

‘O Último Minuto’: reflecting on coach identity and role prominence in contemporary football

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Literary fiction has been recognised as a vehicle of cultural transmission that can be used to reflect on real issues. If used as data sources, sports novels may be useful for making sense of the complexity and messiness of the coaching process. Drawing upon the reading of ‘O Último Minuto’, written by Brazilian author Marcelo Backes, this paper uses the trajectory, experiences, and emotions of its protagonist - João Iánic -, as a springboard to reflect on the challenges of coach identity and role prominence in contemporary sport and society. Although role prominence may enhance coaches’ commitment, energy and motivation to invest in their tasks, strong coaching identity may as well have its potential pitfalls. If other identities are dismissed, and the coaching identity is threatened (e.g. by the increasing commercialisation of sport, especially football) there is the risk of a negative path, which can result in experiences of burnout, unsustainable pressure, and ill-being. More research is needed to uncover the mechanisms that lead to or create the ‘turning points’ in the coaches’ paths. A better understanding of identity prominence may also assist with promoting its facilitative nature while mitigating its potentially debilitating consequences.

Keywords: sports novels; identity theory; commercialisation; professional football; role prominence

Introduction

Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because

Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities;

Truth is not.

(Mark Twain, 1897, p. 156)

In an era filled with ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’, literary fiction emerges as an otherwise rare opportunity to understand better what it means to be human. Other than an invitation to step back from a fast-forward, fast-track, fast-food, fast life, and unfasten the seat-belt of imagination, literary fiction is also a vehicle of cultural transmission (Kane, 1998). May (2018, p. 927) claims that “the nature of the ‘imagined community’ described in fiction is often a cultural and political statement about the community discussed”. In that line, it is unsurprising that suggestions have been made for sports novels to be treated as rich data sources (Bairner, 2017). Indeed, they can assist with the difficult task of making sense of the complexity and messiness of the coaching process (Cushion, 2007).

Drawing from the reading of ‘O Último Minuto’ [The Last Minute], this paper uses the trajectory, experiences, and emotions of its protagonist - João Iánic -, as a springboard to reflect on the challenges of coach identity and role prominence in contemporary sport and society.

‘O Último Minuto’: a synopsis

‘O Último Minuto’ [The Last Minute] is a novel written in 2013 by Brazilian author and translator Marcelo Backes. The plot revolves around the life story of João

Iánic, a former Brazilian football coach with Russian-German origin, jailed for a crime that is only revealed at the end of the novel.

João Iánic was born and raised during the 1950s in a deprived area of rural Brazil that had been populated by Russian migrants in the beginning of the 20th century. His father Vassili, hardened by a family feud over his marriage with a German woman, was often absent, devoted to the farming duties that helped to keep the family's finances afloat. The presence of neglect, hardship and violence in João's upbringing is synthesised in a shocking childhood memory of his dad ordering him to leave the dining table and beat six new-born kittens to death. The family could not afford to have more mouths to feed – human or animal.

Despite his background, Iánic managed to overcome the physical and psychological borders of his life in the remote countryside and went on to graduate in Physical Education in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. His career as a football player was short, due to an episode of shingles during childhood, (un)treated by a local witchdoctor, followed by a broken leg at the age of 16: “at the time, it was not like it is these days, when guys make a mess out of their knees and just after two months they are running again as if nothing happened” (Backes, 2013, p. 33)

Iánic started his coaching career while taking up a job in his home region as a Physical Education teacher. His initial experiences were highly successful: first, county, and then regional champion. However, at a personal level, he was deeply troubled. The unwanted birth of a son led him to increased feelings of estrangement towards his wife: “a man could not tolerate watching his woman changing as an object of love, his female sexual being suffering changes” (p.36). So, in 1984, he decided to run away from his fate and from his family, accepting a job offer to clean stables in a small town in Switzerland. His Swiss boss was an influential adviser at the local football club, bringing Iánic to watch

