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“And I dedicate this win to...”: Performing grief in high performance sport
Forthcoming *Autoethnography*
Accepted for publication 20th May 2020

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Abstract

Arthur Bochner^{1 2} wrote that even though he’d written about grief, he never really understood it until the death of his father. I suspect many of us recognise a truth in what he said. Often unannounced, death creeps like an unwelcome stain into our lives. I wonder how many of us are ready for it and what narrative scripts are available to us at these times as we try to make sense and bring meaning to our loss?

In sport, the path that I trod for my first occupation, the pervasiveness of the performance narrative means that following the death of a parent an athlete is expected to continue with their sport, regardless of their pain and grief. “The show” or that competition you trained so hard for, so the story goes, “must go on”. Within high performance sport the grief and loss experienced by well-known athletes seems to also provide an additional newsworthy opportunity for reporters and journalists to spice up their copy with stories of how, “I did it for dad”.

But is winning the only way to represent or honour this relationship? And what of those athletes who never win? How do they honour their dead?

Over the past twenty years I have often drawn on my own experiences in professional sport to challenge the dominant performance narrative which frames winning as the only accepted and valued goal of the athlete. In this performance autoethnography I hope to extend my previous work by turning the spotlight on some of the ways the performance narrative frames how athletes and media alike represent grief and loss and what the father/child relationships means.

My aim and purpose with this work is to contribute to the creation of counterstories and alternative narrative maps. Through creating such resources it may provide some athletes whose lives and experiences are currently disenfranchised or silenced, and I include myself in this group, to negotiate this difficult terrain in ways that are more authentic. In Mark Freeman’s terms, I seek to ‘break away’ from this powerful monologue and sap its “coercive power”³ (p. 12).

“And I dedicate this win to...”: Performing grief in high performance sport, or not

[note: this is a performance autoethnography. In the opening and closing verses (which are from the songs *Corridors*⁴ and *Ray of Sunshine*⁵) the lyrics are sung and accompanied by a finger picked guitar.]

*

“Corridors”

She didn't see it comin'
It wasn't on her mind
No chance now for running
To lost to be found

*

Telephones interrupt, don't they? Some people don't seem to mind; well they'd turn it off if it bothered them, *wouldn't they?* Door-bells are the same. An interruption that requires a response.

Of course, sometimes the interruption is welcome. Sometimes its not.

*

Was it Tuesday or Wednesday? Morning or afternoon? Sunny or grey? Hot or cold? Winter or summer? I can't tell you. But what I can tell you is, the telephone interrupted.

A telephone bell ringing, demanding to be picked up. Demanding an answer.

*

My Dad was always telling jokes, taking on accents and moving across borders as he embodied the characters in his stories.

I've heard jokes are a way to sugar coat a truth that may be otherwise difficult to swallow, and maybe that's why my father, an Irish immigrant, was always telling jokes, like this one about death.

Have you heard the one about Murphy whose mate Paddy dies? Murphy goes to Paddy's house and his wife answers the door.

“I'm so sorry to hear about Paddy,” he says.

“Oh Murphy!” She says, putting her hands to the side of her face.

“B'jees, he was such a great guy,” Murphy continues.

“I know,” she says, “and he had so many friends.”

“I know, and such a sense of humour” Murphy adds.

“So he did,” his wife nods, “He'll not be forgotten for sure.”

“And had he been long ill?” Murphy asks

“No, to be sure, he was as fit as a fiddle”

“Nothing to worry, or...no warning..”

“No,” she cuts in, “there were no warning signs”

“And how old was he?”

“He was four months and six days short of his 52rd birthday.”

“Ahhh, it must have been an awful shock for you?”
“To be sure, it was an awful shock, him going so suddenly an’ all”
“And did he pass quickly?” Murphy asks, still standing on the front step.
“Yes” she says, “his passing was awful quick.”
Finally, Murphy asks, “I don’t suppose he mentioned a pot of paint before he died?
I’d be awful keen to get it back?”

Questions.

The phone rings again. So to shut the thing up rather than to enquire about who or what the caller wanted, she answers:

“Hello?” was all she said into the speaker.
“Hello” the caller replied chirpily, “can I speak to Mr Douglas please?”
“No” she replied in an off-hand way.
There was a pause, then, “Oh, why’s that?”

