“In the Boat” but “Selling Myself Short”: Stories, Narratives, and Identity Development in Elite Sport

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Through narrative methodology this study explores the processes and consequences of identity development among young elite athletes, with particular reference to the influence of sport culture. We focus on life stories of two elite male athletes, recounting significant moments from their lives analyzed through the lens of narrative theory. Our findings offer insights into three strands of sport psychology literature. First, responding to calls for a cultural sport psychology, our study reveals how elite sport culture shapes psychological processes of identity development. Second, it shows how the origins of a potentially problematic athletic identity are seeded in early sport experiences, shedding light on how athletic identity is developed or resisted. Finally, it extends previous narrative research into the lives of female professional golfers, documenting how comparable processes unfold among male athletes in other sports, deepening understanding of how cultural narratives influence behavior and life choices.

Scholars in a wide range of social science disciplines now appreciate the potential of various forms of narrative research for developing knowledge and theory within their fields. In psychology, narrative approaches are often employed, for example, by health, developmental, counseling, and occupational psychology researchers. Recently, Smith and Sparkes (2009a, 2009b) provided a thorough and convincing rationale for the inclusion of narrative methods in sport and exercise psychology and describe in detail a number of ways narrative research can make a unique contribution to the discipline. We suggest six interrelated ways through which narrative research can contribute to the field.

First, narrative research provides rich insights into lived experience. Rather than focusing on constructs, opinions, perceptions or abstract ideas, narrative methods prioritize a specific individual’s experience through eliciting stories of concrete events and happenings that have occurred during the individual’s life. By recounting moments of personal experience in story form (detailing, for example, what happened, where, when, to whom, what were the consequences), the individual’s emotional and subjective responses are also made accessible for study. Second, narrative sheds light on the meaning of personal experience. For Chase (2005, p. 656), “Narrative is retrospective meaning making – the shaping or ordering of past experience. Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over time.” As others have observed (e.g., McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997), creating and sharing stories about one’s life is a primary way through which meaning is achieved, realized, and communicated. Third, narrative study offers insights into the trajectory or arc of a life across time (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Rather than providing a static ‘snap-shot’ of multiple lives at a fixed moment in time, narrative methods permit consideration of how a particular life develops over time. In this way, narrative reveals the interconnectedness of what might otherwise appear disparate or unrelated factors.

Fourth, narrative approaches permit a focus on both the personal and the social. Although stories prioritize individual experience, they also reveal social and cultural context and influence because, as McLeod (1997) notes, an individual’s story is shaped by the narrative scripts that are available within her or his particular culture. Thus, narrative methods generate understanding of psychological processes within their sociocultural context. Fifth, narrative promises insights into what life is like as an embodied—living, breathing, feeling—human being. As Smith (2007, p. 395) observes, “we tell stories about, in, out of, and through our bodies.” In this sense, story telling

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is an embodied act based on one’s experience of the world from the location of one’s own body. Thus, narrative studies reveal how bodies and stories impact, shape, and constitute each other (Carless, 2010). Finally, narrative research offers a route to an ethical and relational engagement with others. Because “stories as acts of telling are relationships” (Frank, 2000, p. 354), narrative research calls for an empathetic and trusting relationship between researcher/s and participant/s within which hopes, fears, values, and vulnerabilities can be expressed. Within this kind of relationship alternative or silenced stories can be voiced and taken seriously, thereby deepening and expanding our understanding of different ways of living.

While a number of narrative sport/exercise-related studies have been published in interdisciplinary journals, few original narrative studies have been published in sport and exercise psychology journals. This study, founded on the theoretical and methodological tenets of narrative inquiry (see Smith and Sparkes, 2009a, 2009b), offers an example of narrative research of interest and relevance to sport psychologists and is a response to Smith’s (2010, p. 103–4) suggestion that we move from talking about methods to, “expand our use of narrative methods, show them in action, and get on with doing innovative, creative, and useful narrative inquiry.” The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the processes and consequences of identity development among young elite athletes, with particular reference to the influence of elite sport culture. To achieve this, we focus in detail on the life stories of two elite athletes, recounting significant moments from their stories, which we analyze by drawing on existing narrative psychology theory and research as we go. The study is built upon, and seeks to develop, three strands of sport psychology research.

First, Sparkes and Partington (2003) call for greater attention to be paid to the role of cultural factors in sport psychology. Underlying their call is recognition that an individual’s behavior and development is shaped by an interaction of psychological and sociocultural processes, and can therefore only be understood by considering psychological factors within the sociocultural context in which they occur. Narrative methodologies are well suited to this task because, as previously noted, studying personal stories provides insight into social and cultural context. Second, a substantial body of literature has detailed how a strong athletic identity is associated with sometimes severe psychological problems during periods of poor form, injury, and/or on career cessation (see Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Murphy, Petipas, & Brewer, 1996; Sparks, 1998; McKenna & Thomas, 2007). While the dangers of an exclusive athletic identity are widely recognized, research has yet to explore the processes by which a young person may come to develop this kind of identity. Important questions include: What is the role of sport culture in identity development? What experiences or factors protect against an exclusive athletic identity?

