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Coaches' reflections on the meaning and value of Masters athletics

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ABSTRACT

Masters sport is a growing social movement offering the opportunity to participate in competitive sports in later life. Although many studies have explored Masters athletes' experiences, little is known about how other actors in the sport subcultures construct meaning in Masters sport and whether their stories work to support or hinder participation. Our study explored the cultural narrative resources and life scripts surrounding sport and ageing that coaches draw upon in two European countries, England and Finland, where sport policy has put different emphasis on elite sport and sport for all. We analysed interviews from 23 athletics (track and field) coaches (8 women) to understand how they assign meaning and value to Masters sport. The narrative analysis showed that coaches constructed two possible athlete pathways: the elite athlete pathway, followed by disengagement from competitive sport, and the 'second chance' pathway, describing Masters athletics as an option for those who did not succeed in youth. Normative expectations about the life career in athletics, involving a transition from an athlete to a coach and volunteer, also worked to construct participation in Masters athletics as a selfish activity and neglect to 'give back' to the sport. Finnish coaches constructed more nuanced stories about Masters athletics and sport in later life, tapping into sport for all narrative resources that circulate in the Nordic countries. The findings indicate that athletics subculture is a contested space where 'new' discourses of ageing are only slowly starting to challenge the normative life script of sport as a project of youth.

Introduction

In the recent decade, scholars have increasingly observed that the biomedically driven ageing-as-decline master narrative has been challenged and partly replaced by 'active', 'positive', 'successful', 'productive' and 'healthy' ageing discourses (Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2013; Evans, Nistrup, & Pfister, 2018; Gard et al., 2017; Katz & Calasanti, 2014; Lamb, 2014; Rudman, 2015). The physical activity promotion campaigns tied to these concepts have often been articulated through neoliberal discourses where older people are encouraged to take moral responsibility for the success of their ageing by maintaining physical and psychological health through exercise (Dionigi & Son, 2017; Pike, 2015). With the change of discourse and increasing research evidence on the benefits of physically active lifestyle in advanced years, policy-makers across the globe (e.g., Sport England, 2018; World Health Organization (WHO), 2002) have encouraged older citizens to engage in physical activity including the more intensive forms of exercise and competitive sports (Allain & Marshall, 2017; Horton, Dionigi, Gard, Baker, & Weir, 2018; Kirby & Kluge, 2013). Scholars have recently associated the growing popularity of Masters sport with this shifting narrative landscape that re-stories old age as a time for leisure, growth and activity (Dionigi, 2015; Gard et al., 2017).

Despite its success in fueling research and influencing policies, numerous researchers have criticised the successful ageing concept (for a review, see Bülow & Söderqvist, 2014). Centrally, the concept has been argued to place the responsibility to age 'successfully' on individuals themselves and disregard pressing questions of social exclusion, health disparities and the difference in social and material resources (Katz & Calasanti, 2014). Furthermore, scholars have viewed it as a particular expression of individualistic North American culture (Liang & Luo, 2012; Lamb, 2014), overly focused on health and optimal physical functioning (Cole, 1992), and excluding the inevitable facts of death and dying (Cosco, Stephan, & Brayne, 2013). Some alternative concepts that researchers have introduced include 'harmonious' ageing (Liang & Luo, 2012), 'conscious' ageing (Moody, 2003) and gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) that, although including distinct components, all emphasise the spiritual dimension of old age, contemplation, and acceptance of ageing. However, these alternative concepts seem marginalised both in research discourses and popular cultural understandings of sport in later life. That is, sport has most often been constructed

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within successful ageing –related discourses as a vehicle for the pursuit of sustained youthfulness or a health-management technique to avoid illness and physical decline (Allain & Marshall, 2017; Eichberg, 2009; Ronkainen, 2019). As Tulle and Phoenix (2016) noted, a challenge for social scientists lies in moving understandings of sport in later life beyond the instrumental notion of physical activity as a panacea for the problems of old age.

