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Training or Education? Negotiating a Fuzzy Line Between What *We* Want and What  
*They* Might Need

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## Training or Education? Negotiating a Fuzzy Line Between What *We* Want and What *They* Might Need

### *Introduction*

In recent years we have become concerned at the increasingly widespread use of the term *training* in relation to the development and progression of young people and adults in sport in general and golf in particular. One doesn't have too look too hard to find psychologists training brains, physiologists training bodies, performance directors enforcing training diaries, and golf manufacturers producing training aids. Recently the English Golf Union (EGU) unveiled their vision for golf in England. This vision proclaims that beginning from the age of nine years, a young person should "learn to train", "train to train", "train to compete," and "train to win" [1, p.7; 2, p. 5]. Earle Woods told the world he "trained the tiger" and Tiger Woods in his turn has reinforced this ethos by telling the world to "train your butt off" [3]. In sum these visions, vocabularies, quotations, and beliefs contribute to a dominant narrative or storyline within golf which portrays development and progression as dependent on following a regimented training-dominated approach.

In this article we would like to reflect on what we see as an over-reliance by many in golf – including coaches, sport psychologists, and governing bodies – on a training-dominated vocabulary. To do so, we take a narrative approach to explore the kinds of stories which circulate in golf as well as the stories women professional golfers told of their development and progression during our life history research. By analysing these stories, we hope to provide a contrasting perspective on golfers' long term needs and show that alternatives to a training-dominated vocabulary are both possible and desirable.

Through these reflections, we aim to arrive at some more general insights concerning how to negotiate a fuzzy line between what *we* (as coaches, psychologists, governing body officials, performance directors) want and what *they* (players) might need in development terms. We close by suggesting some alternatives to the current training-dominated discourse which offer a healthier path to player retention, development, and progression in golf.

### *Why Words Matter*

Many have fallen by the edge of the sword,  
but not so many as have fallen by the tongue. [4]

As far back as biblical times, as the quote above shows, humans have been aware of the power of words. In more recent times, in both psychology and sociology, scholars have shown that the words we use play an important role in shaping who we are as people and defining the life possibilities which are open to us. More than thirty years ago Bandura [5] coined the term *verbal persuasion* in describing how an individual's self-efficacy can be influenced by the words of a significant other such as a coach. Sport psychologists have continued to show that an athlete's internal dialogue or self-talk has important effects on their confidence, motivation, and psychological well-being.

The study of narrative psychology has illuminated further why and how words are important both for the individual and the culture in which she or he is immersed. According to Carr [6], human beings have an orientation towards creating coherence in their lives which provides a perception that we have a degree of control both in how we arrived at where we are today, as well as where we may go in the future. Words play a critical role in the achievement of this objective as it is by creating and sharing

meaningful stories that coherence and a sense of purpose in life is created [7, 8]. These personal stories link an individual's experiences with her or his behaviour and adventures across time and therefore provide the individual with a framework to make sense of their life. This process – and the perceptions of control and choice it brings – is associated with mental well-being and positive health [7].

While every individual's story has unique characteristics, each personal story is heavily influenced by the larger stories – meta-narratives – that circulate within a culture [9]. In sport, for example, a particular athlete's story of reaching the top of the metaphorical mountain may have many unique details and features. At the narrative level, however, we commonly find that these stories follow the contours of a *hero narrative* [10] which tells how, to reach his or her goal, the “hero” overcame many challenges, obstacles, and hurdles through hard work, skill, cunning, discipline, and sacrifice. These culturally available stories are not just entertaining; they also shape how we know and understand our own and each other's lives. The story told by a great hero – in golf it might be Hogan, Palmer, Nicklaus, Faldo or Woods – provides a template by which other golfers' lives and careers are shaped and measured.

A problem arises however, in terms of possibilities for living, because certain stories tend to be privileged above others within a given culture. Within sport culture, as Madill and Hopper [11, p. 45] note, the most highly valued stories are those where the character is powerful, strong and dominates others:

Those involved in sport draw on and are highly influenced by the role of the male professional athlete. Discourse surrounding professional athletes emphasises a hegemonic masculinity that promotes strength, power and war

metaphors, and deemphasises healthy lifestyle choices, such as exercise and food choices, sensitivity to others and appropriate social interaction in society. Other scholars have been more critical still in their analysis of the damaging influence of dominant discourses within professional sport. According to Bennett, Whitaker, Wooley Smith & Sablove [12, p.370],

Sport is violent. Sport perpetuates domination and submission. Sport is built on a capitalistic model of competition and survival of the fittest. Sport uses people and discards them. The very language of sport is the language of assault and dehumanization. One team “penetrates” the other’s defences; “seeks” another’s “weakness”; “wipes out the opponent”. Men who err are sissies (women). Men who perform well are studs. The recruitment pool is a meat market; injured players are put out to pasture.