Third, recent narrative research which has explored the life stories of successful female professional golfers offers several provocative insights for sport psychologists. These include: (i) the identification of a performance narrative underlying some participants’ life stories. This narrative type—in which life is storied around performance outcomes—may be considered ‘dominant’ because it is the most commonly accepted story plot within elite sport culture (Douglas & Carless, 2006a); (ii) the presence of this dominant narrative, two alternative story types were also identified: recovery and relational. These stories are often silenced, trivialized, or ignored within elite sport culture, yet they challenge the conception that there is only one way to be an elite athlete (Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2011; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2009); (iii) the storying one’s life exclusively around the plot of the performance narrative can profoundly damage long-term identity development mental health (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009); (iv) elite sport culture encourages and promotes performance stories and individuals need alternative stories to resist this narrative (Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009). This study seeks to develop and extend these findings by focusing on the experiences of male athletes in other sports. Relevant questions include: How are the personal stories of male athletes affected by elite sport culture? Do the processes documented in women’s professional golf occur in other sports?

### Methods

Our research lies within the interpretive paradigm where, in contrast to the positivist/postpositivist paradigm where the aims are typically explanation and control, we are interested in understanding and illuminating human experience. A central aim within the interpretive paradigm is the elucidation of meaning as a way to question existing assumptions regarding social experience, striving “to sustain conversation and debate, rather than attempt to act as a ‘mirror to nature’, as a source of foundational, universal truth” (McLeod, 1997, p. 142). Within this paradigm, knowledge is accepted as socially constructed and therefore the researcher is recognized as a reflexive ‘instrument’ whose biography and positioning influence all stages of a study (see Etherington, 2004). The biography and positioning of the second author is particularly relevant here as the second author, Kitrina, played elite amateur and professional sport for twenty years and is therefore an ‘insider’ to elite sport culture, having personal experience of the issues this study explores. Kitrina’s embodied experience of elite sport culture is central to our research as her ‘insider’ awareness has directed and informed our questions, methods, and interpretations and cannot be divorced from the interpretations we present here.

Kitrina’s personal experience of elite sport culture was developed, deepened, and theorized through a doctoral study (Douglas, 2004) and further research (Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2009; 2012; Douglas, 2009) conducted after she withdrew from professional sport. In this work, Kitrina used her
‘insider’ status to negotiate access to eight golf professionals from the Ladies European Tour, conducting life story interviews over a six-year period. The insights this research provided underpin the study we present here, directly influencing the direction we took when given an opportunity to conduct a research project for the UK Sport Council (Douglas & Carless, 2006b). This study, granted ethical approval by a local ethics committee at Kitrina’s institution, provided us an opportunity to interview 21 elite and professional athletes from a number of sports (11 female, 10 male, between 18 and 44 years of age) identified through UK Sport’s elite sport program.

While research with student populations can be relatively straightforward methodologically (e.g., Lally, 2007), it is widely recognized that researching ‘elites’ raises distinct challenges particularly in terms of access and recruitment (Hertze & Imber, 1995; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). A key challenge we faced was to adapt our life story method to accommodate these challenges. For example, while multiple extended interviews are typical of life story research, this was impossible given the conditions and requirements of the funding body and the participants’ busy schedules and sometimes remote geographical locations. Rather than abandoning an unusual research opportunity and a life story method which has previously provided fruitful insights, we modified our approach into what Plummer (2001, p. 19) calls a short life story interview lasting from between “half and hour to three hours or so.” We describe our method as a ‘short life story’ because, like life story research in general, we consider the trajectory of a life over time through the stories the individual tells of her/his life (see below). Initially, a series of five focus groups (lasting between 90 and 180 min) were arranged and conducted for those individuals who were able to make one of these times and locations. Ryan (a pseudonym), an 18-year-old rower, took part in one of these focus groups. Subsequently, five one-to-one interviews (between 90 and 180 min) were conducted at a time and place which suited each individual who was unable to attend a focus group. Luke (also a pseudonym), a 23-year-old runner, took part in one of these interviews. We used the short life story method in all focus-groups and one-to-one interviews.

In line with a narrative life story approach (Lieblich et al., 1998; Crossley, 2000; Plummer, 2001), in all the interviews and focus groups we sought biographical, historical, and cultural context for each athlete’s current life situation and experiences. Like Lally (2007), we do not favor the use of structured interview schedules which can limit or constrain open dialogue. Instead we use a more conversational approach, typical to life story research, which we begin by asking each participant to recount her/his early experiences in sport. From this starting point each participant was then asked to describe how they went from there to ‘where you are now’. As such, each athlete was invited to provide a personal story of her or his life journey, allowing a degree of autonomy over what events, people and issues were raised, as well as how the story plot was progressed. As a result, individual participants led the conversation at different times to most effectively recount moments from their life story.

During data collection, we assumed different but complimentary roles. Kitrina conducted all the in-depth interviews and led the focus groups, taking an open and accepting stance to enable each participant to share stories of his/her experience in a supportive atmosphere. While gaining trust and establishing rapport is important in all research, interviewing elites poses some particular problems as, being well known publicly and used to giving media interviews, they may give ‘rehearsed’ responses and/or withhold information which they do not wish to be made public (see Hertz & Imber, 1995; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). By drawing on and sharing her experiences in elite sport, Kitrina was able to offer empathy and show solidarity, but was also able to test and challenge athletes stories, seeking alternative explanations, and provoking participants to examine their own motives, interests, and explanations. It seemed to us that Kitrina’s insider status helped improve openness and trust in the researcher-participant relationship, helped participants feel sufficiently secure to be candid in the stories they shared, increased the depth of conversation and understanding, and provided an alternative lens for athletes to look at their lives. The candid and taboo nature of some of the stories suggests trust and rapport was established in a relatively short period of time. This outcome shows Kitrina was respected by participants as an ‘insider’ to sport culture and also suggests that during the focus groups other athletes also played an important part in directing and supporting deeper more self-aware conversations.