Masters sport movement emerged approximately 50 years ago in North America, Australia and Europe (Gard et al., 2017; Tulle, 2008a). Hastings, Cable, and Zahran (2005) noted that, in the United States, the Masters movement was initiated by relatively affluent adults who wanted to pursue competitive sport as a serious leisure career in later life. Their participation was facilitated by improved salaries, a growth of leisure time, and advances in medical and sport sciences that dispelled the myths that physical exertion should be avoided in older age. Since then, Masters sport has become a phenomenally popular global phenomenon, with competitions held in 5 or 10 year age categories in various team (e.g., basketball, volleyball, and hockey) and individual (e.g., swimming, tennis and athletics/track and field) sports (Gard et al., 2017). Researchers have sometimes championed Masters athletes as the manifestation of successful ageing in that they typically maintain high levels of physical, psychological, cognitive, and social functioning (Geard, Reaburn, Rebar, & Dionigi, 2017). The Masters sport movement itself has embraced multiple and somewhat contradictory discourses of ageing and sport: while embracing a 'sport for all' ideology and health-related, social, and inclusive practices, it has also facilitated the pursuit of competitive goals, serious leisure careers, and World records (Hastings et al., 2005; Tulle, 2008a). Studies with Masters athletes have similarly indicated that a diversity of discourses shape the participants' understanding of their sport practices; while indeed fear of frailty and ill health have been identified as motivating elements in some athletes' stories (Gard et al., 2017; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011), studies have also illustrated how many of them train seriously and aim at winning or achieving personal or national records (Dionigi, 2005, 2010; Tulle, 2008b). The complex meanings of Masters sport involvement illustrate that participants both reproduce and resist dominant discourses of sport and ageing in constructing meaning in the sport life project and being an older person.

Cultural narratives surrounding sport and later life are reproduced, resisted and transformed by various actors including the policymakers, the media, sport leaders, coaches, and athletes themselves. Drawing on Pollner and Stein (1996), Phoenix and Sparkes (2006, 2007) used the concept of 'narrative maps' to describe the resources that young athletes enrolled in a sport science undergraduate degree drew on in imagining their (athletic) futures and the options that were open for them. They showed that older teammates were a central source of guidance for thinking about ageing and athletic retirement, and mature athletes who continued playing despite the age-related performance decline were constructed as 'feared selves', that is, those who were 'hanging on' too long. They also showed that family members and sport science curriculum were important providers of narrative maps for young athletes (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Perhaps surprisingly, coaches' influence as potential contributors to narrative maps was not mentioned, even if other studies emphasise their role as key socialising agents in young athletes' lives and powerful transmitters of (sub)cultural beliefs and attitudes (e.g., MacPhail & Kirk, 2006). This paper extends understandings of narrative maps available for athletes by scrutinising coaches' views and experiences of Masters sport. Focusing on coaches' stories of being a (former) athlete and their reasons (not) to take part in Masters sport can help us understand how they view the meaning and value of Masters sport, and what kind of narrative maps they are likely to transmit to athletes. Methodologically, focusing on coaches' self-narratives rather than only asking for general opinions about Masters sport allows for combating the social desirability biases and previous observations that coaches' 'official' philosophy of practice does not always align with their actual values (Carless & Douglas, 2011). Understanding coaches' journeys and their own choices (not) to take part in Masters sport can shed light on the ageing concepts that circulate in sport subcultures and how policies are understood and interpreted in the daily practices in sports clubs.

In this paper, we will compare and contrast coaches' stories constructed within two European countries with different sport policy trajectories: England and Finland. In both countries, there are ongoing tensions between the two sporting ideologies of elite sport and sport for all, although the emphases in these countries are arguably different. England can be considered the home of modern sports which frame sport as a project tied to youth, competitiveness and aggressiveness (Eichberg & Loland, 2010). Green (2004) observed that sport policy in England had been focused on elite sport development since the mid-1990s; Devine (2016) and Kirk (2004) also argued that physical education in the UK is framed within masculine, competitive sport discourses. There are significant gaps in sports participation by age, gender, and class, implying that sport is predominantly catered for young, middle-class men (Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Houlihan & Lindsey, 2012). Collins (2010) also noted that, except for one campaign in the 1980s, Sport England has largely ignored older people in the promotion of sport. Athletics in particular has received substantial funding for elite development (Renfree & Kohe, 2018), but the broader participation base at the club level is declining (Grix, 2009).

