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Experiences of a parent-coach: ‘a different ball game’ – an autoethnographic account

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer parent-coaches form a substantive component of the global coaching workforce and their contributions to children’s sporting participation are both vital and commendable. However, despite the role’s importance, it remains under-researched. Accordingly, the purpose of this personal account was to provide insight to the author’s experiences as a volunteer grassroots football (soccer) parent-coach in England. This novel autoethnographical approach reflects on my entry into the parent-coach role, in situ experiences, and culminates with my decision to step back, encompassing my entire tenure as a volunteer parent-coach over a seven-year period. Social, biographical, relational, cultural, emotional, and (micro)political experiences are explored, as I reflect on the challenges, enjoyment, and unease I encountered. The paper aims to provide readers with a greater awareness and deeper understanding of the role and includes implications for both prospective and current parent-coaches. Further, this contribution also ponders whether the parent-coach workforce is being adequately prepared for the complexities and challenges of the dual parent-coach role through formal coach education.

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Introduction

Reflecting on my own sporting participation as a young boy playing grassroots football, I can vividly remember the coach’s son referring to his dad (our coach) by his first name, rather than ‘dad’. At the time, I remember thinking this was a bit odd. Indeed, children’s initial sporting experiences are often facilitated by volunteer parent-coaches that have a child interested in a particular sport or activity. These introductory sporting experiences can shape children’s future sporting engagement. There is both a historical and global reliance on volunteer parent-coaches, including: Australia (Elliott & Drummond, 2017), Canada (KurtzFavero et al., 2023), the United States of America (Witt & Dangi, 2018), and Scandinavia (Eliasson, 2019; Kilger, 2020). Of course, coaching, in general, is challenging, but the dual role of parent *and* coach has greater complexity (Eliasson, 2019, *inter alia*). Interestingly, however, while parent-coaches form a substantive part of the international coaching workforce, it has been asserted that the role has received limited global attention (Zehnter et al., 2020). This, combined with the under-researched context of grassroots football (O’Gorman, 2016), and the adoption of a rarely used methodological approach in sport coaching, aims to provide a more tangible insight

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of a parent-coach's lived experiences. As such, it is believed that this paper offers the first parent-coach autoethnographical scholarship of its kind in grassroots football.

I think it is relevant here for me to declare that I have an extensive coaching and teaching background and practitioner-researcher (or coach-scholar) experience. My coaching experiences have spanned four decades, and I have practiced in a variety of sports, countries, and coaching domains (Lyle, 2002), including: university, professional youth academies, participation, and disability/special educational needs (SEN) contexts. As such, this probably afforded me a coaching 'head-start' and 'heads-up' prior to commencing the parent-coach role. However, the parent-coach role is imbued with additional (micro)political, familial, and relational complexities. For example, the parent-coach's coaching *and* personal relationship with their own child; a shift in the child's identity and peer group (e.g. to being known as 'the coach's child'), familial relationships, and third-party parental relations (see Witt & Dangi, 2018, *inter alia*).

Research has described the parent-coach role as 'invidious' (Elliott & Drummond, 2017) and implies it has received an 'unproblematic presentation' (Zehnter et al., 2020). It has also been suggested (e.g. Eliasson, 2019) that pre-existing scholarship overlooks educational and sociological frameworks and non-elite team sports, through a psychological dominance that centres on elite level individual athletes and sports. To this end, it is perhaps understandable that scholarship has underplayed the role's complexities and practical challenges. Clearly, then, autoethnographical approaches that may offer rich insight for prospective and current parent-coaches are overdue. Therefore, I aim to offer a deeper understanding of the parent-coach role through my reflections on my authentic in situ personal experiences over seven years. It is hoped that my personal narrative offers prospective and current parent-coaches and coach developers greater insight to the complexities and challenges associated with this unique role.

Methodology

Why autoethnography?

Over two decades ago, seminal qualitative researcher, Andrew Sparkes (2002), encouraged adventurous and bold scholarship to enable authors to write evocatively about their experiences in sport. In recent years we have seen psychology and sociology become more experimental with storytelling genres to aid accessibility, meaning, and impact for wider audiences (see Smith et al., 2015; Sparkes, 2020, 2024). Although there are nuanced typologies and approaches, autoethnography typically involves personalised and revealing writing where researchers offer stories about their lived experiences and relate the personal to the cultural (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To this end, storytelling in sport coaching can offer bespoke and contextualised insights of practitioners' authentic experiences. In this regard, Jones (2006) referred to this type of scholarship as a more 'faithful' insight to coaches' realities. Related scholarship in football has included grassroots (e.g. Potrac et al., 2016), national age-group (Jones, 2009), and semi-professional contexts (e.g. Jones, 2006; Potrac et al., 2012). Clearly, these approaches offer originality and contextual relevance beyond orthodox academic expectations (Sparkes, 2002). Further, if done 'well', autoethnography can invoke emotions, be evocative, and aid self-reflexivity and future practice through deeper understanding and enable readers to 'viscerally' inhabit the research context (Jones, 2006; Sparkes, 2020; Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Winkler, 2018).

