Coaching and ethical self-creation: problematizing the “efficient tennis machine”

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

In this paper we draw from Foucault, particularly his writings on the \textit{technologies of self}, to problematize and reimagine understandings of what it means to coach effectively and \textit{ethically}. In recognising the difficulty of operationalising Foucauldian ideas, we provide a narrative-of-self to reveal how an elite tennis coach, Göran Gerdin, adopted Foucauldian ideas in a process of ethical self-creation. The narrative reveals how Göran experienced the tragedy of youth player suicide and how he critically reflected on his coaching role in relation to this tragedy. Through specifically problematizing the insidious influence of technologies of dominance on athletic subjectivity, Göran reveals how he drew from Foucault to develop alternative coach practices and a related \textit{telos}. We conclude by reflecting on pragmatic issues associated with coaching with Foucault.

\textbf{Introduction}

A significant proliferation of research into coach education and the professional training of coaches has occurred since the 1980s (Potrac, Denison, & Gilbert, 2013). Despite this substantial growth, the majority of sporting issues that were identified prior to the 1980s remain. Concerns with sport doping, violence, cheating, injuries, dropout and burnout, as examples, were all discussed in prominent sport and health journals from the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Antonelli, 1969; Cook, 1969; Orlick, 1974; Prokop, 1965). Our observation of these enduring concerns intimates that the growth in coach knowledge has had little practical impact in alleviating these ethical issues. Which suggests – in alignment with Denison and Jones’ prime rationale for this special edition – that it is timely to problematize and reimagine current understandings with respect to what it means to coach effectively and \textit{ethically}.
We further acknowledge that a number of additional sporting issues/problems have come to light in recent years that traditional approaches to sporting ethics have tended to ignore (see König, 1995; Pringle & Crocket, 2013; Shogan, 2007). These issues do not relate to transgression of sporting rules of conduct, such as doping or deliberate acts of violence, but typically stem from legitimate attempts to follow the rules or demands of one's sport and the negative impact that this has on an athlete's identity or wellbeing (Shogan, 2007). Some athletes, for example, suffer from problems that can be attributed to the normalised training demands of sport; problems such as chronic pain, unhealthy dietary practices, disabling body-image perceptions and even cases of depression and suicide (e.g. Curry, 1993; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012).

Foucauldian analyses of disciplinary technologies in sport have been useful for revealing the production of docile and normalised athletes (e.g. Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Garity & Mills, 2013) and an associated array of short and long-term adverse consequences (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Lang, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012). Recognition of these problems and their linkages to traditional training demands, pose a dilemma for coaches, that is: how can one coach an athlete to perform to their best without subjecting the athlete to a host of potentially debilitating identity and health problems?

In this paper, we draw from Foucault, particularly his writings on technologies of self, to explore ways that coaches might problematize their own relationship with the logic of sport to understand “how this relationship has, over time, shaped their values, coaching behaviours and performances of the self, and correspondingly, the impact this has had on the athletes” (Denison, Pringle, Cassidy, & Hessian, 2015, p. 73). We are particularly interested in examining coach approaches that offer possibilities to disrupt the insidious impact that disciplinary training technologies can have on athlete identity and wellbeing. Similar to Shogan (2007) and Denison (2007), who used Foucault to make the case for the application of ethics in sport to include far more than following a code of rules, we believe an ongoing commitment to the problematization of every aspect of the coaching act is critical for the development of a broader understanding of ethical coaching practices. Nevertheless, we recognise that problematization is both complex and ambiguous and we are cognisant that the coach development literature is replete with examples of coach development based on advanced theoretical and pedagogical approaches failing to achieve lasting impact on coaches’ practices (e.g. Culver & Trudel, 2006; Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009; Knowles, Borrie, & Telfer, 2005; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001; Reid & Harvey, 2014; Roberts, 2011).