In contrast, Finland often ranks as a top country in mass sport participation (Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010) and has much smaller participation disparities in terms of age and gender than most other European nations (Hartmann-Tews, 2006). Historically, however, the elite sport achievement has been a central building block of the young nation's identity, especially in the first half of the 20th century (Tervo, 2001). Athletics, in particular, has been the most successful sport for the Finns in the Olympic Games, and many of the most well-known Finnish Olympic athletes have been long-distance runners (Koski & Lämsä, 2015). However, there was a marked policy shift to sport for all in the late 1960s with a series of strategy documents and facility development to support sport for the masses (Green & Collins, 2008). Nevertheless, Koski (2012) argued that "only two or three decades ago the structural hegemony of top and competitive sport was unquestioned […] even though Finland has long been among the forerunners of the 'sport for all' idea" (p. 259).

To summarise, despite these recent advances to understandings of Masters sport movement and individual athletes' experiences, few studies have investigated how other central actors in sport subcultures assign meaning to Masters sport. Aligned with the calls for moving beyond individuals' strategies to age 'successfully' and seeking to understand broader issues pertinent to cultural forces and social inclusion (Katz & Calasanti, 2014), we sought to understand how coaches construct meaning and value in Masters sport. The following research questions guided our inquiry:

1) How do athletics coaches position themselves in relation to Masters athletics?
2) What are the cultural narrative resources that coaches draw upon and what narrative maps do they transmit about ageing and sports?
3) What are the influences of national cultural contexts on the constructions of Masters athletics?

Methodology

Our theoretical approach was grounded in narrative psychology and loosely within what Smith and Sparkes (2008) described as a psychosocial perspective on narrative. That is, a commitment to ontological realism (there is a real world independent of how we view it) is combined with epistemological constructivism that asserts knowledge as concept-dependent, theory-laden and fallible (Maxwell, 2012). In line with a realist perspective, we acknowledge that the life as lived provides the basis for stories (Spector-Mersel, 2011) and that biological

reality and social structures influence psychological experiences and constrain the stories that can be constructed (North, 2017). Athletics subculture centralises standardised events and objectively measured physical performance; in other words, it is an exemplar of a modernist sport (Guttmann, 1978). The embodied experience of inhabiting this life-world as well as the dominant ideologies shape the stories that can be told and accepted by others; however, participants in the subculture are also agentic in bringing situated meaning to their experiences and negotiating or rejecting culturally dominant narratives.

Bamberg (2012) suggested that narratives' primary purpose is to explain why things are the way they are and to normalise what has happened. Therefore, analysing narratives is informative in revealing how people make sense of the social world and their place in it. Individuals construct their self-narratives in relation to cultural life scripts that function as prescriptive resources for how an 'ideal' life should unfold and when certain life transitions are expected to happen (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Fivush, 2010). If individuals' trajectories align with the dominant script, they do not need to explain why they have chosen this path as it is implicitly understood by others within the same cultural sphere. Pursuing an athletic career in youth coincides with a typical life script and especially that associated with masculinity (Spector-Mersel, 2006), whereas continuing to do so after passing over peak physical performance becomes countercultural and older athletes often need to justify this choice to others such as family members, friends and teammates (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017). Fivush (2010) theorised that those who do not conform with the life script need to speak up to justify themselves; therefore, being silent indicates power, whereas speaking up signifies the loss of power.

While life scripts represent the typical series of events and transitions in the life course, master narratives offer culturally dominant interpretive frameworks that pre-exist the individual storyteller (Bamberg, 2005). Master narratives offer guidance on how to experience the world in 'an appropriate' way and are perpetuated by people who occupy some position of authority (Thorne & McLean, 2003), such as sports coaches. While not everyone accepts the master narrative, similar to when deviating from life scripts, those with an alternative story are often forced to acknowledge it and work to justify developing that alternative position. In ageing studies, the ageing-as-decline master narrative has been argued to direct older people to experience and narrate later life in terms of loss and diminished resources (Trethewey, 2001); however, its authority has become increasingly questioned by counternarratives in the recent years (Gard et al., 2017).