While we may not immediately associate golf with the above analysis, there is evidence of some similarities. In our own research [13] we have presented evidence of a dominant *performance narrative* among professional golfers in which winning is storied as more important than all other areas of life. Among the participants, this narrative type was often associated with health and mental well-being problems. Likewise, war-like metaphors are frequently used<sup>1</sup> when people talk and write about golf and there are plenty of examples of “no pain no gain” stories which can lead to unhealthy

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<sup>1</sup> “Woods battles through in Arizona”, “Battle Hardened Woods”

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/golf/7239327.stm> feb 21, 2008)

"I told them to go out and kill 'em," David Duval, 1999 Ruder Cup,

([http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/golf/1999/ryder\\_cup/](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/golf/1999/ryder_cup/))

consequences. For instance, Gary Player was renowned for his story of hitting so many balls that his hands bled. His story was one among many enforcing the legitimacy of the no pain no gain story which cements this belief as a singular reality in the lives of those who hear the story and repeat it to others.

### *Alternative Stories*

It is, of course, possible to reach the top in golf without adhering to the contours of the performance narrative or “no pain no gain” stories. Alternative narrative types have been provided in recent research in golf [13, 14]. However, the words of many in sport, in the form of stories of their own or others’ experience, promote the belief that single-minded dedication, pain, discipline, and sacrifice are an essential and inherent aspect – a prerequisite even – of progression and success in sport. Our discomfort with dominant stories has less to do with whether or not they match a particular athlete’s experience. The problem as we see it – which is borne out in our own [e.g. 13, 14] and others’ [e.g., 15, 16, 10] research – is twofold.

First, in being accepted, valued, and promoted as the *only* possible story, problems and dangers inherent within the story may be masked or justified as being unavoidable. Second, the dominance of one particular story type tends to silence alternative stories. In so doing, narrative templates of alternative ways of living are denied and individuals’ life choices and possibilities are ultimately constrained. At the same time, those athletes whose stories contravene the dominant narrative are silenced, misunderstood, trivialised, or, in the worst case, villainized. From this perspective words, stories, and narratives are important because they shape not only an individual’s personal story but also her or his identity, life possibilities, horizons, and choices [see 7, 9].

### *Problems with the Term “Training”*

We relate our discussion of dominant narratives and stories now to our concerns about the increasing reliance on a training-dominated vocabulary in golf. For us, the “training story” is merely *one possible* route to success based on one particular value system. Yet in making continued reference to progression being reliant on training, this one story is enforced as the *only* way by which a golfer might achieve success. On the basis of our preceding discussion, we wonder what alternative stories of progression and development are silenced and devalued as a result of articulating a training-focussed model for progression in golf. In what follows we consider some of the possible weaknesses of a training-dominated vocabulary, vision, and ethos.

As a noun, training means the adoption of an action leading to a skilled behaviour [17]. Within this definition there is no requirement for the individual to *understand* the behaviour or *critically analyse* what he or she is doing in the process. Training only requires the performance of the skill or adoption of the behaviour. As a verb, training refers to the process of *being* trained through mechanistic goals. Consider how else this term is used: a plant is trained to grow by being tethered to a pole and tied in place by the gardener who has a pre determined vision of where he wants it to grow; a dog is trained and disciplined by the owner so that it will ‘sit’ or ‘lie down’ on command. In golf, however, we often articulate a vision of helping young people reach their potential rather than directing them to carry out our predetermined plans. Therefore what a young person needs to learn should to reflect that playing golf requires information processing at a much higher level than simply following or carrying out a set of commands. It requires a consideration of moment-by-moment events, calculations that require reflection,



thoughtfulness, awareness, experience, feel, intuition, creativity and experimentation, to name but a few. All of these, and more, are required in addition to the skilful ability to produce a physical movement.