their matches every Sunday, his only weekly rest day. After a losing streak, the club's manager was fired, and Iánic invited to take over the position, mostly based on his nationality: "the fact that he was Brazilian was enough for the club's directors to believe he could bring some kind of direction amid all that chaos" (p.40). Once again, Iánic was successful, not only saving the club from relegation but leading them to a near promotion to the Swiss Premiership. The tragic nuclear accident of Chernobyl in 1986, which created the fear of widespread radioactive contamination in other parts of Europe, and the poor skill of 'hyper civilised' Swiss players led Iánic back to Brazil after two years, this time to Rio de Janeiro. He could not find a job for many years, except for a short spell coaching a third division team of the interior state of Rio Grande do Sul, where he had lived and studied before. Later, Iánic would accept an offer to coach the under-18's of a prestigious club in Rio de Janeiro. However, frequent wage delays compromised any illusion of career stability. After seven years without seeing his wife and son, Iánic brought them to Rio, motivated by guilt and by his willingness to develop his heir's talent and toughness at all costs. Even if it meant using his power as a coach to facilitate his son's trajectory up the club's youth ranks.

Rio de Janeiro, in 1994, was very different from the Brazil of Iánic's upbringing, with soaring crime rates and increasing migratory movements – "the world was moving, and everyone would end up as some kind of walking vegetable, pulling out their roots as soon as they managed to settle somewhere" (Backes, 2013, p.46). Furthermore, the commercialisation of the 'beautiful game' (Dubal, 2010) would result in players getting wages from very young ages even if, in Iánic's opinion, their ability failed to meet the minimum standards. The best would get ludicrous promises of millionaire contracts, even before proving themselves at the adult level – "football players had gone from outcasts in a recent past to the biggest stars of the present" (Backes, 2013, p.50). Iánic's

disappointment with the evolution of society in general, and with football in particular, was a struggle he could never overcome. He could not dissociate one from the other: football was the real theatre of existence. The coach recognised that he could have accepted change and become part of the system, earning good money with his known ability to spot raw talent in rural Brazil. However, due to his upbringing, values and beliefs, Iánic refused to betray his principles, which he forcefully implemented in his coaching environment.

Until the end of his career, Iánic accumulated frustrations, defeats, and enemies. His loss of power and direction were evident: in an act of despair, he ended up murdering a player who had an affair with his partner. After spending nine years on the run, or, as he pointed out, two World Cups, Iánic handed himself in and committed suicide the day before his trial.

In resume, ‘O Último Minuto’ describes the tortuous journey of Iánic as an ageing coach, from unexpected deification during his youth to the unavoidable vilification brought by his inability to accept and adapt to the evolution of both society and professional football.

Meeting the author

Although fictional, ‘O Último Minuto’ is in many parts a hyperbolic recollection of the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood memories of its author, Marcelo Backes. Over a Skype conversation and an exchange of e-mail messages – during July 2018 - aimed at peeling back further layers of meaning, Backes reported that he has German ancestry and has had lengthy interactions with Russian descendants in one of the two regions of Brazil that they populated. Although there is a significant age difference between Backes – 45 - and Iánic, the protagonist, who would be around 65 nowadays, the writer explains that “the adventures of knowing the city, coming from a rural area, are all

mine. His thoughts on life in the countryside, the need to run away from it, are mine. However, Iánic has a conservative, old-fashioned, reactionary view of the World that I do not share. He is a Don Quixote, who insists on living in an ancient time that no longer exists and ends up being brought down by progress” (Backes, July 2018, personal communication). Just like Iánic, Backes graduated from the University of Rio Grande do Sul, in Brazil, although the former studied Physical Education and the latter did a Masters in Brazilian literature. Backes also had an experience as a football coach at the seminary where he studied. He recalls not only the prestige and importance of that appointment, but also the realisation of the ‘bonuses and the onuses’ that the role can entail (e.g. the difficult decisions, and the responsibilities associated with it).