Participants and procedure

After obtaining relevant ethical approvals for the study, coaches in two athletics clubs (one in Finland, and one in England) were invited to take part in an interview with a researcher. Both clubs were among the biggest clubs in their region with a long and successful history, broad participant base, and over 30 coaches and instructors working with junior and senior, both elite and non-elite athletes. The data were collected as a part of two broader projects; one on club culture, athlete development and lifelong participation, and other on youth athletes' developmental trajectories in Finland (Ryba et al., 2016). The aim was to include as diverse range of coaches as possible in terms of age, gender, years of coaching experience, and the group of athletes. Heads of coaching in both clubs were asked to help in participant recruitment and all coaches who volunteered to participate were interviewed. Access to the clubs was furthermore facilitated by the first and fourth authors' (past) involvement in these clubs' activities, but nevertheless they did not personally know most of the participants. The final sample included 24 coaches (8 women), 15 in Finland and eight in England, aged between 22 and 86 years. All participants were current or former athletes in athletics having competed from regional to international level. They had been coaching for 2.5 to 48 years with an average of 19.4 years. The participants in Finland were ethnic Finns, and in England, all except one participant were ethnic British; one participant was originally from an African country. Seven coached children and adolescents, 11 coached adolescents and young adults, one coached young adults only, one coached young and middle-aged adults, and three coaches were exclusively working with Masters athletes with the official title of a peer instructor. Finally, the Finnish coaches received a small financial compensation for their coaching (whilst the majority considered themselves amateur and volunteer coaches), whereas the coaches in England were not paid for their work.

The first and the second author developed the conceptual background, the methodological approach and the interview guide for the study. Other authors helped to refine the interview guide further, and the first and the fourth author conducted the interviews. The interviews started with a grand tour question "tell me your story of becoming a coach" and then followed up with probes depending on what kind of narratives the participants started developing. Most often, the participants started telling about their athletic careers, and the interviewers invited them to share these stories before moving into the coach story. The participants were also asked to tell about their current sport and physical activities, and whether they had ever competed in Masters athletics or might consider doing that in the future. To discern life scripts, we also asked them to tell when they thought was a good time to retire from athletics. Furthermore, we asked about different athlete pathways in the clubs and whether any of the youth or senior athletes the coaches had worked with had become Masters athletes. The interviews were carried out in Finnish with the Finnish coaches and in English with the coaches in England. They lasted between 35 and 89 min with an average of 59 min.

Data analysis

The first, third and fourth authors coded the interviews inductively, and the first and the third author developed thematic maps and tables to organise the data and further immerse into the content of the stories. The first author then worked with a thematic narrative analysis to understand the main 'whats' or building blocks of the individual stories (Smith, 2016). In line with the narrative approach, each interview was perceived to be unique within its own right, and therefore the focus was first on the internal logic of the stories rather than a cross-case analysis. In reading each story, the first author was asking questions such as: "what are the narrative threads that run through this story? What occurs repeatedly?" (see Smith, 2016). The throughout the analysis, we held frequent author meetings and discussed possible interpretations and tentative connections across the stories, with co-authors acting as critical friends, challenging the first authors' interpretations and highlighting unique themes identified in the analysis. The first and the second author linked the thematic findings to analytical concepts and explored potential theoretical explanations.

As a second analytic step, we employed positioning analysis as outlined by Bamberg (2011). Although Bamberg's main emphasis was on identity construction, he noted that positioning analysis is also illustrative of how the referential world (in this case, Masters athletics) is constructed (Bamberg, 2011). Briefly, positioning analysis explores three levels of the narrative: (1) how different characters of the story are positioned, for example, as winners or losers, in control or helpless, and so forth; (2) how the storytellers position themselves in relation to the audience in this particular interactional setting; and (3) how the storytellers position themselves in relation to master narratives or ideological discourses, thus giving a local answer to who they are, in our case in relation to Masters athletics. Our aim with the positioning analysis was, in conjunction with Fivush's (2010) theorising on voice and silence in relation to life scripts, to understand how coaches navigate master narratives about the sport life and the role of Masters athletics in this picture.

Our approach to rigour is grounded in a realist view where validity is not seen as a product of standardised procedures, but in the

relationship between the researchers' account and those things it is supposed to be an account of (Maxwell, 2012). Following Maxwell's (2017) recommendations, we sought to identify threats to validity in descriptive, interpretive and theoretical levels. For example, translations of the Finnish interviews were discussed between the first and fourth author to enhance descriptive validity, whereas the first, second and fourth authors' involvement in athletics provided additional contextual resources that helped to understand meanings held by subculture insiders (interpretive validity). Theoretical validity – that is, the plausibility of the explanations of the studied phenomenon – was addressed by the first and the second author by exploring alternative conceptual tools and theoretical ideas to explain the phenomenon. The formal peer review offered further critical commentary from reviewers that helped us to explore further theorising and empirical findings that supported or challenged our account. However, given the theory-laden nature of knowledge, we accept that other equally valid readings from alternative theoretical lenses are also possible.