During the focus groups the first author, David, fulfilled a different role. Having no personal experience of professional sport, he remained for the most part ‘in the background’ to the point that participants were often surprised when he eventually spoke. His role was to note key issues which emerged during often animated conversation and ask clarifying or contrast questions to check emerging understandings. It was also important, given that focus groups provide a unique lens to explore athletes shared stories of their lives, to present key issues back to participants to invite confirmation, clarification, and/or modification. David’s status as an ‘outsider’ to the population of study balanced Kitrina’s insider status, bringing a critical perspective to the focus groups as well as subsequent analysis and interpretation.

Both researchers collaborated in a three stage processes of analysis and interpretation, incorporating different narrative analytical approaches tailored to the purpose of the study. After immersing ourselves in the data, the first stage was conducting a thematic analysis (see Rießman, 2008) to identify themes, typologies, or instances of paradigmatic categories. Here, we followed the process detailed by Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 12) where “the original story is dissected, and sections or single words belonging to a defined category are collected from the entire story.” This first stage of analysis served as a form of cross-case analysis, allowing us to
Building an Identity

Traditional theories of identity, according to Lally (2007, p. 86), define identity as “a multidimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic.” Within this conceptualization, a person’s self-image or self-schemata is composed of a number of relatively stable dimensions which are nevertheless influenced by social and environmental factors (Markus, 1977). From the perspective of identity theory, “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). These expectations and meanings, Stets and Burke suggest, “form a set of standards that guide behaviour.” In their discussion of social identity theory, Stets and Burke (2000, p. 224) write that, “the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications.” Identity, they argue, is formed through active processes of self-categorization or identification with respect to preexisting social categories.

Narrative theories of identity share similarities with traditional theories of identity, yet also significant differences. While consideration of these is beyond the scope of this article, a brief comparison might be helpful to some readers. On the basis of our reading of narrative literature, narrative theorists would likely agree that: (i) identity can be enduring yet also holds potential for revision and change (McAdams, 1993); (ii) identity is shaped in part at least by social processes (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000); (iii) identity is a reflexive project (Gergen, 1999); and (iv) identity is influenced by social categories that precede the individual (McLeod, 1997).

Notwithstanding these similarities, some notable differences exist. Perhaps the most important difference from the perspective of this study is that identity is constructed through story telling processes—in Smith’s (2007, p. 391) words, “people understand themselves as selves through the stories they tell and the stories they feel part of.” In a similar way, Neimeyer, Herrero, and Botella (2006, p. 128–9) see identity as constructed through narrative means as people make “meaning of their life experiences by punctuating the seamless flow of events and organizing them according to recurrent themes … which in turn scaffold the ‘plot’ of one’s life story.” From this perspective, identity is construed not as a static entity, but an ongoing project continually constructed and developed as a person creates (and shares) stories of her/his experience (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1993). Telling stories of our experiences over time, in Spence’s (1982, p. 458) terms, allows the development of a ‘narrative thread’ and it is this ongoing personal story that constitutes the core of our identity and sense of self. Thus, one’s life story and one’s identity can be understood as closely intertwined, perhaps even inseparable.

To understand identity from a narrative perspective it is necessary to take seriously stories participants tell...
of their lives in sport, beginning with memories of early sporting experience. These stories reveal key steps in identity development, shaping the individual’s subsequent experiences in elite sport. Importantly, they also shed light on the cultural context within which identity development takes place. This is because, Crossley (2000, p. 45–6) reminds us,

our experience of self, others and the world more generally is inextricably tied up with our use and understanding of the linguistic and moral resources made available to us in the cultures we are brought up in. Narrative theories suggest that the primary way in which such meanings are transmitted is through our embeddedness, from the moment of birth, in familial and cultural stories.

With an eye to their ‘embeddedness’ in cultural and familial stories, we consider now the participants’ stories of their early sport experiences.

**Ryan: “It’s More the Winning That I’ve Liked”**

I did swimming, tennis, and rugby with not much success . . . Then when I was 16 . . . there was a governing body world class start programme and I got tested for that. I was put forward basically because of my size more than anything else and then I got on the programme and that was basically where I started from.

And, do you remember, did you like it?

It was more the fact that – it’s more the winning that I’ve liked. I’ve gone through sports and tried to find one where I could be better than other people and just found that this was the one that I could hack. I could get better than other people at quite a high level. So it wasn’t that I was particularly passionate about the activity – it was a vehicle that I could beat other people and, yeah, just get better than other people . . . I think it’s just, succeeding, like, winning, knowing that you are better than everyone else. How I got into the sport, and the programme I’m on, it’s purely about achieving success. As soon as I got into the sport I knew that was why I was doing it. It’s purely – that’s where I am and that’s where I want to get.

This account of Ryan’s early involvement in rowing is striking in the way Ryan stories his involvement wholly and exclusively around the performance outcome of **winning and beating others**. A number of studies have shown that young people commonly describe multiple reasons for playing sport, perhaps beginning to focus on winning only once they progress or get older (e.g., Côté & Hay, 2002). There is no sign in Ryan’s stories—even of the start of his career—of other reasons for participation such as (for example) enjoyment, passion for the activity, discovery or learning, sharing with others. Instead, his stories portray involvement with rowing—and any other sport—as “purely” about “winning.”