We begin by contextualising Foucault’s ethics in relation to his key concepts of discourse and power. Recognising that Foucauldian ideas have only rarely been developed into pragmatic coach practices, we then present Göran’s narrative-of-self to illustrate how he problematized the training techniques he employed in coaching junior elite tennis players. We conclude by discussing issues associated with coaching with Foucault.
**Foucault’s ethics of self-creation**

Foucault’s conceptualisation of an ethics of self-creation has been a productive form of theoretical analysis within coach education scholarship (e.g. Jacobs, Claringbould, & Knoppers, 2014; Pringle & Crocket, 2013; Shogan, 2007) and related disciplines (e.g. Crocket, 2016; Gerdin, 2017; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Sicilia-Camacho & Fernández-Balboa, 2009). Similarly, a growing body of coach scholarship draws on Foucault’s earlier work on power and discourse to argue for the necessity, or importance, of problematization as a style of thought fundamental to innovative and critical coaching practice (Denison, 2007, 2010; Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2015).

Although there is some diversity of interpretation and application of Foucauldian ethics within studies relating to sport and exercise (Crocket, 2016), there are certain tenets of Foucault’s work which we regard as foundational to theorising technologies of the self. These include an anti-essentialist understanding of the subject, an understanding of knowledge and truth as the product of discourse and power relations, and an understanding of freedom as a set of contextually based possibilities that exist within power relations. These aspects of Foucault’s theorising set the basis from which he developed technologies of the self. Foucault’s latter work represented a significant shift in his focus: away from revealing how discourse and power relations produce particular subjectivities and objectivise certain groups within the population and towards considering ways in which an individual might see the need to focus on his or her self as requiring some form of ethical attention in order to produce for themselves a prized or valued subjectivity (Foucault, 1993).

Despite this shift in thinking Foucault (2000c) maintained an anti-essentialist stance, arguing, “the subject is not a substance. It is a form” (p. 290). In other words, ethical self-creation is not the product of a pre-existing resistant subject fighting against technologies of dominance, so much as the form a subject creates for their self through a combination of problematization and work on the self. For Foucault, “technologies of the self” offer the potential for developing new subjectivities, rather than freeing a latent or repressed subjectivity.

Foucault’s (1972, 2001) early work, which emphasised technologies of domination, examined how scientific and medical discourses and associated power relations objectivised certain subjects, such as the mad and the sick, in problematic ways. This work challenged claims to objective knowledge and truth made within medicine and science, yet was criticised for conceptualising the subject in a deterministic manner. However, Foucault continually revised his understanding of discourse to be less and less deterministic. This shift was, perhaps, most notable when he argued:

> We must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the
dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (Foucault, 1978, p. 100)

Relatedly, Foucault (1978) increasingly emphasised an understanding of power as ever-present, ever-changing and relational, rather than a “juridico-discursive” (p. 82) understanding of power as a possession of a sovereign or government. Thus, relations of power operate in a capillary-like manner in which power “is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). Moreover, although power relations might play out in problematic ways, power is not fundamentally repressive, it is productive: “it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

The implications of these reconfigured understandings of discourse and power are significant. In a later interview, Foucault (2000c) suggested the intersection of power relations and discourse could be understood as forming games of truth, which necessarily contain multiple possibilities for each subject. Within a game of truth, Foucault argued, “it is always possible to discover something different or more or less modify this or that rule” (p. 297). In this sense, then, the modern subject is a free subject insofar as games of truth contain multiple possibilities for action and negotiation, rather than necessarily lead to the production of singular subjectivities. This is not freedom in the liberal sense of absolute freedom of action, or freedom from power relations, rather it emphasises that power relations are fundamentally negotiations, albeit unequal negotiations.

Recognising the importance of this contextually-formed notion of freedom, Foucault (2000c) argued “ethics is the considered form freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (p. 284). This understanding of ethics, which must be understood in relation to the concepts we have outlined above, has three key components. Firstly, being “informed by reflection” means there is a role for a degree of critical thought, or problematization. Secondly, as ethics is a “considered form”, it requires not only critical thought, but also active work on the self to develop or achieve this form. Finally, given Foucault’s understanding of freedom, ethics is applied and contextual as it relates to situational possibilities that can be discovered or negotiated within and between specific games of truth. The first two of these components require further attention.