Results

The stories from coaches in both national contexts were underpinned by a master narrative that constructed competitive athletics as a project of youth. The participants could be either reinforcing the master narrative or working to destabilise it and construct an alternative narrative. Either way, narrative constructions worked to portray Masters athletics as a competition for the 'lesser' or not 'real' athletes. Twelve coaches expressed little interest in participating in Masters athletics, 10 coaches had done so or could consider participating in the future, and one coach was ambiguous. The responses were almost equally distributed by country; however, there were different patterns in the narrative constructions of Masters athletics and the reasons (not) to consider participation. The Finnish athletics club had a separate section and training groups for Masters athletics, and almost all Finnish coaches who were eligible had been asked to compete for their club as a Masters athlete. In contrast, the club in England did not have a section or specific coaching for Masters athletics, but some coaches had athletes who were qualified to compete in Masters competitions (i.e., over 35 years of age) in their training groups.

Only in a few cases, the reasons to reject Masters sport were primarily related to physical (i.e., injury) constraints; instead, the coaches' identity claims and ideological discourses were more important for understanding their lack of enthusiasm. The following analysis focuses on narrative strategies and not on specific persons; at times, coaches could be telling a combination of these stories in making sense of themselves in relation to Masters athletics.

'It is not my thing': Elite sport as the only 'real' sport

Those coaches who had competed in national level senior competitions or strongly aspired to do so mostly constructed an elite athlete identity which was incompatible with Masters competition. The stories were aligned with the masternarrative of ageing-as-decline that centres on the loss of athletic performance as described in several previous studies (Dionigi, 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007). The coaches constructed several reasons to reject Masters sport, including the view of Masters athletics as 'the third division', loss of desire to compete, lacking the embodied sensation of high performance and not being able to reach one's best results. For example, Sami (late 20s, Finland) explained:

> *I've had the expectation that I should be achieving a lot in sport. When you can really be a top athlete in your sport… if we're honest about it, I don't have a lot of respect for Masters sport.*

The identity claims of being a high-performance athlete were constructed in opposition to Masters sport athlete identity, which was clearly the 'other', the 'lesser' athlete. For example, although Peter (70s, England) slightly deviated from the ideal script of sport as a project of youth, was quick to correct the interviewer to disassociate himself from Masters athletics:

> *Peter: … and I carried on [competing] until I was 50.*
> *Interviewer: so you continued until you were a veteran?*
> *Peter: so I mean – I did not compete in the veterans, I competed in open competitions. I was still making the teams and… [Masters sport], it is very good for the health of the nation. But it is managing decline (…) If you are good enough to compete, compete in open competition.*

Although these coaches disassociated themselves from Masters athletics, most of them had maintained recreational exercise activities. Some Finnish coaches also took part in mass jogging or skiing events. The sport for all ideology, prominent in the Nordic countries, provided an alternative narrative resource to 'fall back on' to restory sport-related self-narratives that were now firmly based on participation rather than performance. Jari (50s, Finland) explained his current identity position:

> *Jari: Well I never stopped recreational activities. I like to go for a run. The spark has been there since I was a child.*
> *Interviewer: and is it only recreation or are you still interested in local competitions or something like that?*
> *Jari: no, I'm not interested in competing against others, no. But I can go to a mass jogging event once a year or something. But competing against others, it's not my thing anymore.*

Finally, although the coaches' stories did not fall into neat categories based on the national context, the coaches in Finland often had more thoroughly considered their position; in England, some coaches rejected Masters athletics very bluntly with few explanations offered – perhaps because they did not have as diverse narrative resources as the Finns had for doing so. Furthermore, the coaches like Carl (80s, England) who simply dismissed Masters athletes as "a bit funny", were likely to be from older generations who had grown up in times before the successful and active ageing discourses were introduced. The normative discourse of sport as something that is preserved for young people is illustrated by John (50s, England):

> *Interviewer: do you ever think about getting back into competing or racing again?*
> *John: no I am too old… I am too old.*
> *Interviewer: but you still have people running who are 70 years old. So why not? Is it just not that interesting for you?*
> *John: No, just doesn't interest me.*

