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# The practices and developmental pathways of professional and Olympic serial winning coaches

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### **Abstract**

In 2011, the Innovation Group of Leading Agencies of the International Council for Coaching Excellence initiated a project aimed at supporting the identification and development of the next generation of high performance coaches. The project, entitled Serial Winning Coaches, studied the personalities, practices and developmental pathways of professional and Olympic coaches who had repeatedly achieved success at the highest level of sport. This paper is the third publication originating from this unique project. In the first paper, Mallett and Coulter (2016) focused on the development and testing of a novel multi-layered methodology in understanding a person, through a single case study of a successful Olympic coach. In the second, Mallett and Lara-Bercial (2016) applied this methodology to a large sample of Serial Winning Coaches and offered a composite account of their personality. In this third instalment, we turn the focus onto the actual practices and developmental pathways of these coaches. The composite profile of their practice emerging from the analysis revolves around four major themes: Philosophy, Vision, People and Environment. In addition, a summary of the developmental activities accessed by these coaches and their journey to success is also offered. Finally, we consider the overall findings of the project and propose the concept of Driven Benevolence as the overarching operational principle driving the actions and behaviours of this group of Serial Winning Coaches.



57 methodology of understanding a person in the field of sport psychology, through a single case  
58 study of a successful Olympic coach. This pilot research was, to our knowledge, the first  
59 attempt to pursue a multi-layered understanding (McAdams & Pals, 2006) of a (successful)  
60 coach. In the second publication, Mallett and Lara-Bercial (2016) applied this multi-layered  
61 methodology to a large sample of Serial Winning Coaches. As a result, they offered a  
62 composite account of their personalities, as well as a set of recommendations for the effective  
63 recruitment and development of high performance coaches. In this third instalment, we focus  
64 on the day-to-day work and the developmental pathways of this group of coaches. We share  
65 what we have learnt about ‘what they do’ and ‘how they got there’ and thus complement the  
66 previous two publications.

### 67 **High Performance Coaching**

68 The high performance sport environment (Olympic and professional sports) has been  
69 described as dynamic, complex, unpredictable, and at times characterised by chaos (e.g.,  
70 Purdy & Jones, 2011). Repeated success in this climate is highly challenging. Succeeding  
71 repeatedly is the prerogative of very few athletes and coaches. Ever growing competition  
72 from increasingly more proficient national Olympic squads, the rise in popularity and  
73 commercialization, and improved quality of certain sports in non-traditional countries, the  
74 importance of the stakes relative to the country’s investment in elite sport, the central role of  
75 sport in many societies, and the lack of optimal resources or appropriate coordination and  
76 maximisation of the wealth of resources available are some of the factors coaches have to  
77 contend with. In their role as central actors in the coach-athlete-performance relationship  
78 (Cushion, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Mallett, 2010), high performance coaches should therefore be  
79 considered as performers in their own right (Frey, 2007; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung,  
80 2002; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016).

81           Against this unsettled background, recruiting and developing coaches of elite athletes  
82 and teams is problematic and typically marked by serendipity and chance (Mallett, 2010). In  
83 many sports, coaches are traditionally employed because of their playing success (Gilbert,  
84 Côté & Mallett, 2006; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006) and without sufficient training (Mallett, 2010;  
85 Mallett, Rossi, Rynne, & Tinning, 2016; Rynne, Mallett & Tinning, 2006). A sub-optimal  
86 match between the capacity of the appointed coach and the situational demands of the job can  
87 lead to underachievement in performance outcomes and significant disruption and cost if  
88 released prior to completion of contract (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). Therefore, investors  
89 and sport officials with responsibility for the identification, recruitment and development of  
90 elite coaches are keen to better understand what types of coaches and coaching practices lead  
91 to sustained success. They are also eager to gain further insight into how successful coaches  
92 develop their expertise in order to build appropriate coach education and development  
93 programmes that can enhance coaches' ability to negotiate and cope with the extreme  
94 demands of elite sport.

95           Perhaps not surprisingly, given the importance and net economic value of sport in  
96 society, research in this field has intensified in recent years. Researchers have studied expert  
97 coaches' developmental experiences (Erickson, Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Jiménez,  
98 Lorenzo & Ibañez, 2008; Koh, Mallett & Wang, 2011; Mallett, Rynne, & Billett, 2014; Nash  
99 & Sproule, 2009; Rynne & Mallett, 2012); their most valued characteristics and practices  
100 (Ruiz & Salinero, 2011; Vallée & Bloom, 2005); their perceived needs (Allen & Shaw,  
101 2009); how they draw from the intelligence provided by sport scientists (Read, Rodgers &  
102 Hall, 2008); their relationship with performance managers and directors (Fletcher & Arnold,  
103 2011); and their psychological make-up, skills and coping strategies (Chan & Mallett, 2012;  
104 Olusoga, Maynar, Hays & Butt, 2012; Thelwell, Heston, Greenlees & Hutchings, 2008). In  
105 the main, a coach-focused approach has been used in the above studies. Some studies

106 however, have also considered athletes' interpretations of their coaches' practices and  
107 methods and the impact they have on their performance (Norman & French, 2013; Purdy &  
108 Jones, 2011).

### 109 **Method**

110 The main goal of the whole project was to elicit commonalities amongst this very  
111 select group of highly successful coaches, and hence, a pragmatic research design that  
112 focused on trying to answer the questions posed by the IGLA was implemented. The  
113 researchers, however, were cognizant that gaining an insight into the different story each  
114 coach has to tell was as important as the shared attributes between them. Therefore, a mixed-  
115 methods approach, which combined idiographic and nomothetic techniques, was the chosen  
116 design. The study thus spans across research paradigms embracing a mix of positivist and  
117 phenomenological lenses to gather and interpret knowledge about the same issues from  
118 different vantage points. The integration of data from these multiple sources enables the  
119 creation of a meta-story about the world of consistently successful high performance  
120 coaching while also identifying and celebrating individuality and uniqueness amongst the  
121 sample. This acknowledgement recognises the futility of searching for a 'magic recipe' or  
122 'single profile' for the SWC, yet aims to meaningfully contribute to an empirical base, which  
123 can hopefully better inform policy and practice in coach identification, recruitment, and  
124 development.

### 125 **Participants**

126 Using the criteria outlined in the previous paragraph, members of the IGLA group  
127 were asked to identify as many SWC candidates as possible within their countries and, where  
128 appropriate and feasible, from other nations. An original shortlist of 31 coaches was  
129 compiled. Institutional ethics approval was granted prior to sending a comprehensive

130 information pack and a request to participate in the study to the nominated coaches. A total of  
131 17 coaches accepted the invitation (see Table 1 for demographic data of the sample).

132 Table 1

133 Serial Winning Coaches' descriptive data

Number of Coaches	17 (2 female) including 1 Paralympic coach
Sports	Field Hockey (2), Ice Hockey (2), Basketball (2), Speed Skating (2), Sailing, Windsurfing, Rowing (4), Swimming, Judo, and Athletics
Countries	Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Serbia, UK
Gender Coached	Male (4); Female (1); Male and Female (12)
Number of Combined Gold Medals/Major Championships/Professional League Titles	160 (at time of publication)
Age	44 to 75 years (M = 55.7 years)
Coaching	8 to 45 years (M = 29.2 years; HP M = 25.2 years)
Experience as Athlete	International (10), National/Regional (6) None (1)

134

135           Following confirmation of the coaches' participation, they were requested to identify  
136 at least two athletes they coached for recruitment into the study. The criteria for athlete  
137 selection included having won a gold medal or major league championship under this coach  
138 in the last five years and having worked with the coach for at least two years. Altogether, 19  
139 athletes relating to 11 different coaches were recruited into the study. The sample included  
140 athletes from six different sports (rowing = 7, field hockey = 4, speed skating = 4, sailing = 2,  
141 basketball = 1, windsurfing = 1) and six different countries (Canada, Germany, Israel,  
142 Netherlands, Spain, UK).

143 **Measures**

144 **Demographic Questionnaire.** Coaches and athletes were asked to complete a  
145 preliminary demographic questionnaire aimed at gaining descriptive information as to their  
146 personal history.

147 **NEO-FFI-3 (McCrae & Costa, 2010) and Personal Strivings Questionnaires**  
148 **Emmons' (1989).** These two instruments were used to collect data specific to the first and  
149 second layer of personality – self as social actor and as motivated agent respectively  
150 (McAdams & Pals, 2006). For a full description please refer to Mallett and Coulter (2016)  
151 and Mallett and Lara-Bercial (2016).

