, but I am still interested in what’s available in golf,’ Hugh offered.

‘I want to do accountancy,’ Peter interjected. ‘I wouldn’t want to throw all that away to become a green keeper.’

‘It’s not just about green keeping!’ Henry had been fiddling with paper clip while listening to everyone. He stopped, opened his hands to the group and looked toward Peter before making eye contact with each of the others. ‘There are over 600 different jobs you could go into in the golf industry. Agronomy, turf science, equipment design, engineering, course design and maintenance, marketing, managing golf clubs. We have loads of our guys working as club secretaries. Then there’s logistics, communication. We’ve got contacts in every area of golf and we can open doors.’ It was hard to disagree with a man with no legs, a man who’d already trod this path.

## 6. Scoff

*Harry Potter would be comfortable here!* Alwyn thought, picking his way through the crowded dining room filled with gymnasts in brightly coloured Team GB tracksuits. There was only one empty place at the table between Peter and Owen, opposite a couple from the other group whom he didn’t know. One of these men, Liam, was mid-way through telling a story. He broke off to nod, smile, make space and then it was back to the story.

‘So, there I was with this Afghan woman sitting at the bottom of my bed...’

The others, Alwyn noticed, were transfixed. ‘And then these girls turned up trying to sell me shit. I was shouting to the nurse, *Who the fuck are all these people in my room?* Those listening laughed. *Why are these people here? Get ‘em all out so I can have some peace!*’

‘I saw crabs crawling all over my body,’ the man next to him began, ‘I was so out of it.’ Alwyn had never taken morphine, or any of the other drugs they talked about for that matter. These guys seemed knowledgeable about all sorts of medications – the long names just flew off their tongues as they compared side effects. He was glad, sort of, to be included – even though some of the stories were hard to listen to. He couldn’t help drifting off into his own imaginings, seeing the scene they were describing, what he might have felt like if he were there.

‘All that effort draggin’ him back,’ Liam’s voice was now more sombre. The laughing had stopped. He’d begun another story. ‘And I turned him over and he had no face, no legs – gone. And I hadn’t even noticed. I dragged him all that way.’

Alwyn was there, gripped, in that place, imagining a dismembered body before him, a lost friend, warm blood on his own hands. He felt a tinge of sickness. Then he was back in the moment, sitting round the table, with little to say. The others, this time, were silent too.

Then Liam glanced at his watch and stood up and in a beautiful Irish lilt asked, ‘You coming to the cinema?’

‘Ah, no, you go ahead.’ Alwyn returned to the present as the group around him gathered trays and empty plates and departed.

Greg, seeing the vacant seats, shifted down the table. ‘Howzit goin’ coach?’

Alwyn didn't know where to start. 'You guys do an amazing job,' Alwyn offered. He'd never seen a group brought together like these coaches had done. He was amazed at the way Greg knitted together talks about behaviour, anger management, psychology, golf and life through little sport-stories and activities.

They began chatting at 20:08 and at 22:55, when Alwyn glanced at his watch again, he and Greg were still talking. Chewing the cud, some might say. Alwyn loved it. He'd never experienced this type of camaraderie between coaches and he was learning so much. It was so enriching to talk.

'I had a pro golfer come to me', Greg continued, 'he was just so down on himself. I asked, *Why don't you go yeaaaaah! after a good shot?* That's like some of the guys here – they seem to have lost the ability to enjoy life, to enjoy the good shots, or get excited. Mind you, it's not surprising,' he shrugged.

'I know what you mean,' Alwyn paused, thought for a moment, then added, 'But, in golf, we have a saying,' he drew closer as if to pass a secret, 'it's not how good your good shots are, its how bad your bad shots are.' Then he sat back and smiled. 'So with the kids I work with, well, come to think about it even the Tour players, I try to get them to be more *even*.' As he said *even*, his hand mimed calming the troubled sea. 'You know, *not* excited on the good shots because they are only *part* of it. If they get excited they are focussing on the outcome. I kinda try and nurture the opposite, focus on the swing, the move, the feel. Does that seem like the opposite of what you are suggesting?'