On this basis, Ryan’s story closely follows the contours of the **performance narrative**, as described by Douglas and Carless (2006a, 2009, 2011). The performance narrative is a **monological** narrative in that all stories are told from the singular self-position of ‘athlete’, with other life roles and identities subsumed and performance outcomes taking precedence (Carless & Douglas, 2009). It is a story of single-minded dedication to performance to the extent that phrases like “winning is everything” are routine. In this narrative, performance-related concerns come to infuse all areas of life while other areas are diminished or relegated. The performance narrative can be considered the **dominant** narrative type in elite sport because it is the story that is most often heard in the public domain from coaches, athletes, commentators, fans, and governing body officials. The remarks of the director of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS)—broadcast on a BBC **Horizon Special** program in 2006—provide an example:

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

This public example of a performance story communicates a cultural perspective on values, expectations and accepted behavior in elite sport in an explicit, direct and overt manner.

Neimeyer and colleagues (2006, p. 130) write that, “self-narratives represent importations of the themes, roles, and discourses available in a given culture, for better or worse.” Ryan’s story might usefully be understood as an “importation” of the culturally dominant performance values exemplified in the remarks of the Director of the AIS. Reading this quotation alongside Ryan’s earlier account highlights a remarkable similarity in plot and signals the cultural origins of Ryan’s personal story. This is particularly so given that Ryan’s initiation into rowing occurred under the auspices of a “governing body world class start programme” through which he was identified (on the basis of physical characteristics) as a potential elite rower. In this sense, the basis for Ryan’s initial involvement was geared around his potential to win and the cultural context of his participation centered on performance outcomes. These cultural conditions permeate Ryan’s personal stories and identity.

**Luke: “I Just Did It Because I Enjoyed It”**

The first thing I remember athletics-wise was – ‘cause my dad ran – I remember being really small and watching him run. And mum used to make us little vests, sort of the same colours as his. There weren’t many kids who’d go down, and I used to go
down and watch the athletics, and I kind of got lost in that . . . I only got involved in the [athletics] club really when we moved up here, like [at] twelve, it wasn’t when I was younger. I liked playing football . . . if you were good at it then you kind of got accepted at school . . . because I’m dyslexic – academically absolutely atrocious – I used to try to hide that as best as possible. All my school reports they were always, like, I would try to help anyone out to try to stop having to do my work! So you’d get out on the playground and, when you were younger, play football. And you wanted to be good at it because you felt accepted playing football. That’s the only reason I liked playing football. I can’t think of any other reason . . . When we were in Year 7 they had a cross-country league throughout the winter – I’d never done anything like that before – and I remember standing on the start line and everyone was: “Oh Luke will go off, Luke will win,” and their kind of attitude was like you’re gonna, you know, there was almost an expectation. Which for the first time was a bit strange cause I never really had an expectation— I just did it because I enjoyed it and because I felt good at it.

In this excerpt, Luke shares a very different story of his early involvement in sport. Evident within this account—at two moments—are echoes of the performance narrative. First, Luke describes being “good” at football, which suggests an awareness of performance outcomes being potentially valuable. Second, he describes a general attitude among others at his first race that, “Luke will go off, Luke will win.” These references to winning/being good signal the presence of a performance story. In contrast to Ryan, however, both these examples refer to others’ interest in performance outcomes, rather than Luke himself internalizing this cultural storyline. In the first example, others value Luke being good at football and therefore “accept” him on this basis; in the second, others make the judgment that “Luke will win” and, thereby, signal their belief that winning is meaningful. When Luke senses an “expectation” of success, he has tapped into the subtle ways the assumptions of those who subscribe to a dominant narrative are circulated—in this case the assumption that those who are ‘talented’ will inevitably go on to compete and win. Both these moments illustrate how the culturally dominant narrative (exemplified in the words and actions of others) can influence or shape the stories and experiences of an individual within that culture.

Luke’s story also differs from Ryan’s in that diverse narrative threads are present throughout, beginning with his earliest stories. While Ryan’s story does not veer from the performance script, Luke draws on a relational narrative (see Douglas, 2009) when he describes attending athletic events as a young child with his family. He again draws on a relational narrative in his account of his reasons for playing football at school: as a route to “acceptance” by his peers. For Luke, it is not his ability at football that is storied as meaningful, but the fact that his ability leads to him establishing positive relationships with others (e.g., being respected, taken seriously, accepted by his peers). Thus, Luke’s stories of his initiation into sport demonstrate an early resistance to the performance narrative in a way that Ryan’s stories do not.

Developing a Personal Story

Luke: “It’s the Best Feeling Ever” As Luke recounts his subsequent experiences in sport, further narrative threads become evident. In this excerpt, Luke describes his experience of running, shedding light on his reasons for continuing at the elite level:

It’s a place that’s, it is strange, because despite the fact that when you’re finished, when you’re completely knackered and maybe, sometimes, if you’re tired or lethargic beforehand and you might not want to run beforehand, but when you’re there it doesn’t matter . . . it’s the best feeling ever. Because you’re feeling tall and you’re running well you don’t feel anyone else can get you—you’re completely on your own. But at the same time, you just feel like—you’re almost justifying your existence . . . It’s what you do well, you feel good doing it, that’s what you can do well.

This excerpt demonstrates links to a variety of cultural narrative resources, including a discovery narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006a), an action narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2008a), and the storied experience of flow (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Further narrative strands are also evident in this excerpt, in which Luke describes playing football in the school team:

The PE teacher noticed I was reasonably good and put me on the wing … and because you’d been selected, or scored a goal, or played well, everyone seemed to give you respect. I remember they’d say: “Oh come and play for our team!” But because it was on a Sunday Mum and Dad wouldn’t let me play. So I couldn’t take that next step.