Foucault proposed that ethical self-creation required problematization, a style of thought in which:

Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the emotion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem … for a domain of action, a behaviour, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. (Foucault, 2000b, p. 117)

While the first part of this quote emphasises an explicit, rational process of critical thought, it is important to note that in the second part of the quote, Foucault emphasises that this thought process is contextual: An individual might be
prompted to problematize an aspect of their sport as a result of a traumatic event (Crocket, 2014), they may be incited to problematize an aspect of their conduct as the moral code of their sport actively problematizes that aspect of conduct (Crocket, 2015), or they might come to problematize an aspect of their involvement in sport through engagement in other games of truth (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Moreover, problematizations might be expressed by coaches and athletes on their own terms, which may not always match with the discourses of critical sociological and pedagogical scholarship of sport and coaching (Crocket, 2016).

The second aspect of Foucault’s ethics that requires further development is that it requires creation of a considered form. This implies that the individual undertakes ethical work in an attempt to transform their self into a desired form. Ethical work, then, aspires to a higher ethical goal. Foucault (1985, 1988) addressed the notion of a higher ethical goal in two ways: through the concept of telos and through the aesthetics of existence. Firstly, in describing technologies of the self as comprised of four components, he noted:

> A moral action tends towards its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode characteristic of the ethical subject. (Foucault, 1985, p. 28)

This “certain mode of being”, was the telos, or idealised ethical subjectivity to which one aspired. The notion of a telos clearly locates the process of ethical self-creation within specific games of truth. Put another way, a specific telos will be recommended to participants of a particular game of truth in relation to specific problematizations within that game of truth.

Yet, Foucault was also inspired by the Ancient Greeks’ emphasis on the aesthetics of existence. For Foucault (1985), the aestheticisation of ethics within Ancient Greece invited ethical subjects to focus on the production or shaping of an ethical self through a restrained and stylised engagement with problematized activities. This contrasted sharply with the Christian requirement that one must confess one’s true self and strictly adhere to certain interdictions. For Foucault, then, the aesthetics of existence was a device that enabled him to challenge the notion that ethics simply involved adherence to particular sets of interdictions. He argued, “from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as works of art” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 262).

Moreover, Foucault was particularly interested in how the aesthetics of existence might open up possibilities for an ethical avant-garde. He advocated, for example, “let’s escape as much as possible from the type of relations that society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities” (Foucault, 2000d, p. 160). There is a certain tension, then, between telos and aesthetics of existence insofar as a telos identifies an idealised ethical self and an aesthetics of existence emphasises the creation of something new.

In many respects, then, Foucault’s ethics do not so much offer a blueprint for how coaches might work to shape their coaching practice in more ethical ways, so
much as highlight a series of tensions in how we might conceptualise and practice ethics. These tensions relate to the classic sociological question of structure and agency, which Foucault repeatedly engages with: in his shift towards games of truth, in his differing accounts of problematization, and in the contrasting roles of telos and aesthetics of existence. To emphasise Foucault’s stronger accounts of problematization and combine this with his interest in an avant-garde aesthetics of existence might lead scholars to emphasise the possibilities of coaches engaging in a radical critique of their coaching practice and experimenting with alternative methods of training and relating to their athletes. Yet, such an approach might fail to consider the potential for more moderate critiques of coaching practice that might lead to particular coaches seeking new possibilities within the existing truth game(s) of their sport.

In providing this overview of Foucault’s conceptualisation of an ethics of self-creation, we are conscious of the difficulty of translating his admittedly complex ideas into a pragmatic plan for coaching effectively and ethically. A rugby coach who had previously engaged with Foucauldian readings and coach education material concluded, as an example, that the idea of coaching with Foucault is “a real intellectual challenge” and it “will require a ‘decoding’ to simple principles before they become accepted by a wider audience and useful for less experienced coaches” (Denison, Pringle et al., 2015, p. 75). In recognising the challenge of decoding and enacting Foucauldian ideas, in the following we provide a narrative-of-self that reveals how an elite tennis coach, Göran (one of the authors in this paper), problematized select aspects of coaching and drew from Foucauldian ideas to change how he coached. Before presenting the narrative, however, we begin by illustrating the theoretical links between Foucauldian approaches and the scholarly and critical use of narrative approaches.