Greg paused for a moment. Yes it did, but he could see merit in both approaches. 'I get that, I can see why you would do that,' he nodded. 'But so many of these guys have become apathetic, indifferent, demotivated, beaten down. I feel we

need to help them experience the fun in sport again, get ‘em up a bit, encourage them like, even if its only for one shot or one moment at the range.’

‘I’m with you there,’ Alwyn agreed. ‘But if we’re talking about playing golf longer term, the focus needs to be on the *process, the swing*, not the immediate outcome. So, as long as you focus 100 per cent on making a particular move correctly, the shot outcome doesn’t matter. It will, over time, get better. If it’s just the outcome of the shot that matters, it will be a roller coaster ride. More importantly, the swing won’t get grooved, you don’t get the basics cemented? No?’

## 7. Wednesday morning

Hugh took a long drag of his ‘rolli’ and as he did Greg walk past, on his way to the morning session. ‘Last one is it?’ Greg asked. A cheeky smile spread across his face and his eyebrows joined in like paddles on a pinball machine: *ding ding!* He sped on into the building. Hugh laughed to himself, took one more drag, stubbed-out the ‘rolli’ and followed Greg into the morning session.

\*

As the group began to arrive one of the coaches popped a video on the TV hoping to bring some life to the quiet room. It was a mountain of a TV – you’d have a job *not* to watch it. And the video? Well, it was *blokes*. *Blokes* doing daring things, *blokes* throwing themselves off mountains, *blokes* throwing themselves out of aeroplanes, *blokes* throwing themselves from dangerous cliff-edges. It was mad, wild, fast, and mesmerised most of the group with colourful images and the fast beat of the music. Soon seats were filled and it was back to the flip chart.



‘Morning,’ Greg greeted everyone. ‘How are you all today?’ He scanned the smiling faces. ‘Quick session this morning then we’re off to play golf.’

## 8. Silly bugger

*You silly old bugger*, a voice in Alwyn’s head interrupted. *That’s not the way you teach someone to swing a golf club!* Alwyn recognised the voice as his 20-year-old-self – arrogant, proud, self-assured and over-confident. *Bloody impossible!* It had taken him thirty years to realise how simple he needed to make teaching the golf swing, and now, with younger coaches, he could hear the same attitude in their voices. They were all eager to use biomechanical analysis and the newest computer-aided technology on every player, just like he had been when he was twenty. *He needs to be in a much stronger position at the top of his swing*, the voice echoed again. *No! He doesn’t you fool!* Alwyn answered. *He hasn’t got the strength in his golfing muscles yet. OK, he might be able to carry 200lb of ammunition and an injured mate and, yeah, he’d make short change of you if you got on the wrong side of him, but he can’t hold that position at the top of his swing. He isn’t a Tour pro!* Still, in his imagination, he shook his head. *You’re constantly searching for this Aladdin’s cave with the perfect swing in it*, he was now addressing all the arrogant young men who thought they knew how to teach golf, *and its not there!*

He refocused, returning his thoughts to the man in front of him. ‘You had a really good rhythm earlier, that’s all you lost on that last shot. Don’t try and change a thing, all that happened there was the sequence was out of synch.’ Peter was listening intently and nodding. ‘Did you try to hit the ball further?’ Peter smiled and Alwyn took *the look* as a form of confession. ‘Change the club if you need the ball to go

further, not your swing,' he smiled. 'I know, we all do it!' Alwyn reminded Peter of a better focus: 'Go back to thinking about your rhythm.'

Peter went to the side of the tee and took several slower, more rhythmical practice swings. Then he closed his eyes like Greg had shown him in the morning session. In his mind, he followed a simple practical skill to make him more aware of his thoughts and his body. He stood for a moment before opening his eyes and stepping onto the tee. Then he hit the most perfect tee-shot and beamed a huge smile.

'That's it!' Alwyn encouraged, just as chuffed as if he'd hit the shot himself.

## 9. Thursday morning

Hugh was an expert at rolling tobacco, even stood-up, balancing the tin on the stub-it-out stand, he took only moments to fill, roll, lick and light. Then he took a drag and carried on the conversation with the others, releasing the smoke as he chatted.