"I would like to challenge myself into that again": Masters athletics as a 'second chance'

Most coaches open to the idea of taking part in Masters athletics in the future had competed as junior athletes but disengaged from the sport before reaching their hypothetical peak of physical performance. These coaches were more often from the younger generations and many mentioned being used to seeing Masters athletes training at the sport facilities. Starting anew as a Masters athlete was constructed as 'a second chance' to compete and measure one's performance, mainly in comparison to oneself, and with the prospect of doing better than in the first athletic career. Jonna (late 20s, Finland) explained:

> *At that time [age of 13] I also had other hobbies (…) I felt I should have come to training more often in order to do well. And so that's how I stopped doing athletics. But I have regretted later! (…) At the moment, I've been thinking about Masters athletics, [I would like] to be able to compete again and see what I can still do.*

For most of these coaches, there was no 'burden' of stepping down from their previous competitive level or seeing their results significantly decline; although some of them had been goal-oriented junior

athletes, they had not experienced an elite athletic career. 'The second chance', however, was not considered merely as 'health management' as constructed by many coaches who rejected Masters athletics, but a possibility to challenge oneself in record production again:

Taru (20s): Well, it is wholly about challenging myself, but I have high goals for myself in terms of the results. I need to do better than what I did as a junior. In athletics, there are very clear results that I would try to reach. (…) I might not continue if I cannot do that (laughing).

From the coaches, three were regular competitors in Masters athletics. Their stories conformed to the previous studies illustrating multiple meanings of Masters sport as a serious life project, a hobby, a health-related activity, and a socially-oriented practice. However, making a comeback had required rejecting the life script of sport as a project of youth and accessing new narrative resources about athletics. Heli (40s, Finland) reflected:

A bit more than five years ago, I couldn't imagine myself being an athlete again. Now I've started again in Masters athletics and I also compete. [But before that], I never thought of athletics as a sport that you can do as a hobby. Either you compete or you don't compete. Either you are elite and active, or you are not an athlete at all.

Heli's story confirmed the dominance of the elite sport narratives in the athletics subculture and described how these narratives had limited the choices she could see open for her.

While the three Masters athletes were all international level competitors, they tended to downplay their identity claims. Hanna, a medallist from international Masters competitions, offered: "It is, of course, also a hobby, but it has become goal-oriented, so I do feel like I am some kind of an athlete…" That is, despite her achievements, she positioned herself as 'some kind of' athlete who was still in some way not a 'real' athlete. The construction of Masters sport as an activity for 'other people' than the 'real' athletes was also evident in Harri's (40, Finland) reflections on (dis)continuity of different careers in athletics:

I'm thinking, about the people I've coached… I don't remember [if anyone became a Masters athlete]. Oh well, in its own way, yes. I had athletes of different levels, athletes who never made it to the national championships, some of them might continue. Does that count? But then, most often, Masters sport is for people other than those who already tried to reach their limits.

"We always ask for people to become officials": The normative life career in athletics

Especially in the English club the coaches often turned the question of Masters athletics to the lack of officials and coaches. For them, the normative life career in athletics started from being an athlete in youth and then transition to coaching, officiating and other volunteer roles in the club. Similar to those who rejected Masters sport as not 'a real' sport, the coaches who developed this normative life career script were likely to be older coaches who valorised the traditional amateur culture of athletics and felt a strong duty to keep it alive. Several coaches in England worried about the growing difficulty of getting volunteers to run the competitions, coaching and other club activities, suggesting that Masters athletics could be to blame for that:

John (50s, England): The problem with Masters athletics is that – the reason there is a lack of officials and coaches, is because a lot of athletes are still competing. That would actually be more beneficial to the club if they moved from being athletes themselves and moved towards being coaches.

The Western life script which prescribes the life course as starting from individual exploration and achievement and later shifting to other-oriented, generative activities shaped the narrative constructions of Masters athletics. Being focused on one's own athletic career was the privilege afforded to young people, whereas the lack of volunteers was potentially 'caused' by older peoples' 'selfish' choices to continue pursuing their own athletic career. Many older coaches also positioned themselves as those fulfilling a duty to the community and helping others, aligning with Western life scripts emphasising generative activities as the task of middle adulthood and later life. Mark (50s, England) explained:

If I'm being completely honest, I am probably here because I feel committed to be here. There are no other coaches around [in my event], there's nobody to take over. There's nobody that assists me, and if I'm not here sessions don't happen.