Ethics and concerns

I had never previously written an autoethnography and after I stepped down from the parent-coach role, I began an in-depth exploration of the method and its ethical processes. I initially grappled with creative fiction and non-fiction but decided that I wanted my account to be personal with no consciously fictionalised elements. I liaised at length with my university's ethics

department as, whilst I was not naming individuals, I was potentially identifying people through their association with me, and without their consent (Sparkes, 2017, 2024). I felt personal and relational considerations were needed prior to the irreversible commitment to paper (see Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Tullis, 2022) as the method does not avoid implicating others (Sparkes, 2024). Indeed, Sparkes' (2024) work was particularly insightful, and his suggestion that ethical challenges in autoethnographical work are not dissimilar to any other qualitative research approach, in part, reassured me (see also Winkler, 2018). Notwithstanding, I remain surprised that autoethnographical scholarship has and can overlook ethical considerations (see Sparkes, 2024); personally, I hope that my ethical engagement was 'good' practice and offered 'pedagogical value' (Sparkes, 2024; Winkler, 2018).

Procedure and 'data'

Initially, I had never intended my parent-coach experiences to be a research paper. Thus, this autoethnographical account was retrospective and based on my memory and interpretation (cf. Giorgio, 2013; Howard, 2022). Accordingly, participants were not recruited in the conventional sense, and informed consent was not undertaken. However, I considered whether my work would cause dilemmas for me, my family, and others (cf. Ellis, 2000, 2007). Importantly, the decision to not gain retrospective informed consent did not mean that I could not share this work (see Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Tullis, 2022). Andrew's (2017) research also gave me confidence in my attempt to 'shine a spotlight on the blinkers' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 16) of the role and to potentially help others (cf. Jones, 2006). Indeed, Winkler (2018) acknowledges that there is no panacea for the ethical issues and challenges autoethnographical scholarship can offer. As such, 'doing autoethnography, is not easy' (Sparkes, 2024, p. 135).

I position my work as a form of evocative (McMahon, 2016) and emotional (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) autoethnography, aligning in part with what 'character-participants' – namely, 'characters from memory' (Howard, 2022, p. 96) – said and did (see also Giorgio, 2013). The writing process lasted eighteen months. Firstly, I worked through my records on each season in a chronological fashion. I tried to identify the most salient events that impacted either me, my son, or/and family. In other words, what I felt was 'different' to my previous coaching roles, and/or issues that I or we did not expect. I also considered the 'so what' of these points. For example, what could have helped me prior to taking on the role; what could help other coaches and families; what should they be aware of; what could I have done better; and whether coach education could have more impact. As such, my memory and 'physical' data in the form of handwritten notes, diaries, emails, and mobile phone 'whatsapp' and text messages, formed a reciprocal relationship. I also discussed some of the content with my wife.

Essentially, then, this autoethnography is a combination of my autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) embedded in the *social* (Bourdieu, 2000). Biography and ontological and epistemological assumptions, shape all aspects of the research process (Smith, 2013; Watts & Cushion, 2017). Specifically, this work is based on my interpreted autobiographical events that I *think* happened to me (see Denzin, 2014; Sparkes, 2002). Accordingly, my scholarship is guided by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism (Smith, 2013), as I reflect and engage with my extensive lived experiences as a socially situated entity (Denzin, 2014) in a novel attempt to portray my story. Although this narrative is about me, it is also not *just* about me, as it is social, familial, and relational (Ellis, 2007). To this end, there is a related 'polyphonic' element (see Winkler, 2018) that includes my wife and eldest son. An autoethnographer's identity, however, is central and should be honoured alongside their subjectivity, situatedness, and positionality (York, 2021). On one hand, I consider myself to be an 'insider' who has been embedded *in* football culture; conversely, I perhaps also view myself as an 'outsider' in relation to my academic role (Watts, 2020). I am clear on my motives (Andrew, 2017; Gearity, 2014) for writing this work in that I hope it is of interest to readers and helps other prospective and

current parent-coaches, families, and coach developers. Ultimately, I felt that autoethnography was *the* method (Gearity, 2014).

Methodological limitations

General criticisms of autoethnography have included: author narcissism, self-indulgence, 'inferior' research, questionable credibility, limited impact, overlooked by policy-makers, and even whether it is 'proper research' (see Sparkes, 2002, 2020, 2024). Of course, my biography, perceptions, memory, and 'bias' will have affected my scholarship through all stages of the process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and I have selected what content to include and exclude, and others' versions of this story and content may differ (see Purdy et al., 2008). As a reflective and reflexive practitioner and researcher, I acknowledge the methodological and broader limitations. In this regard, I consider whether this work is needed. Will it help parent-coaches, families, and coach developers, and will it reach its demographic? In essence, this work is personal, descriptive, *and* theoretical, but with less emphasis on the latter to hopefully encourage 'broader' readership and impact (cf. Lyle, 2018; Smith et al., 2015).