'So, do you get preferential rates then?' he asked, amazed at the information he could pick-up from this informal group.

'Yeah, you want to ask at that club near you, or Henry will know.'

Greg walked past. 'Morning,' he offered to the 'smoking' group, on his way to set up for the first session on the final day. 'Last one is it?' he called out as he disappeared through the opening door.

Hugh laughed, but no-one else got the joke. 'It's an *in* joke,' he said, turning to look towards the entrance. At that moment Greg glanced back and two men momentarily held in each other's gaze. Hugh smiled and Greg nodded. His work was done.

## Reflections on the story

Our aim with '*My eyes got a bit watery there*' was not to tell a story *about* specific emotions but rather, much like assembling pieces of a jigsaw where no one piece dominates, to illuminate the importance of emotion within a particular coaching context. By adopting a storytelling methodology, we provided a way for others to walk with the characters and learn about their world, a world where a multiplicity of feelings, relationships, emotions and interactions are, at different times, both hidden and revealed. It is not our aim to discuss each issue raised – they are too numerous. Indeed, stories like this open up rather than to close down possibilities for reflection (Frank, 2010). That said, we would like to comment on how the story fulfilled our aims of uncloaking some of the less visible aspects of sport coaching.

Frank (2010), writing about why stories are important, suggests that the established view is to inform professional practice. Along such lines, '*My eyes got a bit watery there*' responds to calls for sport coaching research and pedagogy to be based on 'real world scenarios' (Jones & Turner, 2006; Morgan et al., 2012), represented in accessible language. Like Frank, however, we see a story like this as having additional ontological purchase. That is, a precondition for knowing how to act is knowing what is expected of us in order to carry out a particular role. This relies on being able to define the self we want to become or claim (Nelson, 2001). To *become* a coach, and to become an excellent coach, a person will hold in mind a particular narrative structure. This structure, or template, is based on publically available narrative types that 'story' the actions required to fulfill this role and provide assurance that they will be sanctioned and accepted by others within the culture. Our research in sport has suggested that this framework has become narrower

than need be, and at times oppressively and damagingly so (Douglas & Carless, 2015b).

If, as Bredahl, (2011) argues, coaching an individual with a disability requires a coach to *think differently* and develop greater levels of empathy and knowledge, then perhaps the more important function of the story is to influence (or challenge) narrow conceptions of a sport coach as some machine-like mainframe whose ability or skill is being able to convey highly complex technical information to achieve performance, health or educational outcomes. By making visible those aspects of coaching practice that are often absent and rendering them present – emotional openness, caring, the small, subtle easy to miss gestures that lead to relationships being built and developed, trust, empathic understanding – the story *validates* other ways of *being* a sport coach, expanding the repertoire open to other coaches. To be more blunt, the story provides evidence to counter ‘qualities’ that often dominate in sport culture – being tough, strong, fast, or hard – by providing concrete examples (back-stage and front-stage) of what counts in the process of claiming an identity as someone who cares. Because the story is dialogical, it allows these alternatives to co-exist alongside examples of hegemonic masculinity and the performance narrative (e.g., the coach hiding his tears, a young soldier hiding his anxiety, the value placed on hitting the ball a long way).

When soldiers talk in our interviews about traumatic events such as injury, death, or loss, we might ask them ‘How did you deal with that?’ The most common response has been, ‘*Man up.*’ ‘Man up,’ however, is what Nelson (2001) might describe as a ‘narrative fragment’ chiselled from the weightier hegemonic masculine story of how an individual should act when confronted with trauma, emotional distress or vulnerability. But this way of coping is not working for many soldiers,

coaches, women or men (Etherington, 2000). Against this backdrop, the types of evidence we suggest is important to bring to light are the micro-relational components of relationship building where one small act (a word or gesture) follows another in what at first glance might appear a trivial series of behaviours. One example of this is the cigarette-break interactions between Hugh and Owen. In these exchanges, few words were said, no technical input occurred, it was ‘only’ an eyebrow being raised, a smile in passing, a quietly shared joke. Across the duration of the 5-day course, however, these ‘little’ actions were hugely meaningful and the weight of their meaning is carried in their emotional engagement. These types of story plot follow a relational narrative where *the other* is important, valued and worth listening to – not simply a person to be conquered.