**Foucault, critical research and narrative inquiry**

Barthes (1977) noted that “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society” (p. 79) and that this omnipresence reflects the effectiveness of narratives to serve diverse purposes (e.g. communicate, educate, affect, instruct, entertain, motivate, and transform). Not surprisingly, the use of narratives (or stories) have long been employed in coaching contexts. Researchers have also drawn on narrative inquiry as a representation tool to develop and transmit understandings about select coach issues (see Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2012; Toner, Nelson, Potrac, Gilbourne, & Marshall, 2012). Although not without recent debate (e.g. Denison, 2016; Gard, 2014), the theoretical justification and use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography is well established in the socio-cultural examination of sport and exercise practices.

Foucault’s untimely death in 1984 occurred before the “narrative turn” had been acknowledged (Polkinghorne, 1988), yet his body of work undoubtedly
contributed to this turn. Indeed, Deleuze (1988) described Foucault as “a great writer” (p. 23), in part, as he “never looked on writing as an aim or an end in itself” (p. 23) but as a critical process that could blend the “splendour of its style and the politics of its content” (p. 23). Deleuze explained that Foucault illustrated “his theatrical analyses in a vivid manner” (p. 23) so that the reader was politically moved by his use of “optics and colour” (p. 24). Foucault, as such, “eschewed the uninspired and objective representational style typical of academic prose and drew on various literary techniques to represent his well-researched arguments in an evocative and provocative manner” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 203).

Foucault (1991) acknowledged that he wanted his readers to have an “experience” that would challenge their thinking and permit self-transformations:

… what is essential is not found in a series of historically verifiable proofs; it lies rather in the experience which the book permits us to have … an experience that might permit an alteration, a transformation, of the relationship we have with ourselves and our cultural universe: In a word, with our knowledge (savoir). (Foucault, 1991, pp. 36–37)

Foucault, however, did not consider his books as pedagogical or as “instructive” for how people should think. In contrast, he viewed his texts as “invitations” that allowed readers possibilities “to slip into this kind of experience” (Foucault, 1991, p. 40). He further acknowledged that all of his books were written, as he had “a direct personal experience” (p. 38) with the various social issues that he explored, such as madness, psychiatric hospitals, sexualities and illness.

Given Foucault’s recognition of the value of personal experience in selecting research topics, his ability to blend the literary with the academic, and his desire to invite readers into a text to have an experience, in the following we present Göran’s coaching narrative.

**Problematising the “efficient tennis machine”: Göran reflects**

It is winter, and I am touring the South Island of New Zealand with my kiwi girlfriend. We are in a small town near turquoise coloured lakes and snow-capped mountains. It is cold but stunningly beautiful. We enter the local internet café to check emails. That is when I get the horrible news. My dad has sent me an email with the subject name “Hugo”, he was one of my former tennis juniors and my assistant coach. At first, I wonder why my dad would send an email with Hugo’s name on it? I click on the email and quickly scan it. It does not take long before I see the word “Suicide”! What? No, this cannot be right? My dad must be mistaken. But, as I read the email more carefully, the sickening truth sinks in. Dad writes: “Hugo’s body was found on the train tracks and … a suicide letter was found in his parents’ home”. Tears start falling down my cheeks and my girlfriend who sits at the computer next to me notices, “What has happened?” she asks. I don’t respond. My head is spinning. Why? Why would he do this? What did I say to him last time I saw him? Images of the countless hours and hours we spent together on and off the court flash before my eyes. More questions arise. My heart sinks when I remember his reaction to his last match. I brush this thought aside and think Oh God, how would his family be taking this? His mother, brother, sister and father. What do
I do now? Do I go back to Sweden? How soon can I be on a plane? Why? What am I supposed to do? The tears are now streaming down my face. Why?

I grew up in a small town in Sweden during the 1980–1990s and excelled as a junior tennis player. I was nationally ranked, won medals in national championships, and played many international tournaments. My youthful goal was not just to make a grand slam tournament but to win one. Early in my teenage years I began coaching and I loved working with the talented players and seeing them improve. I have since coached some of the top junior players in New Zealand, Sweden and Australia.

When working at both a regional and national level my coaching practice involved lots of repetitive drills, such as feeding ball after ball out of a basket, and lengthy training sessions. My aim was to perfect my player’s techniques and improve their consistency. I would push them hard, similar to how I had been pushed as an elite junior.