Role prominence and the construction of the coach’s ‘self’

Identity theorists propose that individuals hold a diversity of roles in their lives, e.g. sibling, parent, activist, police officer, athlete, or coach. Each role is associated with an identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) that emerges as a result of the “interactions individuals have in a given role” (Pope, Hall, & Tobin, 2014, p. 137). Those interactions contribute to a process of socialisation and identity construction, in which a coach learns about job expectations via others who share the same role – for example, through imitation. Additionally, coaches can learn from the feedback of those who represent an opposing role, e.g. athletes (Pope et al., 2014) or spectators. Such interdependencies may lead coaches to display compelling ‘fronts’ and engage in impression management (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010). Thus, coaches could adopt certain behaviours during a training session or a match, so that players, club directors and spectators perceive them as being competent and ‘in control’ (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002). These expected responses and reactions are then internalised by the coach and serve as a kind of roadmap that guides the coach’s future actions (Burke & Stets, 2009). It contains a

hierarchy that leads to the prioritisation – prominence - of principles and values that, in turn, end up being enacted more often than others (Burke & Stets, 2009; Pope et al., 2014). Identity prominence also refers to “the individual’s subjective sense of the worth or value of identity to himself or herself” (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, p. 233). Highly demanding roles require levels of energy, drive, and motivation that may lead individuals to increase the internalisation and, ultimately, to become the role (Burke and Stets, 2009).

On the one hand, Pope and colleagues (Pope & Hall, 2015), Pope et al., 2014) established a link between the centrality of the coaching role and associated emotions, commitment and positive affect. On the other hand, research on the potential effects of role prominence in coaches is still scarce (Zehntner & McMahon, 2014), although there is an increasing awareness of worrying signs and symptoms such as coach burnout (e.g. Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kentta, 2017; Moen, Myhre, & Moldovan, 2018). Drawing from previous research on athletic identity may be worthy, due to the existence of a more substantial body of research. Athletic identity is “the degree to which an individual defines herself or himself in terms of athlete role” (Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997, p. 131). High athletic identity has been associated with compulsive exercise (Turton, Goodwin, & Meyer, 2017), which may increase the risk of eating disorders (Gapin & Petruzzello, 2011). Particularly with student-athletes, high athletic identity has also been linked to unethical behaviour – e.g. gamesmanship and instrumental aggression (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018).

Studying role prominence in a socially closed and hyper-masculine environment like professional football (Roderick, 2006) often proves challenging, with investigators having minimal access to those actively working in the field, who are usually suspicious of outsiders (Morrow & Howieson, 2014). Therefore, Backes’ (2013) novel provides an opportunity to use a fictional work to reflect on real issues and challenges associated with

coach identity and role prominence in an ever-evolving world. Departing from the reading of ‘O Último Minuto’, we explore the process of construction of coach Iánic’s identity and the evolution of role prominence throughout his career. We also reflect on what it means to be a coach in an increasingly commercialised football arena, where the role is being redefined. Finally, we anticipate potentially negative consequences of high role prominence in coaches, making some recommendations for future research.

Constructing Coach Iánic’s identity

In ‘O Último Minuto’ (Backes, 2013) the lead character - João Iánic - is both a product and reproducer of a violent habitus¹ that was imprinted in him during his childhood, primarily via the interactions with his father, a strict, distant character. Iánic’s identity developed in a rural environment, under social expectations that emphasised hard, gruelling work:

“The law inculcated during childhood that only work is worthy, ended up ruining any promises of pleasure forever, even when he had the chance and the means to buy a sugar apple. He really liked sugar apple, but he had to focus hard to feel the pleasure, he had to practice the enjoyment – oh, so noble that pulpy sugar apple! –, otherwise he would keep thinking of the five *reais* that it had cost, asking if he truly deserved it. Most times, he would ungracefully satisfy himself with half of the apple. The other half, which he kept for the next day, would end up going bad. (...) For him, paradise was lost in childhood, when he could see it with no stains; when the rules of daily work did not yet affect him so much, even if the textbook was already being imposed”. (2013, p.12)

¹ *Habitus* is a key concept in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). It refers to “the acquired dispositions instilled by the social environment within the social agent, and are significant in determining action and practice.” (Townsend & Cushion, 2015, p.6)