Without explanation, without a caveat, without caution, without restraint, and without any:

Warning
Warning
Warning
Warning

“He’s dead,” she said. And put the phone down.

“Hello?”
“Hello, can I speak to Mr Douglas please?”
“No”
“Oh, why’s that?”
“He’s dead.”

“Hello?”
“Hello, can I speak to Mr Douglas?”
“No”
“Oh, why’s that?”
“He is dead.”

The phone rang again.

“Hello Kitrina, its Diana, I’m so sorry to hear about your father”.

Not as sorry as me, she thought. *I wonder what she wants?*

“How is your mother coping?” *How do you expect*, she thought.

There was a pause before Diana continued,

“Have you had any thoughts about the English Open? Another pause with no response. “I know it’s so soon after your... but you really ought to play.” *Ought I?* She thought.

Another pause.

“Well” another pause, “it would be really good if you could play, help your chances,” said Diana, a member of the English Women’s Golf Team selection committee.

She didn’t reply. The dam was not going to burst, but the pressure was building, and there were cracks. Little seams were appearing, spreading veins across a surface. But, the construction – that kept *them* at bay - was strong, and held, at least on the phone.

“You see the selectors would, um well, they would really take it as a good sign if you played in the English Championships next month, and um, it would be such a shame if you missed out of getting to play for England, and you are so close to making the team, and even if you don’t play well, it would be taken into consideration.”

A good sign, a sign of my dedication, a sign I am prepared to make a sacrifice, a sign I am serious about playing for my country, for England! They would take ‘it’ into consideration.

“I see,” she said, “I’ll think about it.”

*

A golf ball is 1.68 inches wide, and a golf hole is 4 and a 1/4 inches wide. It’s quite a precise thing, to hit a golf ball into a hole, even from a mere six-foot away.

They say to play golf well you need the fine muscle control of a surgeon and the strategy of a chess player. I think they are right.

You see, you begin each hole from a long way away, anything up to 500 yards - that’s half a dozen football pitches!

And from the tee or where your shot finishes on the fairway, you look at the flag in the distance and take into consideration the speed, direction and density of the wind, the softness of the ground, the position of the hazards, the slope of the land, the placement of the pin, and marry that with the distance you hit the ball with a particular club and the type of shot you need to perform. That’s the technical stuff. But *the knowledge*, of how to hit that shot, is held in your body, and the decisions, about which shot is needed as you negotiate your ball around the course, that’s based on visual cues.

But what if you can’t see because the tears wouldn’t stop forming in your eyes, blurring your vision, clouding your judgement, obscuring the flag and creating a fog.

What if, standing on the fairway, you can’t even see the ball between your feet, and you think:

*What am I doing here?
Why did I agree to play?
I just want to be home.*

*

“Would you like to drive the car into the garage?” He asked his four-year-old daughter. Clambering onto his lap she took the steering wheel in her two hands while he applied pressure to the accelerator, and together, they guided the car home.

“Ladies and gentlemen” he said as she and her sister got into the car, “I’d like to welcome you on-board our flight 117 to St Brandon’s School, our flight time today will be seventeen minute and we will be flying at an altitude of one foot. An inflight service is available after a brief stop to take on supplies” he turned his head and smiled, the girls giggled and new they would stop at the sweet shop.

“Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six, and two’s eight,” he said smiling and simultaneously moving his matchstick along the crib board, and then, with a huge grin, he asked, “Did you feel the wind as I went past?”

Moving his knight on the chessboard two forward and one to the side he said, “Come into my parlour said the spider to the fly” and took her castle.

As they walked down the third hole, he said, with an U.S. American accent, “*Kitrina that was a real tricky shot you played there,*”

“*Yea*” she replied into the handle of the club, in an equally humorous U.S. American accent, recognising the handle of the club was now a microphone. *Playing* while they were playing.

In a whisper he asked,

“Wake up. Do you want to come for a walk?’ It was 2am.

“What on earth,” asked her friends mum disapprovingly, “would your father wake you up in the middle of the night to go for a walk?”

