Transitions from elite professional player to professional coach: The case of rugby league in England

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Introduction
A transition has been defined as an event resulting in changes in one’s assumptions about oneself and one’s world, and which requires corresponding changes in one’s behaviours and relationships (Lavallee et al., 2004). Transitions in sport have become topical areas of interest in recent sport psychology literature (as demonstrated by Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000), including transitions in elite sport (e.g., Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Wylleman et al., 1998). Despite ‘performance discontinuation’ and ‘professional occupation’ being considered in developmental models of sport transitions, the experiences of those undergoing specific transition from elite professional player (performer) to professional coach have not been studied extensively (a notable exception being Schinke et al., 1995). This paper will explore this topic within the sport of Rugby League, a sport which has, since the advent of Superleague (the highest level of professional club rugby league in England), anecdotally at least provided players with a greater attraction to coaching as a career.

Methods
Based on the more recently employed developmental models of transition, it was anticipated that those undergoing such player-to-coach transitions in rugby league would experience a range of behavioural, cognitive and emotional challenges both within and outside of their sport. To explore these, a purposive sample of professional rugby league coaches (n=6) in Superleague, recently (range: 10 months-3 years) retired from professional playing careers, were interviewed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews that focused on a range of topics previously found germane to transitions in sport. Interviews typically lasted 45-60 minutes. Fully transcribed interviews were formatted for QSR N5 (2000) (NUD*IST) software package for analysis. Employing inductive and deductive content analysis (Weber, 1985) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) techniques, extracts from the transcripts were sifted and clustered around a number of common underlying themes identified as influential in the experience of the transition process. Repeating this procedure through a hierarchical process identified a number of higher order themes. These emergent themes were then deductively categorised into a number of general dimensions for discussion.

Results
The higher order themes (examples in brackets) were categorised under the following general dimensions: decision to move into coaching (nature of stimulus to coach, love of the game, pre-retirement planning for coaching); qualities and skills needed to make successful player-to-coach transitions (strong self-belief, coaching philosophy, benefits of being a former elite player, fatalistic attitude to job security, single mindedness); difficulties of player-to-coach transitions (missing playing, player relationships, structured thinking); support needed for successful transitions (family support, structure to support future transitions); expectations and goals for future coaching careers (promotion to head coach, financial security).

Discussion/Conclusion
Consistent with other researchers’ findings (e.g., Gordon & Lavallee, 2003), many of the factors influencing the transition experience appear psychosocial in nature. It also appears that few newly appointed coaches in rugby league had considered or planned for coaching careers whilst playing; there were dichotomous opinions as to whether this was disadvantageous. Each of the emerging themes and general dimensions are discussed in relation to existing sport transition literature and suggestions made concerning possible support that can be made available to performers in transition to coaching careers. Limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research in this area conclude the paper.

References