152 **Semi-structured Interview.** SWC and the athletes they coach participated in semi-  
153 structured interviews to corroborate or expand the data provided by the psychometric  
154 questionnaires. For example, coaches and athletes were asked: ‘What personal qualities do  
155 you think have helped you/your coach to become a SWC?’ Researchers also used the  
156 interviews to elicit new information regarding practical examples of their daily behaviours  
157 and the strategies coaches use to successfully navigate the high performance environment.  
158 For instance: ‘What is it that you do/your coach does that has allowed you/her to become a  
159 SWC?’. The interviews also contained specific questions in a number of areas such as the  
160 learning and development opportunities accessed by SWC (i.e., ‘What type of learning and  
161 development opportunities have you accessed over your coaching career?’; ‘What learning  
162 and development opportunities have been most important in your journey to success?’); the  
163 vital steps in their journey to coaching glory (i.e., ‘What have been the key steps in your  
164 coaching career?’; ‘Have there been any critical moments in your coaching career?’); and the  
165 key challenges facing high performance coaches in the future (i.e., ‘What do you think will  
166 be the biggest challenge for high performance coaches in the future?’; ‘Do you think high  
167 performance coaching will change in the future and how?’). In addition, athletes were also

168 asked to compare the SWC with other coaches they had worked with (i.e., ‘What are the  
169 fundamental differences between this coach and other coaches you have worked with in the  
170 past?’); and with themselves over time (i.e., ‘Has your coach changed in any way over the  
171 years? If so, what do you feel have been the main changes?’).

172         The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 180 minutes and they were mostly  
173 conducted face-to-face. Three interviews were conducted using video conferencing.  
174 Interviews were conducted in the native language of the coaches and athletes, transcribed  
175 verbatim, and subsequently translated into English. Over 1,000 pages of double-spaced text  
176 were produced. Coaches and athletes were sent the interview transcripts for checking (Patton,  
177 2002), however, no amendments to the transcripts were necessary.

#### 178 **Interview Data Analysis**

179         In the present paper, we focus explicitly on the findings arising from the analysis of  
180 the bio-demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. More specifically, we  
181 concentrate on two primary research questions; namely, coaches’ practice (what do they do?)  
182 and their development pathway (how did they become the coaches they are?). For a full  
183 exposition of the personality profiles of the SWC please refer to Mallett and Lara-Bercial  
184 (2016).

185         We analysed the data following the principles of thematic analysis described by  
186 Braun and Clarke (2006) and managed the data using NVIVO10 software. The six-step  
187 approach proposed by Braun and Clarke included a period of familiarisation with the data  
188 through repeated readings of the data sets; a phase of initial generation of codes; categorising  
189 the general codes into themes; reviewing the themes; defining and refining the themes; and  
190 the final production of the full report from which this article has been developed. The  
191 coaches’ and athletes’ interview data were coded separately after which key themes from  
192 both data sets were compared. The broad themes that emerged were similar, yet there were

193 noteworthy nuances within the themes, to which we draw attention in the results and  
 194 discussion sections. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that there is always potential for some  
 195 confirmatory bias in the analytical process, which we were cognizant of and attempted to  
 196 minimize (Patton, 2002). Strategies to minimize researcher bias included multiple readings of  
 197 the text by both authors, and the extraction of major themes that were discussed until  
 198 consensus was reached.

## 199 Results

### 200 The Day-to-Day Practices of Serial Winning Coaches

201 The analysis of the interview data with the coaches and their athletes elicited four  
 202 major themes: Philosophy, Vision, People, and Environment. Within each major theme, sub-  
 203 themes were identified thus providing an inductive operational framework of SWC’s day-to-  
 204 day practice (Figure 1).



205

206 *Figure 1. Serial Winning Coaches Day-to-Day Practice Framework*

207 **Philosophy**

208 Coaches and athletes felt that the SWC's practices were anchored upon a very clear  
209 philosophical standpoint (their goals, values and beliefs), which provided them with a strong  
210 sense of purpose and direction. Within this major theme, three recurring elements surfaced  
211 throughout both coach and athlete interviews: first, a disposition towards adopting an athlete-  
212 centred perspective; second, the espousing of high moral values such as honesty, loyalty and  
213 respect for the athlete; and third, the explicit attempts to reach a relative work-life balance for  
214 both athletes and coach (for a full description of this theme, please see Mallett & Lara-  
215 Bercial, 2016).

216 Yes, and coaching, but not only as a person, but also as a human being. And also  
217 some sort of a manager, because he wants... at some point my management quit, for  
218 example and he searched for a new management for me, so he wants the best for me  
219 and then... of course it is not part of his job, but he wants... he just does that. I think  
220 that is the bond you have or something, but he is very... yes, how should I say this...  
221 he is very involved with you. And sometimes more than you know. And he treats  
222 everybody of our team like that, so to speak. (Athlete 7)

223 **Vision**

224 A clearly articulated vision of what is necessary to win was central to success.  
225 Coaches and athletes concurred with regards to the importance of this area as well as the key  
226 elements within it that support its realisation. The ability to predict, particularly with regards  
227 to what 'it will take to win a gold medal or championship the next time around' (Coach 8)  
228 and, specifically, what will be the decisive elements of that performance that will make  
229 winning possible was highlighted by both groups. There was also a strong belief in the need  
230 to constantly innovate to stay ahead of the pack and to be "future-proof" (Coach 9). Equal  
231 importance was attached to the ability of the coach to simplify what is, by definition, a very

232 complex environment with lots of moving pieces. SWC are able to consistently identify all  
233 these pieces, how they fit together and prioritize those fundamental for success. In the high  
234 performance environment, time, attention and resources are limited and having clarity about  
235 where the biggest return on investment is appears central to SWC practice. In addition, being  
236 able to maintain “focus on the big prize” (Athlete 11) and ignore myriad potential distractions  
237 along the way was identified as critical to success. Athlete 10 commented on this last point:

238         So he’s, that’s just quite special within this sport because you know we really only  
239         peak for one event in the year, which is the world championships. We have a number  
240         of other events in the meantime but they are not as serious, it’s not like [other sport]  
241         for instance where you get points for each game so you have to perform at a high level  
242         each time. What [name of coach] does very well, he’s able to plan the whole year  
243         around how to perform at that one event, say the Olympics for instance. And it takes a  
244         lot of foresight and patience to get that balance right. And you can see other nations  
245         they might perform much better earlier in the year or you know at different times, but  
246         they don’t really get the one that matters right. And for [name of coach] he is able to  
247         see the bigger picture, put together a training programme, put together the plan and  
248         how he motivates his athletes and pulls that into that picture. And that’s what’s able to  
249         bring the best out of his guys at the right time. (Athlete 10)

250         The emphasis placed on future performance markers and the simplification of the  
251         inherent complexity of the task led SWC to espouse a long-term view of planning focused  
252         totally around the realisation of the coaches’ vision. In this planning process, coaches and  
253         athletes stressed the vast amount of time dedicated to putting the plan together and the deep  
254         levels of thinking that go into it to account for any eventuality and develop “a plan B, C and  
255         D” (coach 7). Importantly, the planning described by SWC was action-led and process-  
256         driven. In other words, for every set objective, the relevant actions to fulfil such objectives

257 are clearly identified and a process is put in place to complete those actions. The following  
258 two quotes illustrate these elements.

259 I think I am also able to plot out a career, so I am also able to tell someone to do this  
260 and to do that, that your route is not parallel to that [other athlete], and that you are  
261 not able to copy that route, is clear, because that is fairly unique, but I think I can  
262 provide direction to people and then strongly help them in that direction, yes, I think  
263 so. (Coach 7)

264 I think you should know your highway [your plan], see always that point there and  
265 still be aware, that sometimes you have to go to a by-pass [take a diversion] because  
266 of some road work or something you have, it's not that straight every time, but you  
267 always know where the motorway is. (Coach 9)

268 The clarity exhibited in relation to their vision and the subsequent planning process  
269 facilitates the development of another fundamental process which SWC pay considered  
270 attention to: reviewing and adjusting the plan. Coaches highlighted the need to use high  
271 amounts of critical thinking around their own beliefs and actions and to decisively act and  
272 change things when something is not working. Acknowledging the need to adjust something  
273 “rather than not doing anything about it to protect one's pride” (Coach 2) was seen by both  
274 groups as a sign of strength on the part of the coach. In fact, athletes stated that they had a lot  
275 of respect for coaches who were able to admit their own mistakes and that, in turn, this  
276 supported the development of a culture where mistakes are acknowledged and dealt with  
277 quickly and expediently for the benefit of future performance.

278 Athletes highlighted that one of the most important elements of the review process  
279 SWC engaged in revolved around the monitoring of athlete progress and performance. While  
280 recognising the “painstaking and stressful nature” of this process (Athlete 11), they stressed  
281 the contribution it made to the creation of a culture of accountability and responsibility. This

282 also acted as a motivating factor for athletes who, due to the close monitoring of  
283 performance, felt “training was customised to suit their needs and stage of development”  
284 (Athlete 8) and not a one-size fits all. Similarly, this approach allowed athletes to keep track  
285 of their progression, thus also enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

## 286 **People**

287 SWC viewed the selection of competent staff and players who fit their culture as key  
288 to success. Factors beyond ability were considered for both groups. Special emphasis was  
289 given to the operational fit between the athlete/staff member and the gaps in current provision  
290 (i.e., bringing people in on a needs-led basis) and the character fit (i.e., ensuring that  
291 regardless of quality, the new team member would not upset the existing dynamic or uphold  
292 different beliefs and values to those of the coach). Coach 3 summarised this ethos in the  
293 following statement:

294 [you need to build a group] in which players are comfortable with their roles and  
295 where at least they accept it, not always happily, but with a positive attitude to  
296 contribute to the project. A group where beside the legitimate personal and individual  
297 aspirations, what’s at the forefront of everyone’s mind is the team’s success.