For Iánic, the opportunity to pursue a sports degree at the age of 16 represented an avenue to escape his harsh, regimented life in the countryside and to seek a new identity in the freedom of the urban, industrialised world, more in consonance with his long-held dreams and aspirations. Either as a player, teacher, or coach, sport offered Iánic the possibility to overcome an unhappy childhood and to ‘reformulate’ his self. Nonetheless, at different stages, unfortunate circumstances and ill-considered actions kept pushing the coach back to ruminating thoughts. For example, the broken leg which ended his playing career quite early or the unexpected birth of a son that made Iánic run away to Switzerland, where he took up a job as a stable cleaner. Indeed, football coaching was the only source of positive experiences for Iánic. His early success as a practitioner, led him to contemplate the illusion of a different future. He saw the possibility of embodying a new identity and invested in it. As a result, Iánic’s sporting identity grew in prominence up to a point in which his self and his coaching role became a single entity:

“His salary was no longer that of a stable cleaner (...). He ended up seeing a good chunk of the World. He enjoyed the friendly matches in Europe. Everything was so near. Sometimes he would breakfast in Switzerland, lunch in Austria, and dinner in Germany (...). ‘I’m not even going to tell you how much I earned’, he said, showing his stuffed chest as usual” (p.40)

“Football was and continued to be one of the most efficient resources to allow social ascension to those who would maybe never achieve it without the sport” (p.117)

Football coaching gave Iánic a different social status and financial comfort. However, his willingness to leave behind a better paycheck in Switzerland and move to Rio de Janeiro looking for greater challenge, shows his level of commitment to coaching and the strength of his coaching identity.

In resume, Iánic's journey is consistent with Roderick's (2006) suggestion of the existence of an intimate connection between work and self, "such that work in which people engage comes to be closely bound up with their conceptions of self – that is, who they have been, who they are and who they would like to be" (p.15).

What it means to be Coach

Early success led Iánic to reinforce the reflective and operational principles that underpinned his coaching activity. These were mainly learned through his lived experiences, being coached and observing other coaches as a young player, and as a football fan. Iánic was oriented by a traditional, popular conceptualisation of football, rejected by the higher classes and based on the exaltation of competitiveness, discipline, violence, sacrifice, physical strength, and obedience to authority (Bourdieu, 1978). Although mostly fictional and set in different historical and geographical locations, Iánic's behaviours are in many aspects similar to those observed by Cushion and Jones (2006) in their work with Albion Football Club's coaching staff. Iánic displays an authoritarian leadership style, coach-centred, creating an environment based on one-directional communication (from the coach to the athlete), fear and homophobia, which are weakly disguised as manliness:

"A football coach was one of the few remaining gods in today's desacralized world. With his own fingers, he would move the wires that would decide the destiny of that shitty forward and of two other dozens of mortals, who made the starting XI or not". (p. 109)

More than specific reflections of Brazilian or British cultures, Iánic's beliefs and behaviours appear to mirror the traditions of a more general field: professional football. Although mostly representing the views and experiences of players, the work of Roderick (2006) and colleagues (Roderick & Schumacher, 2017) has been instrumental in

providing a better understanding of a dichotomous field. Where fans and young players may expect to see a 'labour of love', professional footballers often experience a ruthless and unforgiving environment. The value of players is primarily based on current reputation (Roderick & Schumacker, 2017), which can fluctuate every week depending on match performance, injuries or perceived attitudes to work and pain, affecting their sense of self and identity (Roderick, 2006). In 'O Último Minuto', former Argentinean international Pablo Guiñazu is presented by coach Iánic to his young players as a role model:

“He was not even that great of a talent, but at least he would not stop until he had eaten all the grass of the pitch, biting the heels of the opponents that dared to approach his box. He would only fall when someone broke his legs, both of them. For those who did not know how to play, he would be such a great example (p.54)”

Nonetheless, Iánic's traditional, reactionary conceptualisation of the Game and his role ended up being challenged by the attitudes of his players. They did not identify with such authoritarian, warlike approach to coaching, nor did they share his values and beliefs, something that enraged the coach:

“Hopefully, his mother would forgive him saying that, but in his opinion, the players were just a bunch of girls who could not think for themselves. A random uniformity was now prevalent – he would say, enraged. No-one had a profile anymore, nor balls. And how he hated to live in a universe that abolished every difference. Even the underwear was becoming more feminine.” (p.63)