At this point in Luke’s story, a further narrative thread is introduced which is important in Luke’s later experiences. Although Luke was “good” at football (i.e., met the terms of the performance narrative for progression), he was unable to progress because his parents “wouldn’t let [him] play” on a Sunday because of the family’s religious beliefs. This moment portrays a tension or collision between two narratives: the culturally dominant performance narrative (in which sport is the priority) and a counter narrative of shared religious belief or faith (in which going to church on Sundays is the priority). On this occasion, the actions of his parents (not letting him play) meant that the counter narrative ‘trumped’ the performance narrative.

These moments are significant because they are instances when Luke was shown that the terms of the
dominant performance narrative are not the only way to experience and story life in sport. Instead of a singular narrative script, these moments illustrate how diverse and multilayered story threads permeate Luke’s life story, revealing an array of cultural influences. As a result of repeated moments like these over time, we suggest that Luke became resistant to storying his life—and developing his identity—around the contours of the performance narrative. In sharing these stories, Luke reveals that since his earliest memories there have been more threads to his life story—and hence his identity—than being a sportsperson.

McAdams (2006, p.119) writes that, “Stories that succumb to a single, dominant perspective, no matter how coherent they may seem to be, are too simplistic to be true; they fail to reflect lived experience.” Luke’s stories bear this point out: while the culturally dominant performance narrative demands exclusivity (i.e., the relegation or silencing of other stories and selves), Luke’s experiences are too rich to be ‘squashed’ into such a singular story. To do so, would result in a monological narrative (Hermans, 2006) which betrays the breadth of experience that life offers. Instead, Luke’s stories are dialogical (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2006), in that they are told from multiple self-positions. His stories reveal and preserve diverse cultural influences, thereby challenging the monological performance narrative.

**Ryan: “I Want to Get Ahead”** Ryan’s developing story, in contrast, shows little deviation from the performance narrative. His story remains monological, with every story seemingly told from the position of athlete. At no time, as Ryan progressed his story, was the central theme of performance seriously challenged—for example, through stories about enjoying the activity, travel, play, fun or friendship. Instead, these other dimensions are either never mentioned or are subsumed within his quest to win. As opposed to broadening out his life story, Ryan’s later stories serve merely to strengthen and entrench a number of values typical of the performance narrative. For example, Ryan describes how his desire to win is “the only thing” that enables him to endure the pain associated with training and competition:

In a sport like rowing the actual process of rowing is really painful – you get 10 strokes into the race and already you can feel your legs burning up and you’ve got to, the only thing that keeps me in the race and pushing myself, is the fact that I want to get ahead of the other people.

Smith and Watson (2001) note that in narrating one’s life, a storyteller draws on his or her embodiment to link “memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body” (p. 37). Above, Ryan stories his embodied experiences—through the metaphor of his legs “burning up”—to communicate the physical demands of the sport. He rationalizes these demands—in line with the performance narrative—as being a necessary sacrifice en route to success. Sparkes and Smith (2008) suggest that males (in particular) within sporting subcultures are socialised to talk about pain through normalizing, hiding, promoting, legitimising, and valorising what pain signifies. Although Ryan tells a personal story of his own experience of pain, the way he describes his experience is not unique—it can be heard in a variety of cultural scenarios from “no pain, no gain” sayings to more lengthy descriptions found in sporting autobiographies.

Narrating pain in this way links one’s personal embodied experiences with wider cultural expectations of what it means to ‘be’ an athlete and, as White, Young, and McTeer (1995) note, serves to depersonalize the experience of pain and objectify the body. Chapman (1997) suggests regimented regimes—such as enduring pain while training—are a way some rowers create a disciplined body (Frank, 1995). This body type, associated with performance stories, rationalizes the acceptance of injury and physical harm in the pursuit of improved performance. A disciplined body tolerates pain through dissociation, and this is demonstrated in the extract above when Ryan disassociates from the pain of maximal exertion by focusing on dominating the opposition.

Lieblich and colleagues (1998, p. 8–9) observe that, “People are meaning-generating organisms; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience.” From this perspective, Ryan’s life story might be seen as dominated by the “building blocks” of the performance narrative and, therefore, that Ryan has either never been exposed to alternative narrative types, or has ignored or discredited these as being incompatible with his quest to win. As a result, Ryan’s stories incorporate culturally dominant performance values, at the expense of other possible stories. This is potentially problematic because, as Neimeyer and colleagues (2006, p. 132) observe, dominant narratives, “‘colonize’ an individual’s sense of self, constraining identity options to those that are problem saturated.” By storying his life in line with the dominant but monological performance narrative, Ryan creates an exclusive athletic identity which threatens long term well-being (Sparkes, 1998). Not least of these are the dangers of a single-minded striving for success and achievement to the extent that the person becomes, “detached from the humanizing web of emotional connections and social commitments” (Jackson, 1990, p. 209).