Implicitly, the stories contained a notion of Masters athletics as a selfish activity as the older athletes were deviating from the life career in athletics by possibly not 'giving back' to the club and the new generation of young athletes.

In the Finnish club, those involved in Masters sport similarly recognised an expectation to give back to their club. They maintained that they were actively contributing and not a burden for their club. Anna (50s, Finland) explained:

Masters athletes bring membership payments, officials to events, and also their children to do youth sport. And so that gives it continuity. That works well and we can also get instructors from our own group.

Anna's narrative emerged within a long uninterrupted story, indicating that although she described being very satisfied with her experience in the club, she had to speak up and justify Masters athletes' place in the club. However, volunteering was less frequently taken up as a critical challenge by the coaches in Finland, and there appeared to be a more reciprocal relationship between the younger and older generations and the division of voluntary work in the club. Heli (40s, Finland) offered:

If there's a [Masters] competition in the club, the younger athletes will come and act as officials which also tells us that they value it. And we're always in their competitions acting as officials, and so they value it and in this way we can give back a little bit… This has become a part of our community. I can't speak for all of the athletes, but the culture makes it possible to help each other out if you want to.

Discussion

Our study aimed to understand how coaches position themselves in relation to Masters athletics and the narrative resources they tap into in doing so. In light of literature describing competitive sport an increasingly accepted form of leisure in later life (Gard et al., 2017; Horton et al., 2018), the athletics coaches were surprisingly resistant to Masters athletics. The life script of sport as a project of youth was resilient in prescribing the course of an athletic career (see also Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006, 2007; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2007) and was often perpetuated especially by those who were long-term members and/or leaders of the clubs. The 'second chance' career in Masters sport emerged as an alternative narrative that destabilised this script whilst also preserving youth privilege and prescribing Masters athletics as the sport for not 'real' athletes. Finally, we identified an additional notion of 'a normative life career' in athletics which involved an elite athletic career in early life followed by a transition to coaching and volunteering roles in later life. As such, the narrative conformed to a Western life script where sport fits the individualism of youth, whereas from mid-life onwards the societal expectation is to be responsible for others (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008).

Similar to Partington, Partington, Fishwick, and Allin (2005) and Phoenix and Sparkes (2006, 2007), we suggest that the coaches' stories provide others in the athletics subculture with 'narrative maps' of different life careers in athletics. The distinct 'first' and 'second' athletic career pathways constructed the 'real' athletic career as a project of

youth, whereas the 'second chance' was only considered appealing for those who might not have reached their potential in the first attempt (or had missed it altogether). The 'second chance' offered an opportunity to re-engage in athletics and a narrative map for reconstructing the life career in sport and resembles stories of 'rekindlers' identified by Dionigi (2015). However, despite challenging the notion that older people cannot do competitive sport, the narrative often included an implicit 'failed' first career. Therefore, it does little to challenge the youth privilege and elitist ethos of the athletics subculture. That is, both the elite athlete narrative and the second chance narrative contributed to creating boundaries between the 'real' athletes and Masters athletes, offering very little continuity between the two. As such, our findings differ from Dionigi (2015) who found that approximately half of the Masters athletes she interviewed were 'continuers' in their sport. The difference is possibly related to her interviewees' top level of performance that might not have been elite, which is in line with some of our coaches' narratives constructing Masters athletics a viable choice for those who did not 'reach their limits' in youth. However, the Finnish coaches also mentioned that there was a gap in the pathway for non-elite athletes after junior years, because the training groups for senior athletes focused on elite competition, whereas Masters competitions were only open for people from 30s onward (even if all ages were welcome to join the training groups). Therefore, both ideological and structural boundaries were found to block the continuity of athletes' pathways, positioning different participants as more or less 'real' athletes.

The narrative maps created by some of the coaches also afforded younger people the privilege to focus on their own athletic bodies and achievements but tied middle-aged and older people to societal expectations for other-oriented, generative activity (Phoenix et al., 2007). This narrative map is resistant to Masters athletics because the new social movement is perceived as a threat to the sustainability of volunteer-based athletics clubs, and was more often developed by older coaches who had grown up before the active ageing discourses started to gain traction. The normative life career in athletics which involved the movement from an athlete to a coach was seen to be disrupted by Masters athletes who might prioritise their own training and competition over other-oriented activities within the sport. Coaches' concerns reflect the broader challenges faced by sport clubs in Europe that need to compete fiercely for the time and enthusiasm of their volunteers (Nichols et al., 2005). Especially in England, the sport club volunteers were normatively assumed to be middle-aged and older people. Still wanting to be an athlete in later life was 'off time' in relation to the cultural life scripts prescribing mid- and later life as other-oriented rather than a self-focused period of life (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008).