Rather than 'burying' my emotions and experiences through 'grand theorising', I attempt to present and articulate them in a manner that academics, parent-coaches, and scholar-parent-coaches can all relate to (cf. Jones, 2009). Depending on the reader's disposition, this could be a limitation or a strength. However, although some research has suggested coaches and coach developers can suffer from an anti-intellectual orthodoxy (Watts, 2020, *inter alia*), I am mindful that 'research without theory is blind' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160). Therefore, throughout this autoethnographic work, I intersperse relevant and related empirical findings. Additionally, from a latent perspective, I focus on why I stayed in the role for so long through Bourdieu's (1998) under-used concept of *illusio* and hope my efforts aid readers' 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills, 1959). I concede that my pre-existing knowledge and experience of Bourdieu contributed to this, but his 'interest in disinterestedness' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 49) is relatable to this paper. As such, I have attempted to make transparent, principled, and sincere choices throughout this work, and ultimately readers will form their own views on whether this scholarship is 'good' or not.

Data presentation

'Early doors'

I felt that the dads who had stepped up to form an under-7 team would perhaps struggle. Firstly, they had no coaching experience or qualifications, one appeared *very* confident, and I *knew* that being a neophyte coach was incredibly challenging (see Watts, 2020). I was quite relaxed about our eldest son not being involved in 'organised' sport at six years of age. However, my wife was quite persistent and won ... ! The team's first 'competitive' five-a-side under-7s league match was interesting. My son's team was losing heavily, and several dads (cf. Coakley, 2006) (no mums) rushed over to 'help' the coaches with their half-time team talk (despite not wanting to do the role!). Throughout my forty years of sporting involvement, I had *never* witnessed this. The dads' panic and emotions were palpable; I did find it a little amusing, as there were more adults than children for the half-time team-talk! One mother asked me, 'why have all the others (dads) gone over, but you haven't?' I paused, responding, 'well, I'm not the coach.' In the second half, the previously animated and encouraging parental (and coaching) support became muted. A fifth goal was scored due to my son attempting a 'drag-back' move just in front of his goal-line! Our squad's parents began to subtly 'retreat' from the touchline. Another mother also noticed this, and commented, a 'sociologist would have a field day here'. Yes, I thought – well spotted.

As a parent spectator, I could now empathise with the emotional, vulnerable, and helpless parent on the touchline and *witness* and *hear* my child's post-match perceptions and emotions. The public

nature of coaching enabled me to observe the interactions and behaviours of my child and his coaches. I thought I *knew* how important sport was to children, but it was only when I became a parent that I began to *really* know. Now I *felt* the range and depth of emotions parents experience through their children's sporting participation. As I watched, and my son got closer to the action, I could feel my heart racing; I felt anxious, excited, helpless, and the need to be protective and wanting him to do 'well'. These amplified emotions felt visceral; I felt more responsible and vulnerable as he was my son. Equally, as I observed other parents, I could see some overt emotional behaviours that could sometimes border on the hysterical. I also hoped that I was not subconsciously 'going in for tackles' and 'kicking the ball' vicariously as I had witnessed some parents doing.

I never really had any inclination to be a parent-coach; I wanted to watch and enjoy my son's experience discreetly. I had 'lived' many of the challenges coach's face and felt this role would be *more* complicated. My background also indicated that certain year groups, squads, and parents could be more challenging than others. This may sound 'bad', but I 'sensed' a couple of potential 'red flags' within this setting. For example, some parental touchline comments witnessed included: 'your son's a bit weak'; 'that was his fault'; 'my [name] is carrying the midfield'; to 'what are the coaches doing?' (cf. Witt & Dangji, 2018). Equally, I was aware of the notion that certain parents may focus on their children's 'success' in sport as a 'measure' of their parenting skills, capital, and to reinforce ideals of traditional gender ideology (see Coakley, 2006; 2015). As such, I was more than happy to view from afar! However, after a few months, things changed.

During the squad's first season, it became clear that there were tensions between the two parent-coaches. Consequently, one stood down. Gradually, and not through my own self-promotion, people were becoming aware of my sporting and coaching background. Meanwhile, it appeared to me that some may be having a negative sporting experience due to some inappropriate coaching behaviours. For example, a visibly upset eight-year-old who had been shouted at by the coach during the match: 'don't try those crocodile tears with me, son, I see enough of that with the women at work'. This coach reluctantly stepped down following an emotional pitch-side altercation with one of our parents who felt the coach was abusive towards his son (a different child). Consequently, there was no coach, no volunteers, and potentially no team! Due to my background, I felt under *pressure* (cf. Coakley, 2006) and even morally obligated to offer to help (cf. Kilger, 2020). My wife was also quite persistent and persuasive, saying, 'you'll be great – it will be fun ...'.

My first season (under-8s) with the group felt very positive and enjoyable. We were a 'mixed ability' group that had fun and were competitive against certain grassroots teams who had 'selective' trials. I was proud of this, and of the way the children conducted themselves. During the end-of-season presentation evening, I spoke about each child individually focussing on their progress. I was incredibly nervous. Later that evening my wife said some of the parents (mums *and* dads) were a bit 'wet-eyed'. I said, 'crikey, was I that bad?!' She replied, 'No (!), it was the personal and positive comments you made about every child'. That felt good.