Jim Denison [18] noted how through disciplining athletes' bodies (in terms of, for example, the types of training, load, duration, intensity, diet), the spaces where they train (through designated areas, regimented spaces, and zones), and their time during training (through schedules, time tables, periodization plans), a tightly controlled disciplinary environment is produced. However, this isn't necessarily conducive to helping an athlete *fulfil their potential*. Denison shows how a tightly controlled environment can encourage athletes to be compliant and docile, conforming to what we (as coaches, psychologists, officials etc.) might want but, in doing so, failing to reach their potential due in part to the restrictive training methods which have removed their flexibility and freedom.

In light of these problems we believe that before a training-dominated model and vocabulary in golf is adopted it is important to: (i) understand the possible consequences of wholeheartedly and uncritically accepting that it is desirable to train brains, bodies, and lives, and (ii) consider alternative and supplementary orientations and approaches to current training-dominated regimes. While standardized training protocols may appear attractive on the surface – apparently giving players, coaches, officials, and psychologists what they *want* – we would like to consider whether or not these protocols are likely to be effective in proving golfers with what they *need*.

#### *Human Development Needs*

While it may facilitate the promotion of sport to endorse a view that involvement in high performance sport is fulfilling, healthy, lucrative, and fun, research has shown

that it is frequently associated with pathological development and a range of emotional and psychological problems which include alcohol and substance abuse, acute depression, eating disorders, identity confusion, decreased self-confidence, self harm and attempted suicide [19, 20, 21, 22, 23] Research with elite golfers has also shown that cheating, depression, low self-esteem, self-harm, and attempted suicide are evident [13, 14, 24, 25]. Despite the many positive attributes associated with the game of golf, merely playing golf does not protect an individual from the deleterious aspects of sport nor does playing golf shield a young person from the pressure and expectations of those within golf's performance environment. In short, golf is not a game removed from the problems identified in other sports.

One reason for these problems is that, as we have suggested earlier, young people are encouraged to develop only one type of story in sport, (to say "I want to be the best," see for example 13) and to only value stories about winning. In addition, contemporary training plans tend to prescribe one route to success and coaching frameworks support prescriptive stories that, as Denison highlights, contribute to a loss of creativity and flexibility. Research suggests that individuals who develop only one story – a monologue – might adhere to training in the short term, but over time, many face identity dilemmas later in life [26, 27]. What is *needed* therefore in golf, and particularly for those whose goal it is for young people reach to their potential, is a variety of stories, maps and routes. In our experience this can only be achieved when we take into consideration what we know young people *need* developmentally, as opposed to what we (or they) *want* and when we relate what they need to the tasks involved with playing sport.

In the 1950's Erik Erikson [28] postulated a series of binary concepts which show paths of healthy and maladaptive development<sup>2</sup>. The most important concept Erikson identified was that we need to develop trust. For Ingam, Chase and Butt [29, , p. 313] “building trust should be our first consideration in the development of a child’s physical potential...” so that “they can hold onto us unconditionally” regardless of how well they perform. These authors, like Denison, question the rationale of specific patterns of skill acquisition and suggest there is *not* a need to structure sessions into organised competitive games. When we analysed the stories of participants in our research, many told stories of broken trust, rather than gaining trust [(see 24, 25]. Therefore, we would ask: how can a young person learn to trust adults when adults *say* one thing and *do* another, when selectors talk in veiled secrecy about team selection and individual players, when players witness team members being dropped, and officials demonstrate a lack of care for them because they are no longer in the team?

The second binary Erikson discussed is autonomy. We wonder how an individual can become autonomous when they are under the threat of constant evaluation, when coaches, selectors, and performance directors employ surveillance strategies to ensure targets and training session are adhered to and when a child learns they are, in fact, *expendable*. When stories abound about helping young people reach their potential but support only those pre-identified within strict age limits as ‘talented’.

In our research with four players, the theme of autonomy appeared in *every* player’s life story. Through the participants’ stories of their experience, we have become aware of how the dominant discourse (of performance, training, etc.) restricts an

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<sup>2</sup> The first five ages of man were Trust versus mistrust, Autonomy versus shame and doubt, Initiative versus guilt, Industry versus inferiority, Identity versus role confusion.

individual's right to be different or to break away. To provide one illustration we offer the following example of a player "breaking away" from what is expected of her in a national squad in an effort to establish or preserve a sense of autonomy:

Of course, we have people behind us *telling us* you have to go to bed, but we go to see the boys or the boys come to us. Smoking, laughing, a lot of noise, chipping, putting in the bedrooms and then you break a window and because you are smoking the alarm goes off, and then you are punished ... But you are so excited about doing something bad, because, you're *told* you have to do this.