The higher prevalence of the narrative map on normative life career in athletics in England might be further influenced by structural differences in welfare provisions and working arrangements (e.g., better childcare and more flexible work in Finland) (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). For example, lower childcare costs and better accessibity as well as social approval for formal childcare in Finland (Verhoef, Tammelin, May, Rönkä, & Roeters, 2016) might mean that parents and grandparents were in a better position to pursue leisure activities including Masters sport *and* volunteering in the clubs. The high regard for physically active leisure in Finland (Vehmas, 2010) was also reflected in Finnish coaches' choices to take time for own exercising and physical activity besides work and coaching. The socially endorsed right to pursue sport and exercise activities at any age could be part of why there was less blame on older athletes for being selfish. The Finnish coaches also complained less about the lack of coaches and officials. This could be partly due to the small financial compensation that made coaching positions more desirable to students (who comprised a big part of the coaching workforce in the Finnish club). In addition, there appeared to be more reciprocal arrangements in officiating where junior, senior and Masters athletes acted as officials in each other's competitions.

Overall, most coaches drew on two dominant discourses of ageing and sport as described by Eichberg (2009), constructing Masters sport either as a way to combat decline or a pursuit of record production. Both these modes of being could be viewed as variants of successful ageing, where sport and exercise in later life was considered vital for sustaining physical functioning or active engagement in life. Overall, the dominant constructions of sport across the lifespan were rationalistic and instrumental, with sport acting as a vehicle for record production in youth and (most often) health management in later life. The considerations of sport in later life as a potential site for experiencing meaningfulness and self-discovery (as in harmonious or conscious ageing) or embodied pleasure (Phoenix & Orr, 2014) were notably absent from the participants' stories. As such, the narrative maps developed by the coaches offered limited resources for thinking and feeling about the role of sport across the lifespan, excluding the potential of sport to offer avenues for joy and spiritual development. Working to help broaden coaches' own narrative resources further to create more diverse narrative maps and inclusive sporting spaces could be done, for example, through coach education and sport science courses. Coach education in various sports in Finland and the UK demands the coaches to articulate a coaching philosophy, and introducing reflective questions about ageing and the meaning and value of sport across the lifespan could be incorporated into this task.

In focusing on two athletics clubs which also have local ideologies (see, e.g., Heinilä, 1989) that are likely to be shaped by other narratives including gender, social class and ethnicity, our study cannot provide an estimation of the broader national patterns of how athletics coaches embrace or resist Masters athletics. Furthermore, in our participant recruitment, we noticed that in the English club the older coaches were more likely to respond to our invitation for an interview than the younger coaches, leaving the English sample skewed towards older coaches' interpretations of Masters athletics. However, in focusing on broader narrative patterns and interaction of life scripts with personal and master narratives we believe that our study is credible in mapping the cultural forces influencing coaches' choices of constructing certain narratives and rejecting others.

Conclusions

Masters sport represents one of the new lifestyle choices that were not readily available just a few decades ago. Therefore, making sense of it with modernist sporting narratives and cultural life scripts can be a difficult task. Our study showed that many sport coaches especially from the older generation are still resistant to Masters athletes because they disrupt the traditional narratives associated with ageing. However, we also found that the growing visibility of Masters sport is slowly starting to influence some coaches' life career construction in sport and might be gaining more traction especially in younger generation of coaches influenced by successful and active ageing discourses. The study also highlights that, if governments wish to promote Masters sport, the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility and health benefits alone seems unhelpful. Addressing traditional sport clubs' actual concerns about survival as well as subcultural age-related attitudes and beliefs hindering Masters sport is crucial for developing inclusive sport subcultures that truly encourage active sport participation for all. We are hopeful that, as the alternative stories are becoming more widely known, the normative life script of competitive sport as a project of youth will become increasingly contested, giving way to alternative ways of designing lives in and through sport.

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