298 Once the right people were *on the bus*, careful management was highlighted as vital to  
299 ensure everyone could perform to their potential. For staff this meant maintaining a good  
300 working relationship, but most importantly, that the allocation of roles is clear, a good fit  
301 with their skillset and that they understand the *working ways* of the organisation. Some  
302 coaches stressed the need for them to actively engage in the development of their staff, either  
303 through direct intervention, or through the allocation of jobs that allowed staff to be stretched  
304 and thus grow.

305 The interviews also offered a view of the SWC as a person who carefully and  
306 purposefully set out to foster belief in and around the organisation, club or team. This belief  
307 was broken down into three areas:

308 **Believe in ME.** SWC try to foster a feeling of trust in the coach's ability amongst the  
309 group. The two most frequently identified sources of belief in the coach were the coach's  
310 social capital (past as athlete, previous wins) and his/her ability to develop a positive bond  
311 with the athlete and/or the team (i.e., personal touch, open and honest communications,  
312 integrity, empathy, holistic approach to athlete development, being reliable and emotionally  
313 stable). Other sources of belief included the coach's persuasiveness and the capacity of the  
314 coach to lead by example (i.e., always prepared and ready, remaining calm under pressure  
315 and being able to acknowledge personal mistakes). For example:

316 You can't cut that out sometimes [the personal things]. You still have to be flexible  
317 when a guy comes to you when you have the most important session of the week and  
318 says 'look I have no-one to look after my child today.' You have to have a good  
319 compromise. (Coach 8)

320 They look up to you, like kids to parents. If you are stressed, they are stressed. If you  
321 are calm they are calm. If you are convinced, they are convinced. (Coach 6)

322 We set a certain standard, usually first to arrive and last to leave... Generally, I am  
323 around all the time, so I'm visible. Sometimes the visibility is more important than the  
324 details of what you are doing, so you are just, you are always in the line of vision. I  
325 think it is very important. (Coach 13)

326 **Believe in YOU(RSELF).** SWC invest time developing athletes' confidence in their  
327 own ability and the motivation to continue to strive to improve and win. This does not  
328 typically rely on kindness and positive reinforcement alone, but much more in striking an  
329 optimal balance between challenge and support that stimulates athlete growth. Belief is

330 developed through close monitoring of performance metrics coupled with decisive and  
331 corrective actions when progress halts. Athlete 11 saw it like this:

332 he is very perfectionistic, so he really focuses on the details, but he is very good at  
333 positive coaching, he does not only say what you are doing wrong, but he says what  
334 you are doing well and this combination makes him a champion maker.

335 Open demonstrations of trust in the athlete's talent, especially in the lead up to  
336 competition, focusing on process over results, shared decision-making, and the fostering of  
337 increased levels of self-reliance, self-awareness and leadership skills are important for this  
338 purpose too. Coach 6 indicated that "particularly before a competition, my job is to get their  
339 mind ready to compete, make them believe they can win". Finally, appropriate levels and  
340 modes of internal and external competition were also identified as a 'big driver for athlete  
341 motivation and success' (Athlete 11).

342 **Believe in US.** SWC promote a sense of common belief in the programme and the  
343 ability of those in it to achieve its joint goals. Various, and at times contrasting, ways to do  
344 this were elicited through the interviews. Some coaches advocated for the development of  
345 strong personal relationships with athletes and between them. Coach 4 talked about the  
346 importance of "a mountain retreat at the beginning of the year so they can get to know the  
347 new players" and "the need to do something special every now and then, a special lunch,  
348 change hotel or go for a drink or two". For others, a robust sense of collective discipline  
349 around common objectives was paramount. This shared identity included the surrendering of  
350 personal egos, clear understanding of and respect for everyone's contribution, and a sharp  
351 focus on day-to-day processes and routines with minimal fluctuations (see earlier passage  
352 from Coach 3).

353 Interviewed athletes expressed a view that team cohesion was built around personal  
354 connections with coach and teammates, coach discipline, provision of relevant and fresh

355 goals to avoid stagnation, and the handing over of some of the leadership and initiative  
356 traditionally reserved for the coaching staff to the playing group. For instance, Athlete 1 said  
357 that his coach:

358           was very aware that his job is to step in at the right moment and get the team moving.  
359           I think that's why he looks for a personal connection with the players beforehand, and  
360           it is very important for him to bring the team together as people.

361 In addition, a number of athletes indicated that, at times, their coach deliberately created  
362 instances of “crisis” (Athlete 2), which brought the team together (sometimes even against  
363 the coach) and was quite adept at playing “mind-games” (Athlete 1) to keep athletes from  
364 becoming complacent.

365           An additional area of interest in relation to athlete management revolved around the  
366 ability of the coach to be able to keep athletes level-headed and minimize mood fluctuations.  
367 SWC expressed a perceived need to keep athletes **firmly rooted and grounded**. This entailed  
368 three inter-related items: **avoiding complacency, steering athletes away from developing a**  
369 **sense of entitlement, and providing emotional stability**. SWC deal with athletes who are  
370 celebrities in their own right and are subject to adoration, criticism, and constant scrutiny by  
371 sports fans, and the media. The coaches in the sample had established strategies to tear down  
372 and re-build athletes when they felt they were becoming complacent due to success on the  
373 field or to the status and comforts afforded to elite performers. SWC were very keen to  
374 address all these issues early, explicitly and directly. Coach 8 talked about “ensuring that the  
375 players understand that fame and making a bit of money on corporate functions on the back  
376 of an Olympic gold medal is ok, but if you don't win the next one that will dry out quite  
377 quickly”.

378           Closely linked to this point, some SWC made a conscious effort to protect athletes  
379 against the development of a sense of entitlement, which could potentially impact on their

380 performance. They spoke about using strategies to foster a feeling of gratefulness amongst  
381 athletes and the realisation that, despite having worked very hard for it, they were very  
382 fortunate to be in the position they were, and that they could lose it all very quickly. Athlete 1  
383 explained how Coach 1 would “make me worry for four months about my place in the team  
384 for the Olympics, even though he knew I was a definite, just to keep me on my toes”. Finally,  
385 amongst all the hype and high levels of examination, which surround high performance  
386 athletes, SWC expressed the need to find ways to normalise and neutralise what is an  
387 unusual, hectic, and pressurised way of life. The coach was seen as a provider of stability and  
388 dependability regardless inherent oscillations in stresses in a dynamic environment.

389 Finally, SWC generally agreed that, in the modern era of sport, crucial to success was  
390 the coach’s ability to manage the high performance entourage (including coaching and  
391 support staff, directors, media, agents, athletes’ families, etc.). Overall, there was an  
392 emphasis on the coach’s aptitude to build and manage relationships with every stakeholder  
393 and member of the entourage. Role demarcation, performance management and recognition  
394 systems, and clear and open communications were rated highly by coaches and athletes.  
395 Within this need to manage athletes, staff and entourage, Coach 7 talked about being  
396 “selective in my communications and make my world as small as possible to be able to keep  
397 good relationships with those that really matter”.

398 Therefore, to create the necessary conditions for success, SWC consistently  
399 demonstrated emotional intelligence, underpinned by enhanced self-awareness as shown by  
400 the high degree of coherence between the data collected from coaches and their athletes.  
401 Coaches reported that high levels of emotional intelligence were necessary to adapt their  
402 behaviour to each individual rather than using a one size fits all to relationship building  
403 and/or conflict management. In the main, SWC described themselves as collaborative and  
404 facilitative, or at least as “benevolent dictators” (Coach, 10) who had to make very hard

405 decisions and were not afraid to do so, yet were always considerate of the impact on athletes.  
406 Knowing that the coach always had the best interest of the athlete and/or team at heart helped  
407 athletes deal with the harsh realities of high performance sport.