The following year, however, the under-9 season became a little more challenging. Unfortunately, my son had started to experience a few football-related niggles at school (to be discussed later) from two boys in the squad (relating to me doing this role). Even the presentation evening felt a little different. I arrived early to help set up at the local cricket club and one of our parents was there and seemed a little aggrieved. Later that evening, I was informed that the dad had arrived early to check the trophies *before* the presentation had commenced! My guess was he must have felt his son should have received the coaches' 'player of the year' rather than the 'most improved player' award. During my seven-year tenure, I never used to give weekly awards, but perhaps no end of season awards is advisable (although the majority seemed to enjoy this annual tradition). For the record, my son was never awarded the coaches' player of the year but did receive players' player and parents' player awards. On two occasions over the years my co-parent-coaches were adamant he should, but I said, no. I felt (as his dad) that receiving the coaches' award would not help the school situation. I feel somewhat guilty about this, but I felt that receiving recognition from external sources (i.e. not his *dad*) (cf. Eliasson, 2019), would mean a lot (or more) to him, and

remove the focus of his dad being the coach and any perceptions of bias and unfairness (cf. Kurtz-Favero et al., 2023).

On a more positive note, it was lovely to hear a grandad of one of the boys thank me for my 'community work' following the presentation. Similarly, a parental comment, that I hold close to this day, was, 'I don't know how you do it, with some of these people – I would never do it! You would never know that [name] was your son.' The final sentence meant a lot. However, later that evening, another parent (ironically, the son of the grandad!) – who appeared slightly inebriated – and whilst inadvertently showering my face with his saliva, informed me his son should have won a 'special' award. At first, I thought he was joking, but he was not (inwardly, I thought, 'crikey, he's serious!'). I then felt my heart race a little and felt the urge to respond with a spikey comment, but I composed myself. In that moment, I sensed as though I was being used (cf. Witt & Dangi, 2018) rather than appreciated. Another parental comment regarding the 'late' start of our age-group's presentation had also irritated me. My response, 'I have just come straight here from work' did not pre-empt an apology or any noticeable discomfort! While a few days beforehand, another parent had wanted to vote for her own son for the parents' player of the year award – I was shocked by this one, but I did find it a little amusing. As I wiped the saliva off of my face with my sleeve, I began feeling quite down; I walked away and shook my head with my face wearing a wry grin. To my wife's surprise, I said quietly, 'I'm going, you guys stay and enjoy the evening'. However, we all left. As I drove the short journey home (as an a-side, I advocate a clear head and soft drinks for parent-coaches at these events ...), I started to think what the hell I am doing this for. I carried my work bits into the house, feeling even worse that the evening had now ended early for us all.

'Culture club'

I must confess that the monthly club meetings were a chore. The club was wealthy but offered poor training facilities. There were no girls' teams, but we had a girl in our team (although, one parent was not happy about it). The chairman refused my ongoing requests for a club defibrillator as it was 'too much money'. I often found the meetings a little hostile; the club was not a meritocracy. Despite being a grass-roots community environment, winning, as opposed to participation and enjoyment, appeared to be overly important to two coaches, but thankfully not all. Interestingly, both had been tertiary educated; one was a physical education teacher and the other a primary school teacher. I recall a meeting where the former asked, 'what is the best way to *get rid* of one my players'. He added, 'he may have *special needs* and was *ruining* his sessions'. I rarely spoke in meetings, but said, 'well it depends on what your coaching philosophy is?' He did not respond. I was probably a bit naughty here, as I followed up with, 'are you trying to get into champions league next season? This is a community club, and you are coaching under-8s.' A couple of coaches sniggered, but the room remained silent. The coach never spoke or acknowledged me again.

The primary school teacher's tenure ended in less than two seasons following a heated pitch-side altercations with his *own* team's parents! There had been murmurings about this coach. For example, several parents witnessed him telling a six-year-old 'if you do not *tackle*, we will lose the game because of *you*'. In contrast, I saw other parent-coaches who were excellent role models, and really cared about children's enjoyment, development, and well-being. Based on my experiences, parent-coaches who are *intrinsically* motivated may well find the role far more challenging than those adopting a 'win-at-all-costs' approach. Society is truly indebted to these types of volunteers.

'Everything changes'

I am a private person, but when I became a parent-coach, this became harder. Walking my children to and from school became less enjoyable. Often, I would be stopped and asked football-related questions, and whilst it was probably innocent, I just felt that this invaded my privacy. Admittedly, there were also a couple of parents I would try to avoid due to the loaded nature of their questions; I

felt as though my identity as a dad was being replaced as their 'child's coach'. Although I was cognisant of a relational identity change (see Eliasson, 2019), I perhaps under-estimated, or simply had not expected, that *certain* parents seemed to think it was my 'job'. Conversely, I saw other parent-coaches who appeared to thrive on the additional attention and changing identity. I didn't.