**Challenges to the Story**

At times, stories are challenged by embodied experience (see Carless, 2010). When this happens, in McLeod’s (1997, p. 93) terms, the story teller needs to reconsider “the fit between his or her individual experience and the story-lines that are available” within his or her culture. One of two responses is possible: the individual either modifies their behavior to fit the dominant narrative, or modifies the story (by drawing on alternative narratives) so it better fits their experience. In the first response, the individual’s actions ‘fall into line’ with the culture in
which they are immersed, while in the second, the individual’s actions transgress that culture. Ryan’s and Luke’s stories illustrate these processes unfolding in the context of elite sport. Ryan’s story portrays a detachment from emotional and social connections when he modified his behavior to conform to a performance script. Adhering to this story helped Ryan to erradicate the tensions he experienced and, over time, cemented an athletic identity. Luke’s established dialogical story was challenged by the monological performance narrative (which dominated the culture he was increasingly becoming immersed in), leading to a period of reflection and, eventually, his rejection of the values of the performance narrative.

**Ryan: “In the Boat”**  
Ryan tells of a mutual inter-dependence between county-level crew members as they work together toward a shared goal. But, as sometimes happens, Ryan is selected to progress to a higher level. The friendships Ryan initiated at county level become the first casualties under the terms of his performance story which does not allow the maintenance of relationships with his former crew while remaining completely focused on beating them with his new crew. The story he has advanced so far does not allow him to be ‘friend’ and ‘winner,’ because in his story the effort needed to win is generated by disliking the opposition. At this moment, two narratives—performance and relational—clash. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

*Would you say that you hate the opposition?*

You build yourself up to doing it. It’s more the fact that you’d hate them to beat you. I’m probably worse than other people. When I got into, kind of, the group at national level you get to know people – before you’re selected to the squad – you still train with. You get to county and you’d seen them before. Before a race a lot of them would be talking to each other and that’s the sort of thing I’d have to, if I talked to them I’d forget that – [pause]

*You didn’t like them?*

Yeah. Which is – [pause] Yeah.

In this excerpt Ryan communicates a concern that maintaining a connection to his former crew (by talking to them before the race), would compromise his “hate” of them beating him and, therefore, his determination to win. The way he recounted this part of his story (i.e., pauses and hesitations) suggested to us a degree of discomfort as he reflected on these feelings and actions. Faced in the moment, however, with the decision of whether to interact with his former crew, he elected to follow the script of his story by disassociating from them. This behavior ‘fits’ the performance story he has advanced so far and ‘makes sense’ in terms of the plot of this story. It is accepted by tellers of performance tales that relationships are, if necessary, sacrificed in pursuit of success (Douglas & Carless, 2006a; Douglas, 2009).

Yet in the terms of a relational narrative, the same actions make no sense at all because they result in the breakdown of relationships. From a relational perspective, Ryan’s behavior could be interpreted as selfish, insincere, and/or uncaring. Ryan story remains within the contours of the performance narrative, thereby relegating relational concerns and side-stepping any need for ethical or moral reflection on his actions. This narrative justifies them as necessary steps in the pursuit of performance.

A second instance of a challenge or tension occurred when Ryan described his experience of national training camps in which his girlfriend also took part. Although Ryan believed spending time with his girlfriend did not affect his performance, he suggested that spending “too much time” with his girlfriend was perceived by others as a threat to performance. He offered this account of how coaches responded to him spending time with his girlfriend:

They make a massive issue of the fact that if you’ve got half an hour free time in the evening or in the middle of the day, they go out of their way to say you can’t see that person. So it just creates tension because you have bad feelings towards the coach because you can’t think or see a logical reason why. I mean you can say if you’re spending your whole time with them that you’re crew mates won’t like that ‘cause you’re not focusing on the job in hand. But I know my crew were perfectly happy with me seeing her. So I don’t – they just seem to go out of their way to make it difficult.

This example illustrates behavior control that has been identified in elite sport culture (Denison, 2007)—training camps present a unique opportunity for coaches to put the behavior of athletes under a 24-hr microscope, policing even how they use their leisure time. While those outside sport may dismiss coaches’ influence on such matters, Shogun (1999) suggests what a coach says carries great weight for many elite athletes. While voicing his frustration, Ryan takes the coach’s words seriously and decides to modify his actions to demonstrate his commitment. By doing so, he again sacrifices relational values in favor of sustaining a performance story.

Ryan makes sense of his response (spending less time with his girlfriend) by highlighting his responsibility to his crew:

You have to limit it, ‘cause I can see if I spent all my free time with her then that would annoy my crew, ‘cause for them, they would look at it that my focus wasn’t on performing. And when I’ve trained all year and they’ve trained all year to get to one point they’d want to know – I’d want to know – that everyone else in my crew was completely mentally, sort of, in the boat.

In this account, Ryan does ‘narrative work’ to reframe his embodied experience (that spending time with one’s girlfriend does not affect his performance) within the terms of a shared performance narrative. In the light
of a totalitarian performance narrative, spending “all [his] free time” with his girlfriend implies that Ryan is not mentally “in the boat,” and any action that suggests he is not “in the boat” weakens his commitment to the crew and is therefore a threat to performance. Consequently, Ryan adjusts his behavior (i.e., he reduces the amount of time he spends with his girlfriend) to sustain his story.

Luke: “Selling Myself Short” Luke’s progression to the international scene was typical and included school, local club, county, and national competition. Up to this point, Luke lived with his parents, established friendships and connections within sport and outside, and regularly attended a local church. This all began to change when, as Luke describes:

I broke the British record, went to the Worlds for the first time, and met the coach of the two best athletes in the world. He was the top dog. And when he says, “Do you want to come and train with me?” you think, “Right! OK, that’s going to another level.” So I upped sticks and moved there.