Inside yourself, there is something saying you can't do that! [24, p. 147].

In this excerpt one multiple tournament winner notes how she broke curfew, hit shots in non designated areas, smoked, refused to go to bed, visited the boys' dormitories and so on. In non-sporting social groups little is made of these types adolescent activities and they are *put in perspective* as a necessary part of young people's development. In the elite sport culture, however – as was evidenced in 2007 when two young tennis players lost their LTA funding through such antics – the dominant story (that you cannot behave like this and be an elite athlete) is bolstered and reinforced as the *only* possible story. In this context, a young person is faced with two alternatives: either to conform and become an easy-to-manage docile athlete, or face rejection, de-selection, and be storied as "a rebel". As our research shows, the belief that the dominant storyline is the only way to achieve success is a fallacy: *you can* achieve success without adhering to a performance and training dominated story. Frequently, a player tells the desired story that the performance director, coach, or selector might like to hear, while continuing with their previous (so called deviant) behaviour under a veil of secrecy. In so doing, players often create a story

to themselves to justify and make sense of their “deviancy”. But we wonder, what lessons are being learned. It is to be honest and truthful, or to be deviant?

One might not agree with unhealthy lifestyles of those around us. As a tour player Kitrina observed numerous unhealthy and unprofessional behaviours, some invisible (e.g., players trashing their rooms), and some visible (like Laura Davies winning the Evian Master’s while watching England footballers in the world cup on a hand-held television). We should recognise that young people need to learn to make their own choices – which may not correspond with *our* choices – and hope that they learn from these and accept responsibility for them.

A further related and important developmental step is for a child to learn to take the initiative and do things on their own. An integral part of taking the initiative is the opportunity to make up games with peers. From these experiences children gain an understanding of why ‘rules’ are important, because they are given scope to make up their own, and through these experiences they also gain a perspective for ‘the other person’ or ‘social perspective taking’ [29, p. 316]. Developmental psychologists suggest this important step provides the basis for learning to be self-reflective later in life and understanding that ‘we’ can be a team, that there are other individuals whose needs should be considered alongside one’s own. Highly organizing children activities, therefore, as many golf organisations seem to want to do, reduces the opportunities for children to learn these valuable and important lessons [29].

By the time a child is 11 adults begin to devalue play activities and reward children’s achievements according to adult standards. Put simply, what is often valued and evaluated is the *result* – the product rather than the process. A problem for

developmental theorists is that for a young person in sport *work* replaces *play* before a young person has reached an emotional, moral, cognitive and social-interactional level to deal with sport as work. The ability to process information, emotions, and social development are not neatly tied to chronological age. Thus if children have not advanced sufficiently far through the autonomy and initiative stages, they are at risk of engaging in unhealthy behaviours which threaten their health, well-being, and long term sport performance.

We have used the case study of Leanne [13, 24, 25] as an example to show how these types of problems arise and how within the culture of golf these types of stories are silenced. Her case study revealed that as a young talented player who played for her country by the age of 11, her life was marked by throwing events (because she felt under so much pressure), self-harm, and emotional turmoil. Although her golf skills would have been considered well developed, the well-intentioned adults who wanted to help her reach her potential had not considered her holistic developmental needs. We ask, are we now meeting the needs of children like Leanne? Or do their stories remain silenced?

Between the ages of 12 and 18, most young people traverse adolescence, a time developmental psychologists and sociologists agree is a time of critical identity and role formation. From a narrative perspective, identities and roles are constructed through the stories we tell. If a young person continually tells stories about missing parties, birthdays, weddings, and so on, critical relational ties may be compromised. Similarly, if the only stories a player develops are about training, dedication, fighting, and winning, our research suggests development can be compromised and identity foreclosed. As professionals with responsibilities towards young and adult golfers we should be deeply

concerned as such narrowly focussed narratives often result later in powerful feelings of loss alongside emotional and psychological problems when the individual experiences poor performance, serious injury, or retirement.