408 I also believe that it's very important today to put yourself in the athletes' shoes too. I  
409 have a particular way of working too. When I suggest something to athletes, a work  
410 exercise, I test it beforehand. You have to always put yourself in the athlete's shoes,  
411 for you're likely to mess up if you only take an external perspective. Think that it's  
412 easy and in the end it isn't at all. Think that it's difficult when it isn't at all. So it's  
413 important to look at things from the athlete's perspective, not necessarily physically,  
414 but you can try to picture what the effect is on their emotions. This is important in  
415 training. (Coach 14)

416 He knows where the bottom line is, he's quite open and he'll hear you out, but you'll  
417 more or less finish the conversation with him saying well right look, that's fine, but  
418 we just have to get you to do this, we think we're closer, we hope you've got a better  
419 understanding, go out and try it. (Athlete 13)

420 Athletes tended to see the relationship with their coach as much more of a partnership  
421 than an autocracy. Some athletes reported this as a departure from previous experiences of  
422 coaching and, while still respecting the coach's ultimate decision-making power, stressed that  
423 authoritarian approaches were on the decline and would not work going forward.

424 He will still point us in the right direction, he will always give us things to work on,  
425 like a strategy of things to work on, but he will, to his credit I think, hand over  
426 [responsibility] to the athletes. So he would say to me at the Olympics to lead that  
427 technical aspect with my feelings and how I see fit and we'd come in, it was not like  
428 'I'm the boss', but we would come back in and he would listen to the four very

429 experienced athletes and their opinion. I think other coaches don't have the security to  
430 do that. (Athlete 12)

### 431 **Evolution of the SWC Coach**

432 Athletes were asked to reflect on whether they had seen any changes in their coach's  
433 ways of working over the time they had worked together. Three main themes emerged for  
434 those athletes who felt their coach had evolved during this period. First, SWC had over the  
435 years become more benevolent and less business like. Second, athletes reported how, over  
436 time, SWC had become "more flexible" in their planning and actions and less limited by their  
437 own self-imposed "expectations and working ways" (Athlete 14). This resulted in an  
438 enhanced capacity to navigate the dynamic waters of high performance sport and deal with,  
439 and even leverage, the uncertainty and unpredictability of the environment. Finally, a smaller  
440 number of athletes spoke about a significant change in the ability of their coach to manage  
441 the high performance environment. This included a better understanding of all the  
442 components and how they fit together, as well as a greater disposition and "ability to control  
443 and influence the environment" (Athlete 13).

### 444 **Environment**

445 Coaches and athletes indicated that fundamental to sustained success was the  
446 development of a 'high performing' culture where everyone in the organisation understood  
447 the required behaviours and ways of working that lead to consistent competitive results. SWC  
448 described **five main pillars to develop and sustain the high performing culture.**

449 **First**, there was value in **espousing and 'enforcing' high expectations and standards** to  
450 create a self-perpetuating culture of high performance. Athlete 11 described this reminiscing  
451 the first time he walked into the training venue: **"as soon as you walked in there, you knew**  
452 **how to behave in that environment, the culture was everywhere"**. A significant part of culture  
453 building relies on the fostering of personal responsibility and accountability, and on the

454 culture being led, shared and ‘lived’ not only by the coach and athletes but also by officials  
455 and administrators. Veteran athletes who unequivocally demonstrated these values on a daily  
456 basis were deemed pivotal to sustaining the high performing culture throughout the group.

457 **Second**, SWC recognised the need to “**leave no stone unturned**” (Coach 2) in the **quest**  
458 to maximise performance. Finding the right coaching and support staff and athletes that are  
459 world-class yet good cultural fits, attention to detail, controlling the controllable, regular  
460 efforts to find new elements that may provide an edge over competitors, pro-active decision  
461 making that puts you “ahead of the game” (Coach 8) and a “constant seeking or  
462 manufacturing of opportunities to stretch and improve athletes” were stated as key  
463 behaviours (Coach 6).

464 **Third**, the development of a **challenging training environment** was reported as central  
465 to sustained performance. The role of healthy, yet “open and fierce internal competition”  
466 (Athlete 11) was emphasised. Setting practices that “contain a level of complexity and  
467 toughness similar or above that experienced in competition is capital” (Coach 2). SWC also  
468 pointed at the need to ensure that once training and competition goals are reached, “**new**  
469 **higher goals** are immediately set to avoid complacency and generate fresh motivation”  
470 (Coach 9).

471 **Fourth**, whilst challenging, the environment was seen to require a certain level of  
472 “**stability and dependability**” (Athlete 13) to allow all within it to **thrive**. This **Greenhouse**  
473 **Effect** requires that key features of the environment such as personnel, resources, schedules,  
474 relationships, and the motivational climate remain relatively stable so staff and athletes can  
475 concentrate on doing their job to the best of their ability. As previously mentioned, SWC  
476 were mindful that building stability and dependability did not interfere with athlete resilience  
477 or worse, “create a sense of entitlement detrimental to performance” (Coach 8).

478 **Finally**, SWC and their athletes stressed the importance of the coach being able to  
479 **influence upwards** in generating the right conditions for the environment to flourish. SWC  
480 deliberately try to impact on the decisions made by those in powerful positions within their  
481 governing bodies or clubs and even at the level of the international federation or in some  
482 cases, the equipment manufacturers (Coaches 7 and 8).

### 483 **Comparison with other Coaches**

484 Up to this point, athletes had simply been asked to describe the way their coaches  
485 worked. However, in order to find the potential lines of demarcation between this very  
486 unique sample of SWC and other less successful coaches, athletes were specifically asked to  
487 elaborate on what they felt was unique about them. The coach's professional skills like work  
488 ethic, his/her credibility and their overall knowledge and skill level were all highlighted.  
489 However, athletes tended to place greater emphasis on the **inter- and intra-personal skills** (i.e.,  
490 **soft skills**) of the coach (e.g., **empathy, persuasiveness, open-mindedness, self-awareness**).

491 The coach's ability to be empathic and acknowledge the athlete's 'feelings and  
492 concerns beyond sport' (Athlete 7) were underlined. Likewise, the **persuasion skills** of the  
493 SWC were brought to the fore by a number of athletes. SWC seem to use high levels of  
494 persuasiveness to build a collaborative environment that is dialogue-based, founded on  
495 consensus, and supportive of athletes speaking out, displaying creativity and taking the  
496 initiative. A number of athletes expressed how they had struggled with this idea because in  
497 the past they had 'always worked under more directive coaches who told them what to do and  
498 when to do it' (Athlete 1). It is also recognised that some of the SWC still operated under this  
499 paradigm.

500 Athletes also reported that their coaches, while working from a bespoke operational  
501 framework, "tended to be **open-minded**" (Athlete 8). This translated into a heightened  
502 capacity to be **flexible** and **adapt** to the needs of the personnel, the situation and the context.

503 This is consistent with the findings of the personality traits of these SWC (Mallett & Lara-  
504 Bercial, 2016) and facilitates SWC’s thinking in innovative ways and their ability to solve the  
505 challenges presented to them in the course of their day-to-day practice.

506 Finally, the elevated **self-awareness** of the coach (i.e., their awareness of their actions  
507 and their impact, their motives, and their feelings and those of others) was a recurrent theme  
508 in many of the athlete interviews. At times this wasn’t explicit, yet the athletes’ narratives  
509 portrayed their coach as possessing an advanced level of self-awareness. For instance,  
510 Athlete 10 talked about how their coach “wasn’t always nice, but knew exactly when he was  
511 and when he wasn’t and plays whatever role he thinks is going to get the job done on that  
512 day”.

### 513 **The Future of High Performance Coaching**

514 SWC and athletes were also asked to forecast the main developments and challenges  
515 high performance coaches would need to be able to deal with in the coming years. Coaches  
516 highlighted how “keeping athletes grounded and motivated” (Coach 8), managing “ever  
517 larger teams of staff” (Coach 12), fulfilling multiple and varying responsibilities that go  
518 beyond the traditional on-field coaching, managing the “socio-economic impact of sport”  
519 (Coach 2), and keeping up with and forecasting new knowledge, technology and rules would  
520 be fundamental to achieving success in the mid- and long-term. Notwithstanding the above,  
521 some coaches warned about a key challenge being not forgetting about “doing the basics of  
522 teaching the sport well and managing people effectively” (Coach 7).

523 Athletes reported that one of the biggest challenges for coaches going forward would  
524 be the need to become increasingly athlete-centred (Athlete 1). This referred to getting to  
525 know the athlete better as a person, but also to foster player and team empowerment. Again,  
526 this seems to suggest that coaching at the high performance level is moving away from a

527 coach-driven power relationship towards a cooperative partnership between athlete and coach  
528 and athlete and athlete.

### 529 **Coping with Pressure and Failure**

530 The IGLA was interested in the SWC's views on dealing with pressure, the threat and  
531 reality of failure, and the associated potential for stress in their work. As expected, coaches  
532 openly acknowledged that high performance coaching is a very pressurised environment, and  
533 that to survive, let alone succeed, in this environment "resilience and perseverance" (Coach  
534 9) were fundamental attributes. SWC were able to clearly articulate their interpretation of  
535 pressure and failure. In the main, pressure was understood as inherent to the job of the high  
536 performance coach. As such, pressure is to be embraced and, as Coach 2 put it, "count  
537 yourself lucky because the day there is no pressure it means you are no longer a contender".  
538 Moreover, most coaches highlighted that pressure and high expectation acted as a catalyst for  
539 their effort. Again, Coach 2 emphasised that pressure "focuses rather than distracts me".