I recognise now that my coaching drills resembled Foucault’s (1995) disciplinary techniques. I would divide training sessions into different time segments (e.g. hitting 100 topspin forehands in a row) and spatially distribute the players into “top” and “bottom” courts: this spatial distribution would form a hierarchy of players to encourage them to fight their way into the top court. This form of drilling was viewed by fellow coaches, parents and administrators as signs of “effective” coaching. Parents would often comment on their children’s improvements in technique, consistency and match success. In this way, and at this time, I knew I was coaching well.

As my players aged into their mid-teens, I increased the complexity and duration of the drills. I demanded greater accuracy, attention and singular devotion to the task. I recognise now that the use of these military style drills aimed at the disciplining and training of the players’ bodies into docile and productive tennis bodies (Foucault, 1995): my ultimate aim was to produce each player as an “efficient [tennis] machine” (Foucault, 1995, p. 164).

Foucault (1995) suggests that on almost every occasion, disciplinary practices are adopted in response to particular needs. In this case, the increased emphasis on lengthy training and monotonous drilling, came as a response to countries such as Russia, Serbia, Spain and Argentina, who were training large numbers of young, talented tennis players through extensive and gruelling practice and match playing regimes. These countries were seen as a threat to Sweden’s international tennis success. It was not unusual, correspondingly, for me to hear other elite coaches telling their players: “do you know how much the tennis kids are training in Russia? At least 4-6 hours of drills and matches every day! We need to start doing the same here if we are going to keep our international ranking”.

Foucault posited that critical reflection is essential to forming oneself as an ethical subject. Yet, he offered relatively few suggestions about what might prompt one to critically reflect on their situation (Crocket, 2014). For a significant proportion of my coaching career, I had not problematized my coaching pedagogy. Indeed,
it was easy to adopt coach practices that had worked and were widely accepted. However, as indicated in the vignette at the start of this section, significant life events fuelled my problematization of my coaching style.

Firstly, over a period of time, three of my tennis juniors attempted to take their own lives: two of them, unfortunately, were successful. I am still haunted by their tragic, untimely deaths. These three juniors were all aged between 18 and 20 and, although lovely guys, they had very few friends or interests outside of tennis. When they each experienced different setbacks or trauma on and off the court, their entire world came crashing down. In recent years, reports of severe depressions and mental illnesses as related to the pressures of elite sport and retirement have increased (e.g. Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2012). Yet the issue of how many young athletes—who train hard throughout their childhood but do not make it to the elite level—and how this influences their senses of self are rarely examined (for a significant exception see Sparkes, 1998). Although there are many reasons why someone might take their own life, experiencing this loss first hand was life changing for me as a coach and as a person.

These three episodes were “moments of crisis” (Denzin, 1989, p. 70; cf. Crocket, 2014) that led me to ask whether I might have been a factor in these athletes’ tragic experiences. I could not help but question everything that I had done as coach and even my involvement in sport and professional coaching. I thought about the way I designed and carried out training sessions and the extent to which I involved players in decision-making. I also thought about the kind of things that I talked to these young players about after training sessions. Did I ever really know these young people? I questioned whether the disciplinary machinery of coaching involved constructing both a player and a coaching identity as impersonal (docile)? Having worked with these three juniors for a long time, I thought that I knew them as more than just tennis players. To some extent, I now think I was wrong; perhaps more importantly, I doubt they knew me other than as a coach committed to developing elite tennis players. Although I had a cordial relationship with each of these juniors, this relationship was predicated on developing their potential as elite tennis players. I started to doubt my role and continued involvement as a tennis coach. For a period of time I stopped all involvement with tennis and even changed my career pathway by enroling in teacher education. Yet it was not long before I was drawn back into playing and coaching tennis.

The second significant factor in my problematization of my coaching practice occurred some years later when I started my doctoral studies and began examining the works of Foucault and how his ideas had been drawn upon by sport scholars. My doctoral study focused on boys, gender and physical education and drew on various Foucauldian concepts. Throughout my doctoral research, I kept coaching tennis and could not help but draw on Foucault’s analytical framework to reflect on my coaching and how it shaped the aspiring tennis players.