“There” was a prestigious national performance center where:

Every morning [we] trained ‘til 12, go to lectures for two hours, go back to training, go home. It was just that for two years, training all the time with the best athletes in the world . . . you’re wandering in and it’s like Sports Personality of the Year.

Over time, Luke began to experience tensions with the culture of the performance center. One example is evident here, when Luke looks back on his time at the center:

It wasn’t me. Having been someone who was brought up in church and stuff, all of a sudden Sunday mornings was training, and that was sort of non-negotiable

So they wanted you to train on Sundays and you decided not to?

No, I decided to train. I went to church in the evenings. But it was the principle – I felt that I was kind of selling myself a little bit short in that I knew really I should make more of an effort to go to church and stuff. But then I wanted to train and I wanted obviously to get better and so you’ve got that kind of nagging away at you.

The “nagging away at you” that Luke describes can be understood as a result of a clash between the culture of the center (which prioritizes performance) and his personal story (which prioritizes religious faith and church). McLeod (1997) suggests individuals whose stories do not fit dominant cultural narratives are often silenced—their stories cannot be told within that culture. This was the case for Luke, as his personal values and beliefs were sidelined by the center’s “non-negotiable” culture of training on Sunday.

Luke described temporary changes in his behavior—and even the kind of person he considered himself to be—that occurred over two years as he tried to “fit in” at the performance center:

You kind of became consumed in your athletics. You became at the end so into it that you couldn’t see your perspective on other stuff . . . I dumped Naomi, I didn’t want – I got to the point where I just felt that I want to be an athlete, I’m meant to be, I just felt that athletics is what I should be involved with. I’ve come this far, I’ve invested money, I’ve invested time, I need to give it as good a shot as I can and I can’t be doing with you, you know, moaning at me down the phone. I need to be single minded. I wasn’t giving her enough time, or I wasn’t at church, or I was becoming a different person . . . Because she had known me obviously before I went to Uni and I was quite, I always felt, I was quite laid back. But I don’t think I was when I was at [the performance centre]. I was just really kind of channelled to wanting to – just run faster.

In the italic section, Luke tells a performance story, utilizing phrases that characterize this narrative type. For a time, Luke modifies his behavior in an effort to conform to this script. Evident, however, is a degree of discomfort, revealed as a tension between Luke’s established life story (focusing here on connection to his girlfriend and church) and the storyline that was impressed upon him by the culture of the performance center (“sport comes first”). For Luke, striving for success under the terms of the dominant performance narrative resulted in him becoming detached from humanizing social and emotional connections. This is demonstrated in his story when he moved away from home (loosening ties with his family), trained on Sundays (loosening ties with church), and “dumped” his girlfriend. Luke’s actions at this time held different meanings for different people. For those within the performance culture (his coaches and team-mates), they provide evidence that he is “dedicated,” “focussed,” and “wants to win.” For those outside (his girlfriend and parents), they indicate a dramatic shift in his priorities. For Luke, his actions leave him feeling guilty and uncomfortable.

Initially, despite the guilt his actions create, Luke goes along with the performance script. This is not surprising as these behaviors are sanctioned in elite sport and storied as the only route to success (Douglas & Carless, 2006a). However, two experiences led Luke to question the performance story. First, despite his commitment, his performance was not improving:

You’d go to [the centre] thinking I’m training with the best in the world – I can’t fail to get better. And that didn’t happen. And so you feel, well hang on a minute, what’s going on, is this working for me? In the back of your mind you’re questioning it.

According to the performance narrative, total commitment is the route to success: the compromises Luke
made should result in him running quicker. However, the objective details (i.e., times) showed this wasn’t the case. The performance story wasn’t working.

Second, as Luke came to know two other athletes—Tom and Erik—he reflected on how they lived their lives:

Tom wouldn’t go to a cinema because how you have to sit in a chair would affect his hamstrings. And you think, flipping heck, if that’s what a world record holder does, then I’m not that! Is that what I have to be like? I’ve seen what a lot of the best athletes in the world are like, because as much as Tom was like that, Erik wasn’t, and he also won an Olympic medal. Having spent time with him I realised Erik wasn’t like that and he still performed. And realised Erik had a kid, his wife and they bought a house, he was settled, this place was home. Whereas everyone else was there because the coach was there, they’d come from other places.

In this excerpt Luke sees—as previous research (Douglas & Carless, 2006a; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009) shows—that it is not the case that the only way to be successful in elite sport is to follow a performance script. While Tom did, Erik—who was also successful—did not. Around this time Luke realized that, therefore, he did not have to be this way (a way that was causing him personal tension and guilt) to be successful. As a result, the promise of the performance narrative was weakened, and Luke began to consider alternatives.

He found those alternatives by returning to the life story he had previously developed, characterized by a strong relational thread:

I remember being back in [the centre] pretty much deciding that really I’d given everything to my athletics in probably the most single minded way I could do. I felt that I had upset a few people. Naomi, most definitely, Naomi. I hadn’t spent time with her. I’d kind of broken up with her and I didn’t really speak to my mum and dad when I was there. I didn’t really see much of my family. As much as I had friends at training and stuff, I didn’t really have any other friends outside of training, I didn’t know anyone from church, it was all pretty much everything was based around training – completely. And I just felt that really that’s crazy, what happens when I’m not an athlete? I’ve got to start to look at where I’m going in the long term and then weave athletics into it and I think that’s the way it’s got to be for me. Because I love athletics, and I love running, and I want to achieve … but I think the only way for me to do that is for me to get certain areas of my life sorted, in the sense that now I’ve moved [back home], got married, kind of established friends, got involved in the church quite a lot, and got friends within university, in training, and church and stuff. I feel like I’ve really gone back to basics but in a way I’ve got back to me… I’ve kind of eased back a little bit on the intensity of the training I was doing but I’m not as injured and I’m running just as well.