Iánic's apprenticeship of coaching via his own experiences as a player and fan is in line with the suggestion of Pope and colleagues (2014) that coaches' mainly acquire meaning from other practitioners. However, the authors also highlighted the importance of athlete feedback in shaping coach identity and in increasing the effectiveness of the coaching

process. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Pope et al. (2014) propose the creation of autonomy-supportive environments. These sharply contrast with Iánic's philosophy and behaviour: coach-centred and dismissive of the opinions and feelings of others. Iánic struggled to adapt his identity to the evolution of society and sport, refusing to accept the perceived increasing power of players:

“Football, just like the World, was lost. What he could see around him were professionals with no passion, mercenaries looking for any kind of small change. (...) Where were the ripped boots, the pulled grass, and the blood on the shirt? (...) When he used to play, there was love; there was a commitment. (...) Playing for a goalless draw was absurd. It did not exist. Drawing a match was just a more cowardly way of losing. Moreover, when the team in which he played would not win a single match, even playing away, they would at least destroy the opponent's field, crushing the enemy's ground until no single piece of grass remained intact (p.48)”.

Being a coach in an increasingly commercialised arena

Although considered by Bourdieu (1978) as a separate reality, sport – and more specifically football – are increasingly permeable to the current, globalised, neoliberalist movement that influenced a rising phenomenon of commercialisation of the ‘beautiful game’ (Dubal, 2010). The empowerment and exaltation of the individual resulting from the neoliberalist movement contradict, or at least disperse, some of the core values traditionally instilled by team sports, like collective discipline. Curiously, after being created by the social elite, and adopted and adapted by the working classes (Bourdieu, 1978), it seems that the commercialisation of football and the increasing private investment may be giving origin to a *nouvelle bourgeoisie*, interested in monetizing the “public ritual of football” (Dubal, 2010, p. 126). As key figures in this entertainment business, players have become wealthy, receiving higher salaries, longer contracts, and more visibility (exponentiated by the advent of social media) than their coaches, whom

they used to rely on, in the past, for the assignation of capital. Looking at the English Premier League, Stead (1999, p. 24) has pointed out that “player power has increased disproportionately”.

With the organisational metamorphosis of professional football clubs, football managers have lost some of their remits, particularly those linked to transfer policy and the definition of the clubs’ longitudinal strategies (Morrow & Howieson, 2014). Additionally, the introduction of a culture of hyper-specialisation in professional sport has led to the addition of multiple support personnel to traditional coaching teams, together with the introduction of sporting and performance directors. Notwithstanding, the “level of media and stakeholder scrutiny of managerial performance and decision-making is greater than ever” (Morrow & Howieson, 2014, p.515). Even at the highest level of the Game, there are suggestions that the job title of ‘manager’ may be misleading. For example, a serial-winning coach (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016) like José Mourinho, claims that “football is changing, and managers should be called head coaches.” (Mourinho, in Bascombe, 2018). Previously powerful and influential figures in clubs’ long-term strategies in the past, many coaches are now being ‘invited’ to focus almost exclusively on player technical and tactical development (Penn, 2002).

Therefore, redefining the coach’s role in professional football is just as important as it is problematic. It is also fundamental to understand how this evolutive process can impact on existing cases of role prominence and how current and future coaches can be better prepared to face potential challenges associated with professional changes in their lives. Furthermore, it must be taken into account that most reports and inspiring tales of ‘heroes’ and ‘superstars’ refer to the very few who make it to the top of the football pyramid. Indeed, little is known about the working conditions of the majority of professional players and coaches – like João Iánic -, who develop their activities under

the radar of mainstream media. Referring to players, Roderick (2006) and colleagues (Roderick & Schumacher, 2017) have highlighted pressing issues such as contingent employment, sharp decreases in value and reputation due to long-term injuries, unceasing evaluation, lack of work-life balance, ageism and job temporality. All of these may contribute to players experiencing difficulties in maintaining a stabilised sense of self and identity. Players interviewed by Roderick (2006) identified themselves as commodities.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the ‘new business of football’ is no less than ruthless with coaches too, which may result in a misalignment with existing conceptualisations of coaching identity and the expectations and behaviours associated. In fact, although usually proving ineffective, the number of managerial dismissals has increased in the past decades in European football. Coaches are usually the first to be held accountable when teams fail to perform (Nissen, 2016). This fight for survival puts coaches under permanent pressure, leading them to work long hours and attend to a myriad of tasks, many of which they may not necessarily control.