Based on my life experiences, my “problematization” began to revolve around my acceptance of, and adherence to, the disciplinary practices of tennis coaching
which aimed to produce efficient tennis machines. I was aware, of course, that these disciplinary practices often produced young players that excelled and reached the top of their club/region/nation but the question that I started asking myself was an ethical question: what kind of identity does this sporting involvement lead to in both the short- and long-term for these young people? Kelly and Hickey’s (2008) Foucauldian examination of identity formation within professional Australian Football League (AFL) found, for example, that the workings of power within the AFL created narrow athletic subjectivities, which made it difficult for transition and change in young people’s lives.

Through a self-reflexive process, I started problematizing how the disciplinary practices involved in producing “tennis machines” were implicated in the creation of unhealthy and narrow/restricted subjectivities. In this sense, I started questioning the ethics behind the disciplinary training regimes. This self-reflexive process resulted in a turbulent time in my coaching career as part of me questioned “why change something that works?” Recent commentary illustrates that problematizing normalised practices that are tied to pleasure, success, reward and power are difficult even when these practices are known to create various problems (Denison & Mills, in press; Gerdin & Pringle, 2017). Yet I could not ignore my inner tensions and by now I knew I had to coach differently.

I developed as a coaching “telos” (Foucault, 1985), or broad existential coaching goal, the aspiration to coach in a manner that promoted the development of healthy, well-rounded and resilient youth. In particular, I believed that my coaching practices should allow these young people to become active critical thinkers as they develop as players and people. Through my training as a physical education teacher I had been introduced to alternative pedagogical approaches which I believed could underpin this telos. I subsequently changed my on-court and off-court coaching practices in an effort to bring my conduct into line with this idealised ethical self.

On court, I now avoid monotonous drills and an authoritarian coaching style in favour of involving the players in all aspects of the training sessions. I now put my players at the centre of learning and developing their game. I facilitate training sessions aimed at encouraging players to ask questions and to understand what strategies, tactics, skills and techniques that they can work on to improve their game. The players, accordingly, are actively involved in decision-making and this has had the side benefit of increased player motivation. Sometimes this also means that the players and I together design and carry out similar disciplinary practices and drills to those I used to use. Yet, the broader coaching context in which these drills are used is in stark contrast to how I used to operate. Drills are contextualized in relation to match play where the players have identified what technique or skill that they need to work on in order to improve their game. Always when working with improving their technique I encourage the players to talk about, articulate and reflect on their learning of the technique rather than having them merely trying to adopt or copy the “correct” technique.
I also encourage the players to engage and develop their skills in relation to the sport of tennis in more ways than just playing the game themselves. I urge players from an early age to help out as assistant coaches for the younger players, be umpires at various club events, watch the top juniors and seniors as well as the pros on TV. I also promote the juniors getting their siblings, parents, grandparents and other extended family and community members to play the game in the weekends and the holidays. And I avoid “pushing” the juniors into playing individual tournaments and instead encourage them to play team based interclub competitions or even just at their own club.

My “telos” is based on a desire to enable all of my players to experience tennis as something enjoyable, social and less focused on disciplinary and competitive practices, regardless of their skills/abilities and ambitions as tennis players. In the words of Foucault, I aim to “allow the games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” within my coaching sessions. More specifically, I want to disrupt the technologies of domination to avoid the risks of players developing restricted player identities. In this sense, I do not want my players to feel destined or pressured to become or fail to become elite tennis players. My telos, at another level, revolved around a refusal to be disciplined by dominant and singular notions of what coaching practices in tennis should look like.

By shaping my coaching in this manner, I also aspire to transform the dominant disciplinary practices in tennis and influence how others (e.g. coaches, parents and administrators) view the value of tennis. To make more of a difference, for example, I often talk of my philosophy at different tennis committee and coach meetings. I use what Foucault (1999, p. 1) called “parrhesia”, that is, a speaking of the truth without being worried about the consequences. Through revealing this “truth” about the dangers of disciplinary technologies, I attempt to reveal a subjugated knowledge in the context of tennis coaching to encourage alternative practices. Yet, I acknowledge that my provocations have not resulted in significant changes. As argued by Denison and Mills (in press) getting “buy in” from coaches in terms of problematizing their normalised and seemingly “working” practice is difficult since you might be seen as advocating for “losers” and “laziness” over “winners” and “discipline”.