540 In relation to dealing with pressure effectively, SWC proposed a number of strategies.  
541 First of all, they had learnt to naturally "dissipate ordinary pressure over the years" (Coach 6)  
542 and to "normalise the job" and its daily demands (Coach 3). Past experience as an athlete and  
543 growth in status as a competent coach had facilitated that process. Coaches also reported  
544 trying to "focus more on the process and the journey than the final outcome" (Coach 2).  
545 Breaking challenges into smaller steps and tackling one step at a time was the *modus*  
546 *operandi* of the coaches which guaranteed them, as coach 6 reported "a sense of having done  
547 all I could to maximise my chances of success and get a certain degree of peace of mind".  
548 The need to set realistic expectations to avoid undue pressure and disappointment was also  
549 stressed. Finally, whatever the outcome, "taking total responsibility for it and a focus on  
550 taking out all valuable lessons" (Coach 2) appeared to be key to dealing with setbacks and  
551 losses. Getting quickly "past the personal affront and loss of pride" (Coach 3) provoked by

552 the loss, and replacing it with learning and a plan for the future aided the recovery and  
553 healing process.

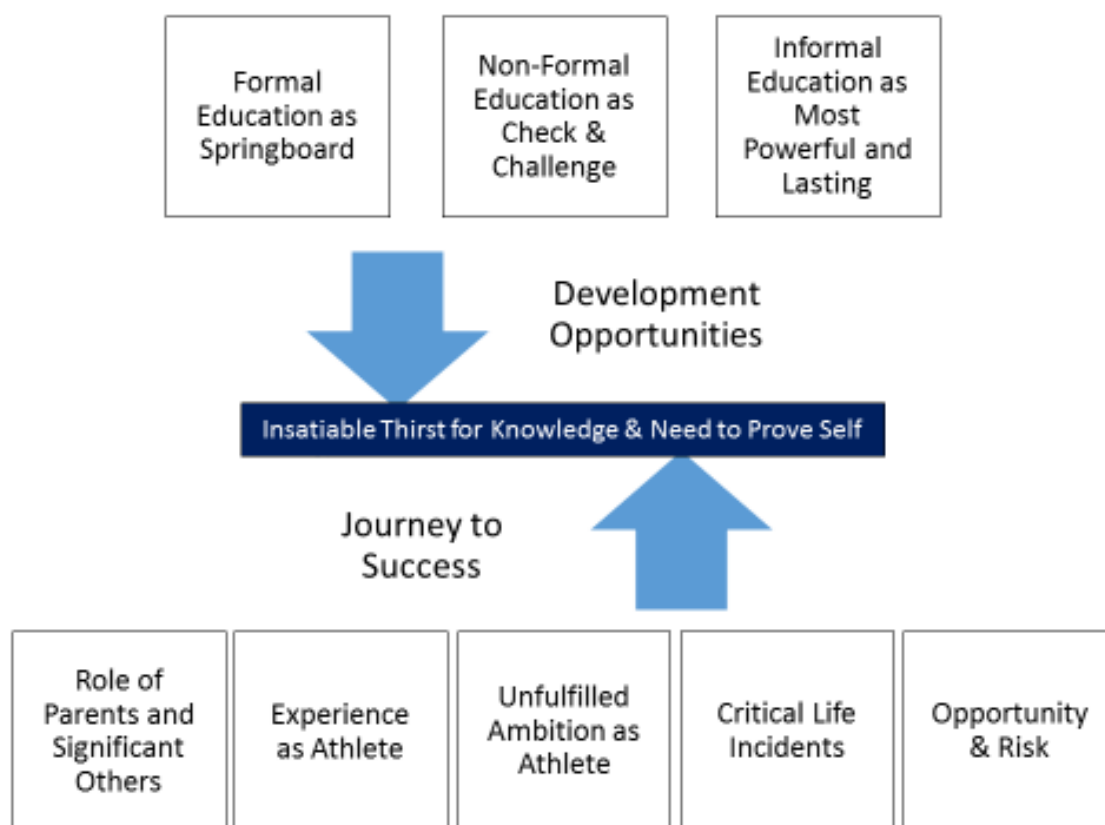
554 All coaches, to a greater or lesser degree, reported strategies to buffer the impact of  
555 pressure and stress on their own performance and, most importantly, on their physical and  
556 mental health. For some it was investing time into a particular hobby, which allowed them to  
557 take their mind off the job completely, even if for a short time. The wife of Coach 2 jokingly  
558 stated as the interviewer entered their home: “Are you here to interview my Summer or  
559 Winter husband; because they are two different people”. For other coaches, spending quality  
560 time with their families was a top priority. Coach 6 described how family time seemed to  
561 have a dual effect: First, it relaxed him because he genuinely enjoyed it. Second, it also gave  
562 him added peace of mind to know he was fulfilling his family duties that, admittedly, were  
563 regularly challenged due to the time and travel-intensive nature of high performance  
564 coaching. In line with the above, 16 of 17 coaches in the sample were married and had  
565 dependants. Only one of the married coaches had divorced and re-married. In his own words,  
566 “I screwed up my first marriage [because of coaching], but I have taken steps to make sure it  
567 doesn’t happen with this one” (Coach 9). One coach was single. Finally, all SWC emphasised  
568 that they took measures to stay in good physical shape and that this has a positive effect in  
569 their ability to deal with the pressures and demands of the job.

570 The second half of the results section revolves around the personal stories of SWC.  
571 These stories relate to their journey to success and the learning opportunities accessed in the  
572 process.

### 573 **The Developmental Pathways of Serial Winning Coaches**

574 Central to supporting those with responsibility to recruit and develop high  
575 performance coaches was to gain a deep understanding of the developmental pathway of  
576 SWC and what factors played a significant role in shaping it. This task was approached from

577 three different angles. First, coaches were asked to detail their academic and coaching  
 578 qualifications in the bio-demographic questionnaires; they were then asked to indicate, in  
 579 order of importance, the types of coach development opportunities they had accessed, but  
 580 also their preferred modes of learning; finally, during the interviews, coaches were asked to  
 581 elaborate on their journey to success (Figure 2).



582

583 *Figure 2.* The developmental pathways of Serial Winning Coaches

#### 584 **Formal Education in the Developmental Journey of Serial Winning Coaches**

585 SWC had, by and large, strong academic backgrounds. Nine coaches held sports-  
 586 related degrees (i.e., sport science, kinesiology or physical education). One of them held a  
 587 M.Sc. in Sport Science. Another four coaches had completed bachelor's degrees in unrelated  
 588 subjects and three coaches had not attended university. One coach did not answer this  
 589 question. Fifteen coaches held the highest possible coaching qualification for their country.  
 590 Two coaches did not answer this item. When asked about their formal education during the

591 interviews, SWC overall placed high value on their academic and coaching qualifications.  
592 Academic qualifications supported the development of competencies that SWC felt had  
593 contributed strongly to their success such as work ethic, critical thinking, planning, and  
594 management skills. For those holding sports related degrees, university had provided a very  
595 solid foundation from which to build their sport specific knowledge or make sense of the  
596 practical knowledge they had gained as athletes. Coaching qualifications were seen as key to  
597 SWC development, especially in the early stages of their career, where it had given them  
598 foundational knowledge and “mental frameworks” (Coach 3) used to interpret their own  
599 practice and accelerate on-the-job learning. A fundamental caveat to the above point  
600 however, was the unequivocal affirmation by SWC that formal education, to be effective,  
601 needed to be relevant and delivered by credible and capable coach developers. As Coach 6  
602 put it “I hate token coach education; it’s pointless”.

### 603 **Serial Winning Coaches’ Access to and Preference for Learning Opportunities**

604 The researchers included a section in the bio-demographic questionnaire wherein  
605 coaches were asked to rank both their most commonly accessed and their preferred learning  
606 opportunities from 1 to 4 in descending order. SWC ranked coaching qualifications, coaching  
607 clinics, on-the-job learning and self-study as the most commonly accessed learning  
608 opportunities. On the other hand, peer learning was consistently rated as the preferred  
609 learning opportunity by SWC followed by coaching qualifications, self-study, self-reflection  
610 and on-the-job learning (see Table 2).

611 Table 2

612 **Serial Winning Coaches Access to and Preference for Learning Opportunities<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Key: coaches stated the 4 types of development opportunities they had accessed most frequently in descending order. As such, even when an opportunity is ranked as a 4, it still denotes a relatively high frequency compared to others that do not feature in the top four for each coach. Similarly, when asked about preferred opportunities, an option rated as 4 can still be considered as seen positively by coaches. Significant importance is attached here to the frequency with which a particular type of learning opportunity features in coaches’ top four either as accessed or preferred.