The potentially negative consequences of identity prominence

The increasing complexity of coaching environments, under the influence of neoliberal philosophies, raises questions regarding the potentially damaging effects of professional coaching at different levels – not only in the coaches’ perceptions of self and identity, but also (and consequently) in their mental and physical health. Furthermore, a culture of hypermasculinity has often been associated with football at different levels – from school sport (e.g. Hickey, 2008) to the professional game (Welch, 1997; Roderick, 2006; Jones, 2008). Such pervasive culture, perpetuated for example by the frequent ‘fast-tracking’ of former professional athletes into coaching positions (Blackett, Evans, & Piggott, 2017), may contribute to a perception that leadership requires portraying a public image of strength, which in turn can prevent coaches from disclosing their emotions (Bird,

1996) and having broader interests. Furthermore, Iánic's frequent exposure to violence and authoritarianism throughout his childhood made it even more challenging for him to understand and adapt to societal change:

“[Iánic] would end up confessing that he had felt lost, that he had made a mistake, thinking that he could put things back in order, trusting the whip, when everyone in the world was already carrying a textbook book under the arm, filled with human rights” (p. 67)

Due to the prominence of his coaching identity, indistinguishable from any other, Iánic's perceived loss of power and agency proved impossible for him to digest. Although recognising he could have adapted to the new paradigm, Iánic chose the reactionary route, scheduling a battle with progress:

“Violence is the only patrimony of those in despair, and those who were born commanding cannot forget the anger provoked by those who were supposed to die obeying (p.179)”

In ‘O Último Minuto’, the power struggle between players and coaches is depicted symbolically by Backes and most visible off the pitch. The consequences of Iánic's inability to distinguish between his personal and professional life ended up having irreversible consequences in his life. After divorcing from his first wife, whom he had estranged after the birth of their son, Iánic initiated an affair with a much younger woman. Not long after the start of their relationship, Iánic found the woman cheating on him with one of his most talented forwards, who he insisted on keeping on the bench. The coach could not accept such an extraordinary blow to his expectations of power and control.

Indeed, he struggled to understand how a ‘mere’ substitute player could dare to interfere with his authority. Iánic appeared to have, at least momentarily, put his personal issues aside at a cup final, selecting the skilled young player for the starting lineup. That decision proved successful, with the promising forward scoring the decisive goal that secured the trophy. However, it soon became clear that the player’s success was far too damaging for the coach’s ego and that his altruistic action had been part of a Machiavellian plan. Thus, in a desperate attempt to assert his power and regain a feeling of control and masculine pride, Iánic ended up stabbing the young man to death during the title celebrations.

Iánic’s role prominence was so strong that it made him unable to reflect and adapt to the evolution of society. Moreover, it prevented him from realising the apparent similarities between the living and working conditions of players and coaches in a football-turned-business-world and empathising with them. Although notoriously exaggerated to serve the narrative, the illustration of such behaviour may be useful to reflect on the dangers of role prominence to the mental health and well-being of coaches.

Despite the usually secretive nature of coaches’ personal lives, there are some anecdotal examples of the potential nefarious consequences of ‘being the job’. In 2016, former Portuguese professional player and manager Joaquim Jesus ‘Quinito’ publicly disclosed his bitter experience in ‘the Beautiful Game’. He ended his managerial career abruptly in 2011, due to the death of his 32-year-old son. Since then, Quinito has been fighting a severe depression:

“I have an enormous sense of guilt. We live football 24 hours a day; we do not see our kids growing; I was not there when my son said ‘daddy’ for the first time, I did not see him learning how to ride a bike or learning to swim. I was not there to hug him every day. Months would pass without me hugging him. Because of football, I paid too high of a price” (Quinito, in Sport Informa, 2016)