One question that could be asked from a coaching effectiveness perspective is whether any of my tennis juniors have gone on to play at a high level as a result of my new coaching style? Since I stopped working with regional and national academies I have not coached players at the elite junior level. However, I have had some of my club players do well in their younger years (ages 8–12), and subsequently transition into regional and national academies. Although it is still too early to tell, these players have had mixed results after transitioning into traditional coaching and performance structures. Some have left the sport quite quickly after being exposed to extended disciplinary training approaches. However, others are persisting and thriving with the extended disciplinary pedagogies used at regional and national levels.
What I have noticed more clearly, is that amongst those players who do not transition to regional academies – the vast majority of youth players that I coach – there is a very low rate of dropout and these players are now successfully transitioning into playing adult/senior interclub for the club and becoming part of the new generation of club helpers/volunteers. They are competent players who have become part of the tennis club community where tennis plays an important and positive but not an “all-consuming” part of their life. This outcome resonates with my newfound telos as a tennis coach, where I reflect on the success of my coaching practice based on what kind of people these young players turn out to be later in life, rather than a short-term focus on their competitive success as elite junior players.

I am aware that my localised offering of alternative activities and practices, as illustrated in the above vignettes and reflective narratives, does not change the modes of domination at a macro-level (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Throughout his career, Foucault was critical of the notion that large-scale societal changes were predictable or that they had occurred due to the deliberate planning and actions of certain individuals. Indeed, much of his oeuvre was dedicated to revealing the role of accident, chance, and the irrational within major changes within society (e.g. Foucault, 1972, 2001). It is important to recognise, then, that Foucault did not propose technologies of the self as a way of effecting major social change. However, I do agree with Denison and Mills (in press) who claim that change for the better can become a real possibility when we continue to problematize the normal ways of being and doing in our coaching practice.

Reflecting on coaching with Foucault

The previous section discussed how Göran became acutely aware of the disciplinary technologies used in tennis and the potentially narrow/restricted identities that could result. Through considering these tensions, the “ethical substance”, Göran scrutinised his own coaching practices and experiences of tennis by reflecting on these as connected with certain moral/ethical dilemmas, problematic identities and unequal power relations. This process of self-reflection resulted in a desire to change various “practices of self”, that of others, and the coaching practices associated with tennis. In particular, the “ethical work” performed by Göran can be seen as an example of a coach’s negotiation of possibilities for acting within a specific game of truth. Through this process, Göran’s views were challenged and he developed, over time, a different outlook or “telos” about his role as a coach and the value and purpose of tennis. He is now more content with how he coaches.

As the previous paragraph illustrates, Foucault’s (1985) mode of subjectivation offers a compelling and succinct theorisation of the processes of ethical self-creation that Göran went through in relation to his coaching practice. However, through reflecting on Göran’s narrative we wish to make several points about the pragmatics of coaching with Foucault. Firstly, the various self-changes that Göran
made, as summarised above, were not undertaken in a neat, linear, progressive and purely rational manner. Although the previous paragraph may re-present the self-changes in an orderly manner, Göran reflects that the changes took place over multiple years with extended periods of frustration, doubt and uncertainty. Thus, although Foucault’s technologies of self can be summarised via four seemingly progressive phases (i.e. in relation to the ethical substance, mode of subjection, practices of self, telos), the process of creating oneself as an ethical coach is complex, non-linear and requires on-going commitment or critical reflection (Crocket, 2016).

Secondly, and relatedly, if a coach is troubled by the production of docile/normalised athletes then it might seem a somewhat easy strategy to employ coaching practices that disrupt the technologies of dominance (e.g. remove the stop-watch in drills or use non-hierarchical coaching groups) or adopt practices that have more balanced relations of power between athletes and coaches. Yet it is clear that coaches are still subject to the broader workings of discourse and power relations. This means that the coach is still subject to the truth games that operate in that sporting environment. In other words, if an “effective” coach is typically judged by the athletes/parents or other coaches by the intensity of the training sessions delivered or by the “success” of the team in the national finals, then the coach who changes how they coach are at risk of being judged less effective if he/she does not “gain results” or appear to coach “effectively”. The issue here, we wish to stress, is not that traditional coaching methods are more effective than alternative coaching methods in an objective sense. Rather within the truth games of coaching, traditional methods are widely accepted as the most legitimate method of pursuing athletic victory.