'How was school today?' 'It was okay' my son replied. On reflection, I was fortunate that my son seemed robust towards some of the 'football chat' that now appeared to be a part of his school day. He was receiving negative personal and football-related comments (about us both) from a couple of boys; one day, however, he came home puzzled, as one of the boy's also declared, 'I wish my dad was like your dad'. Quite a lot for an eight-year-old to contend with during school; however, it bothered *me* more than him, I think. I felt guilty and responsible that I had put him in this position (cf. Eliasson, 2019), and I was aware this could happen from the outset; my wife simply struggled to comprehend how children could act like this. I suggested that some children were probably relaying some of their parents' thoughts (cf. KurtzFavero et al., 2023; Witt & Dangi, 2018). For example, one dad (the former coach) tried to ridicule me at school pick-up as my son was one of the 'angels' and apparently 'looked like a girl' in the Christmas nativity. The comment amused me, and I smiled, saying, 'well, he looked like he really enjoyed it'. Until this point, a coaching role had never impacted me and my family in this way. I recall saying to my wife, 'you couldn't make this stuff up!' I also shared some of my experiences with my PhD supervisor; his head rocked back as he laughed, adding, 'this would be great data ...!'

My son was really enjoying his football and his skills had started to improve significantly. His progress had also not gone unnoticed by others, and during the under-9 season I had been 'accused' (jokingly, but seriously, I think) by two dads of giving my son 'extra training', as we had been spotted *playing* in the local park. They genuinely seemed to feel that he was receiving some sort of unfair advantage ... My wife and I could not comprehend people could *think* let alone *say* this. After the comments, we would often drive our children to a park outside of our village to 'play'. Admittedly, this may seem extreme, but I was conscious the comments would be filtered down to their own children and impact our son at school. I said to my wife, 'this is why I didn't want to get involved'. Of course, this did not go down too well; however, I had, in fact, *under-estimated* the role's complexities.

On the whole, coaching, match-days, and tournaments remained enjoyable. However, a notable memory was the strategic substitution of my son to avoid him taking a penalty in a tournament semi-final. It is another decision that makes me feel slightly guilty, but one I made due to the school situation. The tournament followed a particularly bad week at school; his form teacher had called me as a result of 'targeting' from two boys ['team-mates'] that was football related. She had also called the boys' parents. At the time, my thoughts were what would school be like if he misses the penalty? It would be brutal. Reflecting as I write now, I think to myself (a) what a horrible position to be in; and (b) was it the best thing to do? Ironically, one of the perpetrators missed the decisive penalty, and we were knocked out. As I drove home, I thought at least my son cannot be targeted at school for missing *the* penalty. Equally, though, my son could have scored and been the 'hero' and the whole team could have got to their first final ...

I had now decided to have a conversation with one of the boy's parents (his son was the other perpetrator). Firstly, I telephoned him to discuss the calls from school, but he felt his son had done nothing wrong. However, later that evening, he emailed me a lengthy account exonerating his son but blaming his son's best friend. I wondered what the other child's parents would make of this, as they were friends socially. From here, I arranged to meet the dad after a match, but he rambled an excuse and rushed off to his car with an impressive turn of pace. I subsequently arranged to meet him 20 minutes before training, but he did not turn up until training started! Frustrating, but the conversation was going to happen. I simply wanted to ask, 'why is your son targeting [name] about our football at school?' Is there something I or my son had done? So, I called him over to speak with me during the session – not ideal, perhaps, but no escape route this time. He probably did not like it, as other parents could observe from afar. He now preceded to explain that he did not

know why his son was doing this, but he would 'have a word', but added, 'he could not guarantee it would stop'. I reminded him of the codes of conduct parents and children sign each season – he became a bit agitated and blurted out 'but they're only nine'. Calmly, I replied, 'so at what age should kids start behaving respectfully?' Unbeknown to me, my son had come over – he said, 'is everything okay, dad?' 'Yes, all fine, buddy', and the parent scuttled off.

The ugly

I enjoyed being 'on the grass', but following a Sunday morning match, I saw a rather aggrieved and aggressive looking parent walking onto the pitch towards me. I recall it being very cold, but he was sweating profusely (I joked inwardly, thinking, he must have had a good Saturday night ...). Clearly invading my personal space, he asked me why I had subbed his son. I reminded the parent I had gone onto the pitch to treat his 'injured' son. He was 'on the edge' of losing it, and so I lowered my kit bags in case I needed to defend myself. I then said, 'Have you asked your son *why* he came off?' – he had not. I informed him that his son had *asked* me to come off due to his 'knock'. The dad then went quiet. I was not happy, and said, 'I am a volunteer – if you do not like what I do find another team; or maybe we can swap places, you coach.' He did not offer an answer.