How do you explain magic to someone?

How do you unpack enchantment and alchemy in childhood?

How do you distil wonder?

What makes life as a kid fun, and how do you keep those alluring moments alive as an adult?

*

Hannah, a participant I interviewed three or four times during my PhD, had won around twenty events on tour. When she described what were for her the costs of playing the tour, she said:

Being away from home is a big cost because you are always frightened about things happening. And eh in ‘84 when my father died, it was devastating. And, I was only in Ireland and I still couldn’t get home. I could not get home. I mean, I know when somebody dies there is nothing you can do but, my next thing was, I have to be there for my mother. And the other thing was, after that round, I had just won the order of merit and my father wanted to know and I wanted to go and phone. Instead there was a call for me. Still, in my head, that he never knew, he never knew I won the order of merit, because I never got a chance to tell him. You see, I am not a believer in, um I’m not very religious unfortunately sorry to tell *you*, but I am not religious, I just think when you are dead you are dead. So that to me that was a bit cost. I didn’t get to tell him that I won. And, I got talked into playing in the last event of the season, and I’m leading the event going down the last hole, leading the final event of the season. And everyone was cheering me on. And I thought, no, this isn’t how I want to remember my Dad. I don’t want this. So I threw it, I deliberately hit bad shots on the final hole, I didn’t want to win. Don’t tell Martha that I threw the event, I don’t want her to think she didn’t deserve the win.

*

If you read about grief, you’ll find there is a great deal of research and lots of models and theories to draw on. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*⁶ is one of them. Kübler-Ross introduced five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These were later developed into 7 stages:

shock & denial

pain & guilt
anger & bargaining
"depression," reflection, loneliness
the upward turn
reconstruction & working through
acceptance & hope

I'm sure lots of people find these stages helpful, but they don't work for me. I like what Marie Curie say though:

Grief is a natural response to losing someone you care about. There's no right or wrong way to grieve, and everyone experiences it differently. The important thing is let yourself grieve and mourn as much and as long as you need to. Although grieving is painful, in time these feelings begin to change as you adapt to a different way of life. Grief can never be fixed, diminished or taken away. It becomes part of us, and shapes the rest of our lives.⁷

*

It's a spring afternoon in Dublin and women golfers are out on the links in numbers, their brightly coloured attire bringing an additional spring-like vista to the carpet of green. It's a county foursomes competition, where two women make up a team and take it in turn to hit the ball. A little red car appears, trundling over the dunes, narrowly missing bunkers and ditches, the suspension not in time with the occupants whose heads can be seen bobbing up and down and hitting the roof each time the car clears a mound or drops into a gulley. The car reaches a particular group and the passenger winds her window down, pokes her head out of the window and shouts:

"Kitrina, can you call your mother!" The group of golfers pause from their shots and look over.

"What does she want?" comes the reply from the green.

The two women in the car turn their heads, they shrug, then the first woman shouts over, "We don't know!"

"Can you find out?"

The request seems reasonable, the window is wound up, and off the two women disappear across the course while play continues, at least for a while.

Twenty minutes pass, the red car returns. This time the woman is more forceful:

"Kitrina, you need to call your mother."

*

Like Hannah, whose father died while she was playing in Ireland, I couldn't get a flight from Dublin to Bristol. I couldn't get home.

My host took me to the airport but the only flights available were for the following morning, so I stayed with her and her mum another night and her mum cooked some food, and as we ate, she asked:

"How old was your father?"

"52 is awful young!"

"Had he been ill?"

"Is there a history of heart problems in your family?"

"How is your mother?"

“Will your sisters be home?”
Questions. Questions. Questions.

*

My father worked in Glasgow and we’d talk every night on the phone. And that was what I missed; the phone, interrupting, making space from whatever else I was doing, luxuriating in a conversation, every night, connection, waiting for the telephone to ring.

*

Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones (2019) write:

When we cut off the pain of grief both individually and culturally, we cut off its beauty and the possibility of solidarity and of sharing in its experience. Like gathering, grief can be poetry; indeed it often leads us there. It is the cut that breaks the flow of normative life. ⁸(p.21)

Kim Etherington writes that commonly children will do whatever they need in order to survive, even when the ‘thing’ they do can be, over time, unhealthy⁹.