<b>Development Opportunity</b>	<b>Accessed</b>	<b>Preferred</b>
Coaching Qualifications	1, 3, 3, 3, 1, 1, 1, 4	2, 2, 3, 2, 1, 3
Coaching Clinics	2, 1, 2, 2, 3, 4, 4, 2, 3	1,
On-the-job learning	1, 4, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 1	2, 2, 2
Peer Learning: Conversations with other coaches/ Observation and questioning	3, 2, 4, 1	1, 3, 3, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1
Self-Study: Reading/DVD	3, 4, 4, 2, 2, 3, 4, 2	1, 2, 2, 4
Self-reflection	1	2, 2, 3, 2
Mentoring	2	
Role models	3	
Experience as Athlete	2	
Athlete Feedback	1	
Writing own Books and DVDs	3	
From Business World	3	2
Watching the sport	3	

613

614 Paradoxically, although mentoring did not feature extensively as a preferred learning  
615 choice in the results of the bio-demographic questionnaire, during the semi-structured  
616 interviews, SWC identified mentor-like figures who played a large role in their  
617 developmental journeys. These mentoring relationships operated along a continuum. For  
618 some coaches, it was based on what we have termed *organic mentoring*. Here SWC found  
619 themselves in the vicinity of a more experienced coach they admired and respected. No  
620 formal relationship or agreement existed, but SWC spend time observing this coach and tried  
621 to learn as much as possible from them. For others, a formal mentoring agreement was  
622 established whereby a more experienced coach offered a sounding board, asked fundamental  
623 questions and provided advice on request. Coaches 4 and 7 made the most of this opportunity  
624 by bringing their mentor officially into their coaching staff. Nonetheless, two of the SWC,  
625 despite valuing their mentor’s counsel, made it clear that retaining decision-making power  
626 rather than relying on the mentor, and taking responsibility for their mistakes was central to  
627 their development. Coach 7 put it this way: “We argued sometimes, very bad, but I said to

628 him: it has to be my decision, I am head coach and I have to feel like I am responsible for  
629 what happens. He didn't like it, but he respected that.”

630 In sum, SWC's educational history and preferences are consistent with their typical  
631 personality and motivational profile of being curious and having an insatiable thirst for  
632 knowledge, their high degree of conscientiousness, openness, their never-ending quest for  
633 personal growth and their unwavering desire to learn and improve (Mallett & Lara-Bercial,  
634 2016). This led them to seek additional learning opportunities such as coaching clinics and  
635 study visits, and made them avid readers of electronic and hard copy material, especially  
636 early in their careers. Nonetheless, SWC deemed a deep level of self-reflection and self-  
637 awareness as necessary for any learning to take place. Structured self-reflection was not  
638 considered essential, although necessary when dealing with technical and tactical debriefs  
639 (i.e., formal meetings with staff and players). Unstructured regular self-reflection was the  
640 preferred choice. In this regards, Coach 3 said “you never stop thinking about it when you go  
641 home; about the things you could have done better to impact the outcome”. This continuous  
642 obsession with learning and improvement is underpinned by their acute need to prove  
643 themselves competent. All in all, SWC appear to view formal learning as a necessary  
644 springboard and compass to guide their early forays into coaching; non-formal learning as an  
645 opportunity to be checked and challenged by other coaches' practices; and informal learning  
646 through on-the-job learning (including learning from athletes), self-reflection, and  
647 interactions peers and mentor as most powerful and lasting.

648 **Serial Winning Coaches' Journey to Success**

649 No two coaches' career pathways were the same. In their journey into and through  
650 coaching, SWC travelled distinct and bespoke routes. However, amidst this variability, there  
651 appeared a number of recurrent features that may serve as reference points for the selection  
652 and development of the next generation of high performance coaches.

653 SWC tended to emphasise the role played by parents, extended family and significant  
654 others such as teachers or former coaches in shaping up their character and approach to life  
655 and coaching. Being brought up in rural/regional or non-affluent environments had impacted  
656 on some of the coaches' work ethic and desire for success. For others, they placed high value  
657 on their parents doing a job that involved helping others such as in teaching, nursing or the  
658 armed forces, and claimed that "the teaching and helping gene was in my blood; I had no  
659 choice" (Coach 3). Along these lines, the majority of SWC described how, from an early age,  
660 they had "always felt a desire to coach" (Coach 4) and how they had, in their school years  
661 and emerging sporting careers, been given opportunities to lead their teams as captains. For  
662 instance, Coach 6 spoke about how "my PE teacher must have seen something in me as he  
663 always had me help in lessons, and I always felt like my job was to be the coach on the field,  
664 and I enjoyed that". Similarly, Coach 4 reminisced about how "older coaches used to mock  
665 me because I was going to coaching clinics when I was still playing" and how "my  
666 teammates always came to me for advice before going to the coach".

667 A further theme emerging from the interviews relates to the coaches' experiences as  
668 athletes. Ten coaches had been international and/or professional athletes themselves, six had  
669 competed at regional/national level, while only one of them had no experience in competitive  
670 sport. Of the 10 former international athletes, five had won medals at major events, yet only  
671 two of them had won gold. All SWC with athletic experience emphasised the role this had  
672 played in their development as a coach. For instance, understanding what it takes to compete

673 at this level, being able to put themselves in the shoes of the athlete and the knowledge of  
674 their sport and coaching they had accrued during their careers were all highlighted as key  
675 factors. However, above all this, a recurrent theme underpinned how SWC viewed their  
676 athletic career: unfulfilled ambition and potential. SWC admitted to an underlying feeling of  
677 failure and regret in the way their athletic careers had developed and ended which fuelled a  
678 burning desire to “make amends as a coach” (Coach 6). At times, this revolved around their  
679 own lack of talent to go all the way to the top of their sport, yet in other cases, they felt a  
680 sense of injustice as to how the system around them had let them down which fed a hunger to  
681 do anything in their power to support their athletes fulfil their own ambitions.

682 In relation to the above, for six of the coaches, critical life events had coloured their  
683 athletic careers (especially their conclusion), pushed them towards coaching and shaped their  
684 approach therein. Coach 7, for example, had his one chance of going to the Olympics  
685 thwarted by his country boycotting the event, while Coaches 4, 9 and 12 were involved in  
686 serious car accidents. Coach 15 stated that growing up as one of the very few females playing  
687 the sport and having to endure discrimination and isolation had made her very resolute to  
688 show everyone what she was capable of. Finally, coach 14 explained how he declined the  
689 opportunity to compete at the Olympics to start a new career outside sport and had never  
690 been able to forgive himself until he returned to the sport as a coach.

691 The final common thread with regards to SWC’s journeys to success revolves around  
692 the persistent role played by opportunity and risk-taking in the careers of these coaches. Car  
693 accidents that steered retiring athletes towards coaching (Coaches 4, 9 & 12), unexpected  
694 risk-laden job offers (Coaches 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 & 14), and, for some, a sense of “being in the right  
695 place at the right time” (Coaches 3, 4, 10, 11, 14) all had a significant impact. While  
696 accepting their share of chance and good luck, SWC were keen to emphasise that when the  
697 opportunity arose, they were ready and willing to take the risk associated with it. For many of

698 the coaches, these opportunities facilitated by their experience, success and contacts,  
699 translated into very short transitions from athlete to high performance coach. They  
700 highlighted the important figure of the mentor as a guide during those uncertain and turbulent  
701 early years, and the value of constant self-reflection as they were making mistakes on a daily  
702 basis. For some coaches (Coaches 2, 4, 6, 8, 14, 15) these early jobs, although already in  
703 high performance sport, were in nations, clubs or programmes with low expectations for  
704 success. This afforded the developing coaches the opportunity and time to experiment, make  
705 mistakes and learn their trade in relatively low risk yet high responsibility and autonomous  
706 positions.