Sadly, the worst was yet to come. The following season we were coping and performing superbly against an aggressive and notoriously unpleasant opposition. The young referee was being abused by their coaches and players, and similar insults were even being made towards our parents and grandparents! I was so proud of our team; they stood up to the bullying and intimidation. However, towards the end of the game, as we were leading by four goals, things deteriorated. One of our boys (my son) was 'tackled' [assaulted, really] – he flew in the air for what seemed to be an age and landed on his hand, breaking his thumb. The 'tackler' celebrated. Less than a minute later, one of the opposition's substitutes ran onto the pitch, taking out one of our boys from behind, leaving him with a concussion. We then abandoned the game. Their coach then strutted over to me – he clearly wanted to fight ...! Pure insanity. In hindsight, we probably should have abandoned the game earlier. Could I have avoided this? I felt terrible. I detest all types of bullies, and we went from humiliating them (in the *right* way) to having two children going to hospital. Where was the justice? Meanwhile, the visibly shaken fourteen-year-old referee rapidly cycled off to escape the irate coach. Why was no-one there for him – he's only a child? He was found near the car park in tears, and we helped him. That evening, I called his mother. She said her son had 'locked himself in his bedroom' and 'wouldn't come out for three hours', adding 'he is never refereeing again'. At least he was *talking* to her, I thought. I called again the following day to check in on him; his mum really appreciated the call. Grassroots football and *children's* sport at its ugliest ...

Coaching 'team'

Prior to the under-12 season, my coaching colleague – one of the original under-7s coaches – had decided to take his son (a strong player), to another team. A couple of parents and boys seemed vulnerable as the team would be 'weaker', but I was fine with this. However, he also wanted me to move my son with him – he felt they were 'being held back'. Whether this was genuine or not, I do not know; it could have been a strategic manoeuvre to protect him and his son potentially copping any flak. Anyway, they moved on, and I inherited the assistance of a new parent. The new dad was quiet and reflective and had always been complimentary of my approach; I had noticed he would often stand by himself during matches. He was a breath of fresh air and over the next couple of seasons we really felt like a 'coaching team'. After his first month and club meeting, he said, 'being on this side is so different'. He added, 'you don't get the *experts*, the politics, the stirring, and the club is awful'. I joked, 'yes, you're on the dark side now – this is a *different ball*

game'. We shared similar ideas on community football and liaised with the children and parents to propose a move to a neighbouring village club who re-invested funds back to the children, had better winter training facilities, had a defibrillator (!), and seemed to portray more of a holistic approach. Apart from one parent, everyone agreed and seemed happy, so we went ahead.

On the field, the under-13 season went well. My new coaching colleague inadvertently afforded me a 'distancing' strategy (see Eliasson, 2019) from my son, where I now had a 'ring-side seat' of my son enjoying a coaching relationship with him. The only negative was that my son – at times – was still experiencing some bizarre behaviour towards him (still football-related), now at secondary school. Towards the end of the season, I had spoken to my coaching partner about him leading the next season with me assisting him. He agreed to lead the under-14s season, but there was a caveat. Lots of children attended training, and we already had 17 'signed' players, to the extent we could potentially have two teams. He wanted to lead a 'more committed' squad with my assistance and a parent would need to step forward to run the other team. I was a bit torn by this but being an assistant following five years of leading everything felt very attractive!

During a post-training meeting, the current parents and children were all spoken to regarding the proposal for the under-14s season. Parents and players were invited to offer their thoughts over the subsequent three weeks. Those who did offer feedback were very positive. Following the three-week period, we returned to training after an Easter break. Less than an hour before the training session, I received a voicemail. It was from one of the dads who said, 'some of us are not happy with how this has been handled so our kids are leaving and joining [the former club] to start a new team'. Not a lot of notice (!), no conversation, but a voicemail ...

Mixed emotions – the final whistle

The under-14s proved to be my final season. The atmosphere was even more positive now. In addition, there was no longer hostility from *certain* boys towards new children training with us. Historically, if new children were 'different' or not 'known' to *certain* children and parents, it seemed to be a problem for them. In fact, the parental touchline positioning often mirrored certain children's integration behaviours. During the under-12s season, I had even over-heard a snide racist comment from one boy to his close buddy in relation to a new boy. However, they had gone, and for many there was a feeling of 'good riddance'. Nonetheless, I was done and needed a break. I also felt guilty that I was not spending enough 'quality' time with my younger son, too. My coaching colleague also wanted a break. We received a lot of gratitude from the group and asked for new volunteers to take the team forward. Unfortunately, there were no takers, and sadly the team folded. A year later – and to my surprise – I received a 'whatsapp' message from a mother of one of the boys:

Hi [name], I hope you are well. Just wanted to let you know that [son's name] just played a match and it was all a bit unpleasant. He [her son] was talking in the car on the way home about how you would have dealt with it and what you would have said to your team. Just wanted to say thanks for being such a great influence, [her son's name] really learned a lot from you about how to behave and how to deal with situations in a controlled, diplomatic way. You were an awesome coach.

I had not seen or heard from this parent and child for over a year, and I toyed with including this message, as I am mindful of the self-indulgent undertone, but it happened, and it was humbling.