Even if through less tragic testimonies, other coaches and coach educators have spoken out regarding the serious negative consequences that stress and pressure had – and have – in their lives. The German documentary ‘Trainer’ (Pause, 2013) followed three professional football coaches from the country’s higher divisions throughout a sporting season, interviewing many others who operate at the pinnacle of the Game. Frank Wormuth, former head of coach education at the German Football Federation, admits that while formal qualifications may be essential to prepare coaches for the harsh reality of professional football, direct experiences on the field usually comes with a shock:

“[In coaching courses] we tell them what to expect. Most of them know, but when it happens, and you talk to them, they say: ‘I did not expect it to be so bad. (...) That kind of pressure is insane. There is nothing but stress, stress, stress. I do not mean to be socio-critical, but what we are doing is brutal. I believe we are all heading in a direction that we know it is bad, but cannot stop” (Wormuth, in Pause, 2013)

Moreover, while still minimal in comparison to literature on athletes, coaches’ experiences of stress and burnout are capturing a growing interest from researchers (e.g. Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2017; Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2016; Fletcher & Scott, 2010; McCabe & Holmes, 2009; Moen, Myhre, & Moldovan, 2018). Burnout is a state of mental and physical exhaustion associated with negative thoughts and absence of motivation. Despite not being recognised as a psychiatric disorder, its effects can be damaging to an individual’s health, especially if no action is taken to mitigate burnout (Altfeld, Schaffran, Kleinert, & Kellmann, 2018). The current expectations associated with the coaching role makes practitioners susceptible to physical and emotional challenges (Mallett, 2010). Adequate recovery is, therefore, crucial to maintaining high levels of coaching effectiveness. However, Kellmann, Altfeld, and Mallett (2016) found that coaches usually forfeit family and leisure time to prepare training sessions and

matches in further detail, which may be a reflection of or contribute to enhancing role prominence. Furthermore, excessive engagement with coaching tasks may result in physical inactivity and precarious sleep. In a case-study with the Australian under-20 men's football team, Lastella and colleagues (2017) found that the coach had less sleeping quality and less sleeping time per night than players. Such account is alarming if one considers the potential impairments that sleep restriction may inflict on coaches' psychological well-being, decision-making and overall coaching performance (Lastella et al., 2017), which in turn may have a 'cascade effect' into poor player experiences.

Although coaches learn from other coaches, and the feedback provided by athletes, it is essential to consider as well the expectations of sporting organisations (clubs as employers) and the broader sporting 'culture'. In an increasingly complex sporting environment, it is vital to integrate them in a much-needed reconstruction of the role of the coach and its associated demands. While it has been shown that it is important for coaches to develop an identity that can enhance their commitment, energy and drive to perform well in the role, it is also crucial to recognise that this identity prominence is associated with strong emotions, particularly those related to evaluations of performance in the role (Pope et al., 2014). Therefore, although this prominence may be acceptable during positive moments, Pope and colleagues (2014) report that negative emotions are still prevalent. Thus, if identity prominence is not dealt with or left unchecked, it may lead to the ill-being of coaches. As such, the role of the coach and associated expectations should perhaps be shaped and tempered with the care of self, and the care of the coach by sporting organisations.

An increasing number of researchers (e.g. (Roberts, Baker, Reeves, Jones, & Cronin, 2018); Cronin, Hayton, Hjälm, & Armour, 2019) is recognising and alerting for the importance of caring for, and about coaches, due to the potential physical and