And King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes chapter three:

There is a season for every activity under the sun,
a time to be born and a time to die,...a time to heal, ...a time to build, ...a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to be silent and a time to speak.¹⁰

Is *now* my time to speak?

*

Sport Media seem to do a great deal of speaking for athletes, shaping and amplifying grief in particular ways, and opening up channels for particular kinds of stories and actions. If you search “Sport Media,” you will see how they write about the grief experienced by athletes following a father’s death.

BBC Sport reporter Ben Dirs wrote: “Mark Selby crushed Ronnie O’Sullivan to lift his first world title, then dedicated it to his late father.”¹¹

Darrel Lewis of the *Mirror* newspaper, writing about the same event, reported Selby to have said, “My dad died with cancer when I was 16...before he died he said, ‘*Win the world title*’. Those were his last words to me. I’m sure he’s looking down on me smiling with what I’ve achieved.”¹²

Brendan Irvine¹³ reporting for the *Irish News* wrote, Brendan O’Neill “dedicated his victory to his late father after doing the double over Bulgaria’s Tinko Banabakov at the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan yesterday.” ... “That was for my dad James, who died at the age of 46 when I was just 11”... “That’s just for him. He never saw me box. I just know he is watching over me now.”

The headline in the *Telegraph*¹⁴ read “Justin Rose dedicates US Open 2013 victory to his father,” while reporter James Corrigan wrote, “After making par on the 18th to win the US open golfer Justine Rose made a signal to the heavens. ‘I couldn't help but look up ... and think my old man Ken had something to do with this.’”

Headlines and stories of Tom Daley winning Bronze at the 2012 Olympic games included *BBC online*¹⁵ which read, “Tom Daley dedicates bronze to his father.”

The *Daily Record*¹⁶ “Tom Daley: Dad would have been proud”

The *Yorkshire Post*¹⁷, “Emotional Daley dedicates medal to late father”

*Daily mail*¹⁸ “I'm doing this for my dad.”

*Inside the Games*¹⁹ wrote that Daley’s dad Rob, had lost his battle with cancer, and quoted Daley as saying, “I know that if he was here he would be very proud,” “It's really tough not having him here, but I'm so glad to come out with something to show for it after all of the hard work we put in together.”

The headline in the *Daily Express*²⁰ recounting my first major win, the British Open Amateur Championship, read: How A 50-1 Shot Turned Into A Champion” and journalist Martin Heagar, wrote,

“Last weekend the long legged 5ft 9 Miss Douglas 21 turned the form book of women’s golf into a comic strip. The 50-1 long shot became British Champion after mowing down five internationals in a sensational march to the titleWhen we met, one question was: stroke play or match play? Revealingly she answers “As long as I’m winning, I don’t mind which. I hate losing.” Competitiveness came from her father, Jim, head of a construction firm and a footballer for Edinburgh’s Hearts. Sadly, he did not see his daughter’s triumph. He died last month at 51 with a heart illness. (Heagar [1982](#))

When the press asked me, “wouldn’t your father be proud now?” I said No! No, he wasn’t proud that I could hit a ball around a golf course, or pick up a trophy²¹. But they didn’t report that. And, for the record, I didn’t feel he was watching me.

Tom Daley was reported as saying he wanted to have something to show for all their hard work together. The dominant narrative is the win does that and the media fan the emotional flame of this particular narrative using provocative language. Athletes march to titles, mow-down and crush their opposition, break records and record triumphs, while fathers lose their battles, to cancer, to illness, to their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The winning, so the story goes, provides the worth, the pride, the making it all worthwhile.

But isn’t there more to a sporting life than the number of wins, or the size of the cheque or the importance of the trophy or medal? And isn’t there more to a friendship, to love and loss, to parenting and those unique bonds that form between a child and her father. Something beyond a trophy that marks the journey?

I’m not against dedications, or looking up to the heavens following a win and saying that you have a feeling that a parent is watching over you, cheering you on. But it seems there isn’t space for other stories. It seems there are no alternative narrative maps for this journey and no way to communicate stories like Hannah who threw and event rather than win it. And

what about all those athletes who don't win? How do they negotiate their sporting lives when a parent dies? What else might be said? Is there nothing to show for all the hard work together?