Other evidence of this counter narrative where sensitivity and empathic understanding can be seen is Alwyn recognising a potentially embarrassing situation on the driving range. Avoiding what might be embarrassing for a student is, of course, important in all coaching but, given the experiences of this group where the rawness of injuries are still visibly on the surface of the body, sensitivity becomes even more important. The way Alwyn positions the soldiers sideways on the range, and lowers his voice so that others can’t hear is an illustration of what makes his practice excellent. Yet this is the type of action that is difficult to instil in novice coaches – he isn’t ‘ticking a box’ but enacting emotionally awareness and sensitivity. We might go so far as to say that perhaps, without the types of emotional responses that Alwyn had previously experienced (balling his eyes out, feeling what it was like being held in the vice like grip of another man, hearing stories of death and injury) it may be difficult to understand the meaning and significance of his actions.

Alwyn is an excellent coach, but what makes him excellent is not his technical knowledge about the golf swing, even though this knowledge is necessary element of his professional practice. Rather, what makes him excellent, as opposed to average, is his level of emotional presence, his availability to these people. He doesn't block the possibility of sharing experiences or hearing stories, he is *with* them in an emotional, human fashion. Part of this process is for Alwyn to also be open to himself, reflecting, considering and allowing his emotions (at times) to bring meaning and significance to events that he can only imagine. Sometimes, these thoughts and feelings bring him pain, discomfort, and great sadness. He is a 'bystander' who wonders what we are doing sending young men to war. One of the costs, therefore, of being empathic, caring, and open to others is the risk of being unable to make things right, unable to answer moral questions, and even to potentially experience vicarious traumatisation (Etherington, 2000).

By bringing these issues to light we hope the story will help novice or inexperienced coaches appreciate what 'works here.' It should also pre-warn those entering this type of context about some potential benefits and risks of becoming caring and empathic. And they do come with a cost: those of us who advocate for them should ensure we show this side of the story.

### **The need for stories in coaching research**

Traditional approaches to research and representation (e.g., positivist/post-positivist studies presented as scientific or realist tales) often fail to be true to coaches' experience of what they do. *What* is reported and *how* it is reported often reflects the horizon of interest of academic researchers and scientists, preventing us from seeing

what is before our eyes in day-to-day practice. Even when we do see, these ways of representing research can prevent coaches recognising their own practice in the literature, obscuring the best of what it is they *do*.

Alwyn's response after reading the story, although very supportive and positive, wasn't lengthy. His action, however, revealed how he feels about the story. He told us that he e-mailed the story directly to a close family member as evidence of his work. This action suggests the story 'spoke a language' that communicated something about his practice that he was proud of, but was less able to convey in words or through description himself. And isn't this often the case? While traditional research and representations about coaching practice may be true, they aren't true enough. In the process of content analysing and dissecting people's lives and experiences, meaning and connections are easily lost. One reason a picture speaks a thousand words is because it *shows* an image that is difficult to articulate. Likewise, the story *shows* something that people who have been part of the project recognise in a meaningful and emotionally connected way.

Military personnel on the course and staff involved in the project who read this story conveyed a belief that the story carried, in a dynamic, true to experience way, important 'nuggets' that gave a *feel* for the essence of the programme. These responses suggested to us that '*My eyes got a bit watery there*' is more than just an accessible representation. Rather, the story makes it possible to touch on a truth as the individuals concerned experience it, within their own being and in a way that is not usually articulated or that they may not have previously been aware of.

In terms of coach education and pedagogy, if we wish to develop young coaches or CPD delegates, we think the profession should aspire to reach this level of emotional engagement. We recognise that coaches are increasingly being put under

pressure to 'produce results' and to conform to a singular narrative script of success. Our role, as educators and researchers therefore, is to keep revealing and supporting 'different ways to be' a sport coach through counter narratives and alternative representations. Perhaps when 'man up' fails to be the dominant response to trauma, and we are able to hold and support each other, vulnerabilities and all, stories such as this one will lose their potency. Until then, we believe their impact provides some much-needed validation and insight.

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