emotional strains, their own caring remits may generate. Through a case-study of a youth performance basketball coach, 'Dave', Cronin and colleagues (2019) explore the encroachment between personal and sporting life and its potential to become a vicious circle: "when the job(s) becomes almost all consuming, it may force the coach to have to perform more emotion work within their personal life." (2019, p.112). They suggest junior coaches should receive education on emotional labour and receive structured support, for example in the shape of mentoring. In turn, Roberts and colleagues (2018) used narrative analysis and a storytelling approach to explore the case of a performance coach, 'Steve', who finds himself dealing with comorbid depression and alcohol misuse. Just like in Backes' novel, and Dave's case, Steve's struggle also resulted in a broken marriage. Roberts and colleagues recognise the difficulties of effectively assisting individuals who do not engage in support-seeking. In football, the phenomenon of commercialisation seems to have reinforced a 'dog-eat-dog' mentality, as illustrated by the work of Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, and Nelson (2012). Potrac's unwillingness to align with the ruthlessness and immorality of the footballing world made him leave his role as an assistant coach to embrace lecturing. However, João Iánic's extreme role prominence made his existence dependant on his job. He failed to reflect on his position and consider alternatives until the end of his days:

"[Iánic] decided to leave before he got to the end, shortening what had become a slow agony, declaring his own death sentence, without wanting any sacrifices or dying for someone, whoever it could be, lonely as he always had been. I know that he adapted to the new facts and he could not accept that, although his grudges had become wounds, he was not able to remove the stinger that was killing him from the inside".

Strategies for the mitigation of role prominence

Exacerbated role prominence and the challenges posed by an increasingly demanding sporting arena require urgent attention. In the case of athletes, support is essential at the end of their performing career, especially in cases of strong athletic identity (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Coaches may also benefit from support regarding identity issues, which can prove particularly challenging not only to more experienced coaches, but also to those working full-time. The deep immersion in their habitus may result in coaches becoming more resistant to change, and especially to formal educational initiatives (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). With limited job security and multiple stressors (Fletcher & Scott, 2010), coaches may opt for occupying their time and minds with training and match preparation. As such, it is fundamental to engage international agencies, national governing bodies and clubs, not only to remind them of their duty of care with regards to all their employees (Fletcher & Scott, 2010) and not just their athletes. To do so, they could promote tailored initiatives designed to mitigate any episodes of physical or mental illness of coaches, while working towards preventing future cases. Moments of temporary unemployment may represent the ideal timing to assist professional coaches with their professional development, health and well-being. Additionally, the creation of media campaigns with the participation of serial-winning coaches as ambassadors for mental health could potentially enhance the effectiveness of the message. Finally, it is essential that any initiative assist coaches to become more knowledgeable and adaptable when dealing with societal changes, and generational gaps. For example, in a study with tennis coaches working with so-called Generation Z players (born after 1996), Gould, Nalepa and Mignano (2020) found that practitioners struggled with athletes' "shorter attention spans, poor communication skills, inability to deal with adversity" (p.104), as well as interacting with their support networks.

Conclusion

Literary fiction can be used as a rich source of data to spark meaningful discussions and debates around difficult, uncomfortable themes. By writing 'O Último Minuto', Marcelo Backes provided an opportunity for a timely reflection on pressing issues in football and sport coaching, such as identity and role prominence. Individuals hold different roles in their lives. These identities are constructed through interactions with others who hold the same role (e.g. other coaches) and via the feedback of those in opposing roles (e.g. athletes). Coaches internalise expectations, values, and beliefs, developing a hierarchy – prominence – that will inform their behaviours. Identities higher in this hierarchy are more important and central to the person. They can be revealed by the strength of emotional responses to other's evaluation of the coach's performance in the role. Role prominence may enhance coaches' commitment, energy and motivation to invest in their tasks. However, high coaching identity, i.e. 'being the job', has its potential pitfalls. If other identities are dismissed, and the coaching identity is threatened (e.g. by the increasing commercialisation of football, its structures and systems) there is the risk of a negative path, which can result in experiences of burnout, unsustainable pressure, and ill-being. These experiences have been illustrated not only by the fictional life story of coach Iánic, but also by an increasing number of anecdotal examples involving professional coaches. More research is needed to uncover more about the mechanisms that lead to or create the 'turning points' in the coaches' paths. A better understanding of identity prominence may also assist with promoting its facilitative nature while mitigating its potentially debilitating consequences. The increasing professionalisation of sports means that, just like athletes, coaches have also become performers who cannot afford to work in isolation, detached from societal evolution. Just like in Iánic's tale, authoritarian, self-centred, and hypermasculine leadership styles appear to be quickly running out of time in the real world too.

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Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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