Douglas (2009) has shown how an athlete may experience shame and silence when their personal story differs from the dominant story in elite sport. She has also shown that the availability of alternative stories provide the resources needed for critical reflection on one’s own actions from a moral and ethical perspective. Luke’s stories demonstrate this journey unfolding. Initially, Luke modified his behavior to follow the contours of the dominant performance narrative. As he later put it: “I’ve tried it – I turned into a person I didn’t like.” This dislike of his ‘new self’, we suggest, equates to the tensions that arose when the new behaviors that were required of him by the performance script no longer aligned with his personal story. Eventually—supported by the presence of alternative narratives alongside his awareness of cracks in the performance narrative—Luke abandons the performance story to resume a lifestyle which ‘made sense’ in terms of his own dialogical life story.

**Conclusions**

We have recounted moments from the stories of two elite male athletes, analyzed through the lens of narrative theory, with a view to shedding light on the ways personal stories, identity, and behavior are shaped by elite sport culture. Ryan’s story draws on a dominant performance narrative which prioritizes performance outcomes at the expense of other stories. Whenever experiences occurred which failed to ‘fit’ the performance plot, Ryan modified his behavior (engaging in ‘narrative work’ to justify this modification) such that his personal story continued to align with the culturally dominant narrative. Over time, Ryan created a monological life story characterized by a strong athletic identity. Analysis of Ryan’s story provides new insights into the process of identity development among sportspeople, revealing how athletic identity is culturally informed and seeded in early sport experiences.

Luke, in contrast, developed and sustained a dialogical life story incorporating diverse narrative threads. When Luke relocated to an elite performance center, his dialogical self-story clashed with a dominant monological performance narrative. As a consequence, Luke experienced tensions, guilt, and personal doubts. By drawing on alternative narrative types, Luke resisted the influence of elite sport culture, eventually leaving the performance center to preserve his established life story. Analysis of Luke’s stories offers insights into how cultural pressures toward a strong or exclusive athletic identity can be resisted and, given the long-term problems associated with an exclusive athletic identity, the avoidance of this kind of identity might be considered to fall within the remit of morally and ethically engaged sport psychologists.

This study develops and extends narrative research into the life stories of female professional golfers (Doug-
las & Carless, 2006a, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2009) documenting comparable processes among males in sports other than golf and thereby deepening understanding of how personal and cultural stories impact individuals, shaping behavior, identity, and life choices. Ryan’s story has much in common with golfers who storied their lives around a performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006a, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2009). Longitudinal research shows how—over the course of a career in sport—reliance on this narrative type is associated with trauma and distress during periods of poor form, and identity crisis, narrative wreckage, and mental health difficulties following career cessation (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009). While the similarities between Ryan’s story and these examples do not imply that Ryan will experience psychological problems, we suggest the seeds are already sown for a range of significant difficulties. Luke’s dialogue story, in contrast, has a similar plot to the stories of two professional golfers who—while both achieving success at the highest level—negotiated their careers and subsequent withdrawal from professional sport with minimal psychological problems (see Carless & Douglas, 2009 and Douglas, 2009).

It is significant that Ryan and Luke are young athletes, in the early stages of their careers. We do not know, at this point, what will become of their sport careers or their lives more generally. Their futures are unresolved. We have no wish to ‘finalise’ Ryan or Luke as people, to suggest that this is what they are or this is what they will become (Frank, 2005). Importantly, it is the story, rather than the person, that we have focused upon. If anything, therefore, it is the story rather than the person that we risk finalising. We see both Ryan and Luke as people who have the potential to change in response to new life experiences—although change is likely to require the availability and embrace of alternative stories.

Contrary to commonly held views, research has shown that success at the elite level is possible without adhering to the performance script (Douglas & Carless, 2006a; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009). On this basis, we hope those involved in elite sport might reflect on how their own behaviors and stories might privilege performance stories and rhetoric. Other ways of storytelling as an elite athlete—such as relational and discovery stories—need to be shared, explored, and promoted within elite sport culture. So long as the performance script retains its place in sport culture as the only legitimate way an elite or aspiring athlete can story (and live) his or her life, all those who experience life in other ways will be silenced, marginalized, and/or excluded. Some of these, it strikes us, may represent a promising new cohort of athletes who risk being overlooked, not on the basis of ability or dedication, but because they tell the ‘wrong’ story.

**Note**

1. In transcribed form the final exchange of this excerpt led one reviewer to observe that the interviewer completed the interviewee’s thoughts, raising concern that the interviewer ‘put words in Ryan’s mouth.’ Having experienced and observed the interaction before listening to the audio recording, our shared interpretation is instead that the interviewer supported Ryan in saying—in a sense—the unsayable. This interpretation is supported by the way Ryan recounted this part of his story, where pauses and hesitations indicate a degree of discomfort, caution, and uncertainty suggesting reflection on whether he ‘should’ voice this story. This perspective is strengthened given that Ryan agreed (by saying “yeah” twice) rather than disagreed with the interviewer.

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the participants for willingly and generously sharing with us stories of their lives. We also thank and acknowledge the UK Sport Council who funded the research which we have drawn upon in this article. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript.

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