Reflections

Why didn't you just stop ... ?

Admittedly, there were several occasions over the years when I wanted to stop doing the role. During the under-10 season, I even recall my son even saying, 'Dad, I'd understand if you want stop – don't feel you need to keep doing it because of *me*'. However, I felt it was not as straightforward as this. Crucially, what would the implications be for *him* if I stopped doing the role? How would this impact

school? People would quickly forget that I had given several years (as a volunteer) to *their* children, and ironically had prevented the team from folding all those years ago. Equally, however, from a purely coaching perspective, I had enjoyed working with the group and giving additional opportunities for *any* children to come along and train with us. Selfishly (if this is the right word), I had also seen my own son rapidly progress, and he would often say that he really ‘enjoyed’ my coaching sessions and he had only improved so much because I was his coach (cf. Eliasson, 2019). Well, he *said* this ... ! Fortunately, he also seemed to be mature and robust (to my knowledge) to some of the nonsense he encountered. It was his parents who were more aggrieved ...

From a latent perspective Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) can help to explain my decision to continue with the role for so long and therefore ‘stay in the *game*’ (Watts, 2020). In essence, *illusio* remains an under-utilised concept in sport coaching (see Watts et al., 2021a), but is useful when considering social practice and is described as ‘speaking of interest’ (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 76–77; Bourdieu, 2001) and helps to advance and bring the ‘undiscussed into discussion’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168). Accordingly, *illusio* relates to conscious awareness, agency, and considers one’s environmental investment and commitment, through emotions, values, beliefs, and caring (see Colley, 2012; Colley & Guéry, 2015). I was consciously aware that I had *reluctantly* entered the *field* (cf. Bourdieu, 1990) and role, and *illusio* can offer insight as to *why* I *continued* (cf. Colley & Guéry, 2015; Watts et al., 2021a).

Essentially, my main ‘interest’ in *continuing* the role for so long was my son’s school experience and happiness; I felt really ‘trapped’ along with a sense of injustice and subjugation. My ongoing commitment to the role and the core reason why I continued to ‘invest’ in its ‘stakes’ (i.e. ‘value’) was that I (and my wife) felt it could be more problematic for *him* if I stepped back (cf. Colley & Guéry, 2015); my *illusio* was for him and we perceived the stakes too great to leave. At the same time, I really enjoyed coaching my son and the group; the situation felt incredibly unfair and was affecting me. We never had a ‘cross-word’ in seven years. I always tried to separate ‘coach’ and ‘dad’ (cf. Kilger, 2020), and latterly the ‘distancing strategy’ (Eliasson, 2019) was valuable. More than ever before, I think I *felt* and witnessed the positive and negative forces of children’s primary socialisation and the shaping of their predispositions resulting from family settings and cultures through childhood. In relation to this, my biography, habitus (Bourdieu, 1988, 1990), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) may have been a strength *and* a weakness (i.e. a ‘problem’ for some). Bourdieu (1988) referred to sport pedagogy as an area where the problematic nature of the relationship between theory and practice ‘arises in a most acute form’ (p 160). Maybe I was *too* different to certain individuals, and thought, acted, and practiced (cf. Bourdieu, 1988, 1990) in a way they were unfamiliar with? Had I been on the receiving end of a form of fragile masculinity (cf. Coakley, 2006, 2015)? Was there concerted cultivation occurring (from certain parents *and* perhaps me) (cf. Vincent & Maxwell, 2016)? Was there jealousy? However, despite the challenges, the majority were extremely grateful and happy.

Reflective thoughts

My son and I encountered a number of identity-related, relational, familial, and (micro)political challenges; however, this is not to say this will be the case for all parent-coaches. Nonetheless, I do feel the role becomes a ‘job’ and comes with greater pressure (for the parent *and* the child), responsibility, demands, and even scrutiny (cf. KurtzFavero et al., 2023, *inter alia*). Reflecting on this now, and during the time, this in itself was not necessarily always a ‘bad’ thing, it actually aided my reflective and reflexive thinking. I became *more* sensitive to relational and (micro)political challenges, (self-)aware, conscious of my practice, group members, parents, and my child. Whilst all of my coaching roles have ‘come home with me’ to varying degrees – something I am sure fellow coaches can empathise with – the parent-coach role was *at home* with *us* and kind of infiltrated our family and home. Sometimes this was great, sometimes it was not – but it *felt* different. The parent-

coach role amplified the *personal* and the *emotional* for me, my wife, and my son. Fortunately, these shared experiences perhaps made our relationships and bonds *even* stronger.

Despite my coaching experience, and the array of challenges and intrinsic rewards experienced, I encountered new, complex, and unexpected dilemmas. I honestly did not expect my son to be targeted by a couple of the children and for this to impact his school-life. I did not expect to receive calls and messages from certain parents, suggesting certain children should not play, or they did not want their child to play *alongside* another boy, or there was a non-football-related altercation, and a boy should be banned. I did not expect a phone-call following a visit to hospital with my son from a parent 'gloating' that his son was 'tough' and did not get hurt. I did not expect two adults to contact me to 'tell tales' about their touchline buddy for criticising a coaching decision! After stopping, I did not expect my wife to say she now felt more more relaxed watching our son (i.e. she *felt* less anxious and enjoyed it more, highlighting the impact on one's spouse as the non-coaching parent).