As noted earlier, Denison [18] illustrated how governing officials and coaches discipline athletes' bodies and lives through training. In golf the policing goes further to restrict what an individual may wear, both on and off the course, and how they look. What would be the likely experience of a sixteen year old who arrives at a squad session with long bleached hair and a stud through their upper lip? How many selectors/coaches/officials in golf would attempt to ridicule them? Research has shown that golf is sexist and one form of sexist behaviour is when we story a male as "gay" because he wears clothes which are unusual in golf. We have documented how terms such as "common girls" and "does your husband play?" are used between males to control male behaviour and poke fun, one male towards another, which demean those who deviate from a very narrowly defined story of what is acceptable in golf [30]. This may include people who differ by virtue of gender, sexuality, and/or disability. Sociologists have shown that goading, mickey-taking, and teasing are forms of social control, and these once again, make it difficult for a young person to experiment and *be* anything other than those in the golf culture want them to be.

Taking the above points into consideration, it appears to us that what we *need* in golf is to be more aware of developmental issues and to consider strategies and approaches that help develop trust, autonomy, and initiative taking because development in these terms is likely to lead to adaptive identity formation, a resilient sense of self, psychological well-being, and self-esteem.

### *A Move Toward Education*

A common question whether we work with athletes or coaches is “So tell me what should I *do*?” This question arises in part from a meta-narrative within our culture, the dominant story, that it is possible to identify *one* “*best*” way. Believing there is one best way and having a desire for a quick solution means we are in danger of putting universal strategies and plans in place which do not meet the needs of *any* of us. Some universal plans appear (on the surface at least) to function, to be what everyone (all the stakeholders, at least) *want*. These plans may be economical and capable of being delivered in a specific time frame. Approaches such as these have been criticised as “tinkering round the edges” [29] such as, for example, when psychologists deliver compartmentalised mental skills training but fail to consider and understand more significant holistic issues in people’s lives. What is needed instead, we believe, is to help the student, parent, coach, selector, performance manager and so on, decide how to use the knowledge we have gained through decades of researching young people’s development, decades of research into sport performance.

As Arthur Franks [31, p.363] notes, “Deciding what to do about what we know requires having an ethical standpoint.” What Frank eludes to is that we need help to consider our choices – ethically and morally – before we make decisions because these decisions have ramification for the lives of young people. One route which moves toward answering the “what should I do?” questions is for us all to focus more on education rather as opposed to training. From such a standpoint the student practices in order to perfect performance girded with an understanding for why they are doing what they are doing. Through education, the student is presented with multiple paths by their mentors



and shown how to make informed choices which suit their individual values. Education treats the athlete as an intelligent being, rather than a machine, who is therefore capable of learning and taking control rather than just repeating drills, sticking to a regime or ticking boxes. While training eludes to strict regimes, education encompasses a higher order cognition and relationship between teacher and student, mentor and novice. When one is “trained” one doesn’t question, when one is “educated” one doesn’t stop asking questions.

While training invites external discipline, loss of control and handing over responsibility, education invites self-reflection, self-discipline, and responsibility for our actions. Because an educational orientation teaches reflective skills, the individual is ever-learning from each scenario they face becoming evermore aware of what they are doing in the process. In short, education helps the individual understand themselves, the world around them, and the environment in which they are hoping to excel. Doing so facilitates the individual becoming autonomous and self-determining – something most psychologists believe to be a fundamental human need. In contrast, a training ethos removes autonomy and imparts the trainer’s beliefs on those being trained. It merely produces docile, compliant athletes. Can this really be good for any young person or adult?

Across time the activities of education are involved with imparting knowledge such that skill is cultivated in order that the individual will become a connoisseur in their craft, to be discriminating in taste and judgement during play rather than following a set play list. In our experience it is much easier to teach a set of principles – as in ball flight laws – and provide swing positions, lists of games for young golfers, and periodization

plans for older golfers. It is much easier in a squad session for the physiotherapist to test players and give out exercise plans, for a psychologist to carry out mental skills training, and for the coach to work on technique. Yet what is needed is to offer education on these issues and opportunities where personal choice offered and learnt. Those adults who work with young people, we suggest, need to read the research, embrace some of the difficult problems, to develop a personal philosophy, and become reflective and be more aware. But this approach seems to not be what we *want*; probably because it is demanding and, sometimes, when we reflect on our own mistakes, depressing. Therefore, when it comes to coaching golf, what we want and what we need are frequently in conflict.

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