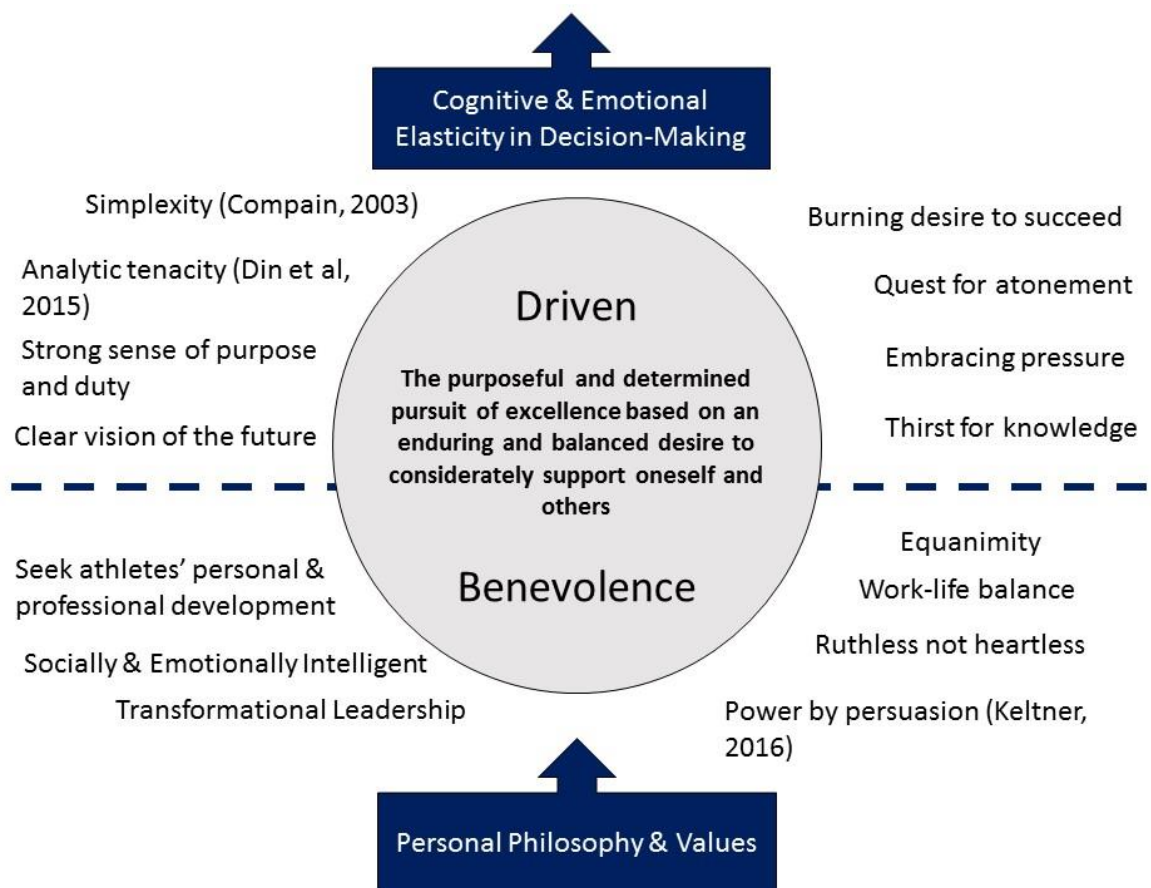
### 707 **Discussion**

708 The aim of the research was to provide a representative profile of the personalities,  
709 practices and developmental journeys of these Serial Winning Coaches to aid recruitment and  
710 development of prospective high performance coaches. Within this bigger picture, this paper  
711 focused specifically on the practices of SWC and their path to success. Whilst efforts have  
712 been made to elicit common themes and general trends, no two coaches from the sample are  
713 the same, and it is important to recognise that, perhaps, a large part of their success lies in  
714 their individual characteristics. Notwithstanding, the results offer a composite philosophical  
715 and operational framework, which guides SWC's practice, and identify key developmental  
716 milestones that can contribute to more informed recruitment and development in the future.

717 SWC and their athletes highlighted four central areas of significance in their work: a  
718 well-developed personal philosophy, a compelling and clear vision of success, the need to  
719 pull together the right people and manage them effectively, and the creation of an optimal  
720 environment where these people can thrive and thus realise the vision. In their developmental  
721 journeys, SWC spoke about the early developmental experiences that significantly influenced  
722 their coaching, the discovery of an early desire and aptitude for coaching, their thirst for

723 knowledge and a relentless and purposeful quest for self-improvement and victory. All these  
 724 elements were supported by a striking ability to maximise chance and opportunity. Through  
 725 the answers to the specific research questions, however, the study unearthed a number of  
 726 underlying themes, which seem to have influenced the coaches’ developmental journey, as  
 727 well as their approach to their day-to-day work. These will be the focus of the discussion.

728 SWC have spent their life in an unrelenting pursuit to enhance human development:  
 729 their own, their athletes’, and anyone’s impacting athletes’ performance. SWC are  
 730 fundamental contributors to athlete development and to the coach-athlete-performance  
 731 relationship (Cushion, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Mallett, 2010) and thus, performers in their own  
 732 right (Frey, 2007; [Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002](#); Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016).  
 733 As a result, they play a double role in so far as their own development is central to their  
 734 athletes’. The way SWC approach this dual mission appears to revolve around a key  
 735 operational principle we have termed *driven benevolence* (DB; Figure 3).



736

737 *Figure 3. Driven Benevolence*

738 DB can be defined as the purposeful and determined pursuit of excellence. This drive  
739 hinges on an enduring and balanced desire to considerately support self and others; DB is  
740 based on, and underpinned by, a well-established and coherent personal philosophy that is  
741 enacted through genuine care for others while ensuring their optimal development as  
742 individuals and as coaches and athletes. A grounded philosophy also provides the orientation,  
743 stability, and consistency necessary for effective evaluation and decision-making. As a result,  
744 DB affords the coach the cognitive and emotional elasticity needed to considerately, yet  
745 proactively, make tough decisions that affect other people (mainly, but not exclusively,  
746 athletes) for the benefit of the overall outcome, both in the short- and long-term. Finally, DB  
747 protects the coach from the distractions generated by the unpredictable and emotionally-  
748 charged elements of the high performance environment. This protective layer fosters the  
749 longevity needed to secure repeated success with successive generations of athletes. We will  
750 now explore in more detail how drivenness and benevolence manifest and impact coaches'  
751 practices and attitudes.

752 **Drivenness**

753 Drivenness encompasses the purposeful and single-minded pursuit of excellence.  
754 Previous research has identified the ability of the high performance coach to articulate a clear  
755 vision as central to their success (Din, Paskevich, Gabrielle & Werthner 2015;  
756 sportscoachUK, 2012; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). This vision allows coaches to engage in a  
757 proactive and iterative planning and goal setting process (Côté & Sedgwick, 2013) fuelled by  
758 what Din and colleagues (2015) termed as analytic tenacity: 'a relentless engagement in  
759 analysis... the conscientious pursuit of incremental improvements' (p. 598).

760 SWC confirmed these findings and offered additional information as to how this takes  
761 place. Coaches in the sample consistently engaged in an exercise of 'seeing into the future'

762 aimed at understanding the required elements of performance necessary to succeed. However,  
763 the resulting picture can be overwhelmingly complex, and SWC and their athletes  
764 emphasised that central to their success is the capacity to ‘simplify complexity’. Simplifying  
765 complexity is the act of picking out, from myriad options, the key modifications to the way  
766 things are currently done that will guarantee the biggest return on investment from the limited  
767 resources at the disposal of coach and athlete. This principle echoes ‘Simplexity Theory’,  
768 which “may be defined as the combination of simplicity and complexity within the context of  
769 a dynamic relationship between means and ends” (Compain, 2004, p. 129).

770 Drivenness is also encapsulated by the steadfast sense of purpose and duty expressed  
771 by SWC. Concurring with previous research (Erickson, Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Rynne  
772 & Mallett, 2012), coaches in our sample highlighted athletic experiences as central to their  
773 development. However, for SWC, this went beyond the previously reported heightened  
774 knowledge of the sport, and afforded leadership opportunities such as captaincies, and the  
775 personal kudos associated with being a former elite athlete. SWC described an unremitting  
776 personal quest marked by stories of unfulfilled ambitions as an athlete and driven by  
777 atonement (Mallett & Coulter, 2016; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). This recurrent personal  
778 narrative drove SWC to continuously strive for success. These coaches lived their coaching  
779 lives perched on a precarious balance between a grounded self-belief in their own ability  
780 based on previous achievements and work ethic, and a ‘healthy’ dose of reasonable self-  
781 doubt about whether they are good enough to win again (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). This  
782 ‘serial insecurity’ protected them from complacency and spurred them on to try to win again  
783 despite their previous frequent success. For SWC, the past did not matter and they “want to  
784 be great this year, not last year” (Coach 2).

785 Drivenness has an additional benefit for the coach. The high number of potential  
786 stressors faced by high performance coaches is well documented (Altfeld, Mallett &

787 Kellman, 2015; Bentzenm Lemyre & Kenttä, 2016; Chroni, Diakaki, Perkos, Hassandra &  
788 Schoen, 2013; Frey, 2007; Olusoga et al., 2012, 2014; Thelwell et al., 2008). SWC described  
789 pressure and the resultant stress as a fundamental part of the job. Moreover, they indicated  
790 that a key to dealing with pressure and stress effectively was to embrace it, relish it and be  
791 grateful for the opportunity to “still be in the fight” (Coach 2). Despite their success record,  
792 SWC had also experienced defeat and disappointment. However, a strong sense of direction  
793 and purpose in both the personal and professional aspects of their practice was identified as  
794 crucial in the process of tolerating and overcoming painful losses or failure to achieve the  
795 desired goal. The ability to put results in perspective coupled with an enduring sense of  
796 responsibility to athlete, programme and even country, allowed SWC to get over the personal  
797 loss of pride that follows a defeat and focus on the necessary steps to improve the outcome in  
798 the next competition. Supporting aspiring high performance coaches in this process appears  
799 paramount.