Thirdly, coaching with Foucault is not undertaken in isolation from other forms of coach or pedagogical knowledge. As Göran’s narrative revealed, while Foucauldian theory facilitated the problematization of his existing coaching practices, it did not offer an alternative style of coaching. Rather, Göran drew on other, already existing coaching pedagogies (e.g. athlete or game-centred approaches) to develop a coaching style that aligned with his revised telos. We suggest, Göran did so, not out of an uncritical belief that these offered the “right” way to coach, but rather, Göran acted as a bricoleur (Bush & Silk, 2010; Jameson, 1991), utilising ideas and strategies that responded to the specific issues that the process of problematization had revealed about his coaching practice. This highlights that Göran was engaged in an aesthetic project of reshaping his coaching practice. He has reshaped it using the tools available to him but, rather than acquiring a final, unchanging form, it remains open to being reshaped, modified and further reformed.

Fourthly, Foucauldian ethics is an open-ended analytic process that can be used to think about different ethical and pedagogical approaches. In this sense, Foucauldian ethics does not make prescriptive recommendations for behaviour, as traditional ethical theories, such as social contract theory, might. Instead, we
suggest, Foucauldian ethics encourages one to search for solutions that are based in one’s community and culture in order to move from problematization to practice. For example, the use of an athlete-centred coaching style was Göran’s solution to harmful relations of power between coach and athlete, and a games-centred approach offered a style of coaching that minimised his concerns about disciplinary practices and docility. Thus, coaching with Foucault offers a philosophical or theoretical framework of thinking that can guide how a coach reads and negotiates with existing coach knowledges. In this respect, a Foucauldian informed coach pedagogy will not necessarily look radical, yet there is a certain pragmatic appeal to this focus on identifying what changes are possible within the truth games in which a particular coach operates, while potentially aspiring to broader systemic change.

Synthesising these first four points, we now offer suggestions for how coaches might seek to engage with Foucauldian ethics. We do see merit in using either the four phases, or modes of subjectivation, of Foucault’s technologies of the self (ethical substance, mode of subjection, practices of self, telos) or Markula’s (2003) Foucauldian feminist ethic (ethical self-care, aesthetics of self-stylisation, critical self-awareness) (see Crocket, 2016) as a tool that coaches could use to organise a process of problematization in relation to their coaching practice. However, as we suggested above, this risk presenting Foucauldian ethics as a somewhat tidy, linear process. Moreover, as Göran’s narrative reveals, to be engaged in a process of ethical self-creation in a Foucauldian sense is potentially a protracted process involving extended periods of ambiguity and uncertainty (cf. Crocket, 2016). Thus, following Douglas and Carless (2008), we suggest the use of coach or athlete narratives that enliven the potential of Foucauldian ethics, in a manner consonant with the complexity of Foucault’s thought.

**Conclusion**

From the standpoint of the “modes of subjectivation” (Foucault, 1985), it can be suggested that coaches, like Göran, are continuously in the process of turning themselves into ethical beings, capable not only of determining their own behaviours but also able to challenge and resist dominant discourses of sport related to discipline, performances and competition. In particular, by raising awareness of those aspects of sport coaching that contribute to the narrow/restricted and problematic construction of identities, it is possible to open up for alternative discourses of sport coaching which creates spaces and opportunities for the production of more ethical and diverse coaching practices.

Markula (2003) suggests that possibilities of resistance and transgression are created when sporting practices are accompanied by critical awareness, a “tuning into one’s self”. Coaching practices themselves are neither liberating nor oppressive. Rather, it is the coaches’ awareness of their ability to exercise power in negotiating dominant discourses that makes transformation possible. The first step
towards an effective and ethical coaching practice therefore lies in reaffirming the need for coaches to reflect on and problematize their practices. Indeed, we conclude by reaffirming Denison and Avner’s (2011) claim that for coaches to become a positive force for the development of ethical coaching practices they need to become lifelong learners and continually question the effects their perspectives on people and relationships and the body and performance have on their coaching. (p. 222)

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