Perhaps these experiences lie in a land beyond words, which is why the press are left wanting. Maybe we can't just speak these truths.

How might they then be communicated? How might the dominant narrative be disrupted or fractured? How might we amplify alternative narrative scripts and what might they look like?

*

It's 2015, 33 years after the death of my father, 33 years after our conversations stopped, abruptly. I'm in David's home studio, recording my first album of original songs. It was evening, winter, dark outside, and we'd just finished mixing *Ray of Sunshine*, a song I'd written around 2004/5 during my doctoral research.

David says we always need to listen to what we record on lots of different devices before making the final mix. The reason being is that without checking the levels, what sounds perfect on one device may not sound good on another. The bass, for example, might sound fine on the hifi, but on the stereo in the car might it might boom so loudly it ruins and distorts the sound.

As a result, we step into the night and the biting English winter, get into the car and slip the demo disk into the cd player, begin to drive, and listen. As we do, I become lost in the sound and I am stuck by a feeling, an embodied knowing, a wonder and distilling unlike any other, a clear recognition, animal, and spiritual. Listening back is very different to creating and singing this song. I'm listening differently and I'm learning something I didn't know before; the fog clears. I know that if my father would have valued anything I have done in my life, and if I could do anything that would have surprised him in a beautiful way, then this song captured it; a sadness and beauty, creativity, wonder, joy, not just lyrical, not just musical, not just the melody, not just the rhythms, not just the spaces. The magic of a song, reaching places I don't usually go, showing me things I don't usually see, providing something I don't usually feel, in a way that others can feel and hear too, if they are prepared to listen.

This may be a step too far for the media and sport press, but maybe *Ray of Sunshine* allowed my grief, love and friendship, and the gifts that can only be given father to child through embodied practices, to be communicated. By singing and performing the song, I was able to share some things that couldn't be said through winning in golf.

[chorus Ray of Sunshine]

What's a ray of sunshine or a beacon of light
To a wandering mind who travels by night
Lost and absorbed by the visions she sees
And only in dreams will her passions run free

end

¹ Douglas (2015) “*Ray of Sunshine*”, (D. Carless, producer). On *Signals & Sings* [CD]. Calverly, Leeds UK: Greenroom Recording Studios.^{[L][SEP]}

¹ Douglas (2015) “*Corridors*”, (D. Carless, producer). On *Signals & Sings* [CD]. Calverly, Leeds UK: Greenroom Recording Studios.^{[L][SEP]}

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<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/dealing-grief/grieving-your-way>. Accessed 10th Jan 2019.

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¹ Etherington, K (2000). Supervising counsellors who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 13 (4), 2000, pp. 377–389

¹ The Bible (2019). Ecclesiastes Chapter Three, *New International Version* (NIV)
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3&version=NIV>), Accessed 17th May 2019

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¹ Daily express my win

¹ Storying a relational identity in sport

¹ Bochner, Arthur. It’s about time: narrative and the divided self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, v. 3, n.4, p. 418-438, 1997.

² Bochner, Arthur. *Coming to narrative: A personal history of paradigm change in the human sciences*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2014.

³Freeman, M., 2010. *Hindsight: the promise and peril of looking backward*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Douglas (2015) “*Ray of Sunshine*”, (D. Carless, producer). On *Signals & Sings* [CD]. Calverly, Leeds UK: Greenroom Recording Studios.^[1]_[SEP]

⁵ Douglas (2015) “*Corridors*”, (D. Carless, producer). On *Signals & Sings* [CD]. Calverly, Leeds UK: Greenroom Recording Studios.^[1]_[SEP]

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⁸ Harris, Anne & Holman Jones Stacy, (2019). Between Bodies: Queer Grief in the Anthropocene, in Norman K Denzin and Michael D Geardina (Eds.) “*Qualitative Inquiry at the Crossroads*”, (pp.19-32), Routledge, New York and London.

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²⁰ Daily express my win

²¹ Storying a relational identity in sport