Considering many volunteer parent-coaches start out in these contexts, as well as the dual-role's uniqueness and 'greater' complexities (see Zehnter et al., 2020, *inter alia*), I do think more work could be done in coach education to raise awareness of the cultural, emotional, (micro)political, relational, identity, and familial elements. This supports and builds on empirical findings with parent-coaches in a variety of youth sports in Sweden (e.g. Eliasson, 2019), Australia (e.g. Elliott & Drummond, 2017), and Canada (e.g. KurtzFavero et al., 2023). Based on my experiences, I do think that the clear delineation of being a 'parent' and 'coach' are vital. In addition, resonating with 'coaching' more broadly, being self-aware and mindful of fairness (cf. Eliasson, 2019) towards all children *and* your own child (cf. KurtzFavero et al., 2023). We did not offer specific equal playing time (perhaps we should have), but we did ensure all children would play at least half of every match (this was a problem for certain parents who felt some children did not deserve this as they 'weren't good enough'). Perhaps an agreement (from the outset) to offer a season or two in the role is sensible. That way, other parents are aware this is *voluntary*, and there is an expectancy that others may need to step forward in the future and can prepare (and/or 'shadow') in advance. I also feel that the club's philosophy, culture, facilities, medical provision, and the use of codes of conduct are important considerations. Ultimately, and perhaps most significant, is a conscious understanding of 'why' you are stepping forward to take up this role.

Concluding thoughts

It was incredibly difficult to condense and select experiences over seven years into a single paper. However, despite being a snapshot, I believe this work offers something new to the sport coaching literature and so long as children continue to play organised sport, the parent-coach will remain topical. The intention was to provide readers with a personal insight to the realities of being a volunteer parent-coach in grassroots football (and hopefully it helps, forewarns, and does not scare people off ... ?!) (cf. Elliott & Drummond, 2017). I hope its originality, authenticity, and evocative content are engaging for readers, and while personal I believe it relates to the culture and these things can and have happened to other parent-coaches (cf. Eliasson, 2019; Jones, 2006). Throughout the paper, I have aimed to share some highs and lows, offering honesty, vulnerability, uncertainty, and guilt; though challenging, I also found the writing process to be cathartic and emancipatory (Jones, 2009; Muncey, 2010; Sparkes, 2002, 2024). My intention is to offer a balanced account whilst providing homage to my identity, subjectivity, positionality, and the interrogation of socio-cultural and political phenomena (York, 2021). I am *interested* rather than *concerned* (see Potrac et al., 2012), of what readers will make of *me* as a person and this story. Nonetheless, I do hope that this work offers no hurt or harm to others (Tullis, 2022).

Although there were many enjoyable and satisfying moments associated with helping the group over the years, I found the (micro)political nature and relational complexities of the parent-coach role – rather than the coaching – to probably be the most challenging and emotional I have

experienced. Despite my background, nothing had adequately prepared me for many of these areas. Ironically, I was probably as experienced and qualified as I had ever been throughout my learning journey, yet at times it was a struggle. Admittedly, perhaps I made some poor decisions; perhaps I was too sensitive and/or over-analytical; perhaps I was a bit unlucky? Either way, I do hope this work enables us to consider how we help, prepare, guide, and educate this integral and substantive demographic of the global coaching workforce (cf. Jones, 2009; KurtzFavero et al., 2023; Watts et al., 2021b). Finally, I hope that my in situ approach goes some way towards offering a richer and deeper understanding of this complex, vital, yet under-researched coaching role. Similarly, I hope it enhances readers' sociological sensibilities (cf. Jones, 2006), gets 'behind the curtain' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 297), and goes some way towards responding to calls for greater academic attention (e.g. Elliott & Drummond, 2017; KurtzFavero et al., 2023; Zehnter et al., 2020) to be afforded to this unique dual-role. As I reflect on my introductory sentence, where I provide the example of my team-mate and friend calling his dad (our coach) by his first name, I now know – and I hope readers will – that it was not 'odd' at all.

Closing remarks

Prior to submitting this manuscript for review, I asked my wife and son to read it. I wanted their thoughts on the content and whether they felt comfortable with this work potentially being in the public domain. My son – now well into his teenage years – took the final draft to his room. He came into my study late in the evening with the copy. I was sat at my desk. He said, 'It's really good, dad. I felt a bit sorry for you at the time, but I feel even more sorry now!' He added, 'parts are quite funny ... you could have written loads more'. He then reminisced over his infamous 'drag-back', the 'ugly', and asked me who the inebriated parent was! As he went to leave the room, he stopped, adding, 'I was annoyed that you subbed me in that semi-final, but I understand, now!' As he left, I said, 'are you sure you're okay with it?' He replied, 'yes, it's about you'.

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