800 In addition, this study brought to the fore the need for the coach’s vision and mission  
801 to be underpinned by a long-standing personal philosophy and world-view. Vallée and Bloom  
802 (2005, 2016) underscored the relevance of a coach’s philosophy and values in guiding coach  
803 behaviour. For SWC, a well-established personal philosophy acted as a reliable navigation  
804 device in the changeable terrain of high performance sport. It provided a built-in compass  
805 that facilitated course-plotting and decision-making. A coach’s philosophy, in this case, acted  
806 as a guide that allowed SWC to ensure that their actions and the programme remained within  
807 desired humanistic parameters expressed by coaches and athletes: an explicit athlete-centred  
808 stance; the espousing of high moral values; and the emphasis on a positive, yet relative,  
809 work-life balance.

810 **Benevolence**

811 Directly linked to the coaches' philosophy and values, benevolence describes the centrality of  
812 the desire to do good to others in the work of SWC (Mallett & Coulter, 2016; Mallett & Lara-  
813 Bercial, 2016). Indeed, these coaches displayed a genuine and caring manner in the way they  
814 strived to support athletes not only professionally, but also personally. Kellet (1999), in her  
815 study of professional Australian Rugby League coaches, described them as having an honest  
816 aspiration to nurture their players as people. Vallée and Bloom (2005) found a similar attitude  
817 in successful Canadian college basketball coaches. More recently, Din et al. (2015),  
818 examined the behaviours of medal-winning Canadian Olympic coaches and found an equal  
819 yearning to treat athletes as people not as commodities. All the above evidence points,  
820 therefore, to the relevance attached by successful high performance coaches to being fully  
821 invested in the personal development of their athletes and to seeing them as people first and  
822 athletes second. This is not incompatible with the SWC's unwavering yearning to win and  
823 succeed. Moreover, SWC's motivational profiles created from their reported strivings  
824 (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016) may indicate that, perhaps, a well-adjusted mix of agency  
825 (i.e., doing things for their own benefit) and communion (i.e., trying to benefit others)  
826 provides an optimal equilibrium that promotes coach and athlete thriving (also see Mallett &  
827 Coulter, 2016).

828 Benevolence also plays a role in the way SWC approached relationships and power.  
829 The quality of the coach-athlete relationship has been highlighted as a key factor for  
830 performance ([Jowett, 2007](#)). In line with previous research (Din et al., 2015; Gavazzi, 2015;  
831 Norman & French, 2013), athletes in our sample viewed their coaches as espousing an  
832 athlete-centred approach that prioritised the needs of athletes and teams above those of  
833 themselves. In comparison to other coaches, SWC were described as highly ethical and  
834 trustworthy, emotionally and socially intelligent, compassionate, considerate, and caring, and  
835 portrayed as dependable and stable. All of the above contributed to the generation of a

836 climate that created a strong sense of belonging and social identity, and where athletes felt  
837 respected, cared for, and generally at ease. For the most part, athletes reported that this  
838 environment allowed them to concentrate on the task at hand and to train and perform to the  
839 best of their ability. In light of research conducted by Gould and colleagues (2002) indicating  
840 that the inability of the coach to connect and build trust with athletes is one of the major  
841 reasons for athlete underachievement at the Olympics, healthy and respectful coach-athlete  
842 relationship are of paramount importance.

843           Nonetheless, effective relationship building and maintenance is not only vital during  
844 episodic or relatively short-term coach-athlete interactions as it may happen during Olympic  
845 games or international competition. During their development phase, or at the beginning of  
846 an Olympic cycle, athletes require substantial amounts of time and investment to reach gold-  
847 medal performance levels. Likewise, for coaches to achieve repeated success they need to be  
848 afforded the opportunity to work with a variety of quality athletes and teams over a prolonged  
849 period of time. Therefore, the generation of functional, enduring relationships, and a reliable  
850 and stable climate of mutual respect and support seems to be a pre-condition for sustained  
851 success. Coaches' ways of working lead to reputations and these are shared amongst athletes.  
852 As Athlete 3 stated, "when you are happy is when you are going to perform better and also  
853 improve more". Given a choice, athletes are likely to disengage coaches that fall outside of  
854 this paradigm. As postulated by Chan and Mallett (2011), social and emotional intelligence  
855 becomes a preeminent requirement for high performance coaches.

856           An additional indicator of benevolence relates to the preferred leadership style of the  
857 coach. SWC and their athletes tended to share a common narrative in this regard, which  
858 signalled a preference for an empowering style of coaching based on the sharing of  
859 responsibility and decision-making with the athlete. In doing this, coaches aimed to build  
860 athlete resourcefulness, self-reliance and motivation. This is consistent with findings from

861 previous research that positioned successful high performance coaches as operating within  
862 the parameters of transformational leadership (Din et al., 2015; Kellet, 1999; Vallée &  
863 Bloom, 2005). Transformational leadership is defined as the development of the followers to  
864 higher levels of performance through inspiration and empowerment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).  
865 Rather than coercing athletes and staff into compliance, SWC made a concerted effort to  
866 subtly persuade them towards their point of view. Although coaches in our sample found  
867 themselves in very powerful positions by social structure and organisation (positional or  
868 legitimate power; French & Raven, 1959), their approach to leadership appeared more akin to  
869 what Keltner (2016) has described as the power paradox. Keltner's research has shown that  
870 power is built through other people's perceptions of yourself; i.e., their trust in you will make  
871 them receptive to your influence. Power is thus not imposed by the leader, but granted by the  
872 followers. This emphasises the importance of 'followership', the willingness to follow the  
873 direction and guidance of the leader partly because he/she is viewed as representing the best  
874 interests of the athletes (Haslam, Reicher & Plastow, 2011). Keltner's proposition explains  
875 and magnifies the value placed by SWC in developing athlete and staff belief in the persona,  
876 work and capacity of the coach as a precondition for an adaptive relationship/partnership.

877         It is however, noteworthy that, while seeking to be empowering and increase the  
878 levels of autonomy, responsibility, and motivation of their athletes and staff, coaches  
879 acknowledged that final decision-making power rested with them. Decisions were made,  
880 where possible, based on consensus and dialogue, but not by committee (Mallett, 2005).  
881 SWC made hard decisions aimed to improve performance and outcomes on a daily-basis and  
882 were comfortable with being accountable for the consequences of their actions. Athletes  
883 accepted this gracefully on the proviso that coaches tended to be considerate on their  
884 decisions, cognisant of the impact of these on athletes and clear in their communication  
885 strategies. SWC were ruthless, yet not heartless. Along these lines, SWC also stressed that

886 they had no qualms in acting decisively (Din et al., 2015) when an athlete stepped out of line,  
887 or when they felt a sense of entitlement or complacency, which undermined their  
888 directedness, was taking root in an athlete or programme. In sum, whilst having a preferred  
889 balance point around more collaborative and transformational ways of working, SWC are  
890 adept at shifting along the leadership spectrum, from more directive to more collaborative  
891 attitudes and practices, and from more transactional to more transformational approaches, to  
892 suit the context, situation, people and time-constraints. This cognitive and emotional  
893 elasticity allows them to, as highlighted by one of the coaches in the Vallée and Bloom study  
894 (2005), behave like a human chameleon.

895 Benevolence, however, does not stop with the athletes and staff. A novel and  
896 significant finding of the present study is the level of compassion and kindness SWC felt  
897 towards themselves. Previous research has shown that the high performance environment  
898 inherently contains a number of stressors and that coaches operate under considerable  
899 pressure (Olusoga, Maynar, Hays & Butt, 2012; Thelwell, Heston, Greenlees & Hutchings,  
900 2008). Coaches had to find strategies to release pressure, positively manage the stress  
901 associated with their job, and normalise their very unique working conditions (i.e., constant  
902 scrutiny, reliance on results, long hours, time away, etc.). SWC reported and placed high  
903 value in having learned to keep a stable state of mind. They tried to avoid extreme emotions,  
904 feeling too high during the good times and too low after losses or disappointments. They also  
905 described their strategies to achieve this balance. For instance, making time for family,  
906 ‘switching off’ through hobbies and friends, and ensuring they remained in good physical  
907 condition were all mentioned. SWC were overall very philosophical and equanimous about  
908 their jobs and seemed to have acquired the necessary psycho-social skills to survive and  
909 thrive in this harsh environment (Longshore & Sachs, 2015; Olusoga et al., 2014). Remaining  
910 long in the game is the first condition to becoming a serial winner.

## 911 **Limitations and Further Research**

912 Previous research into the practices of expert high performance coaches has had to  
913 grapple with the very important issue of sample selection. Specifically, defining expertise and  
914 finding suitable criteria for inclusion in the various studies have been major issues. Given that  
915 our study was based on success rather than expertise, we did not face this dilemma. However,  
916 a number of other limitations can be identified in the study design. For instance, our research  
917 sought a retrospective account of the coaches' practices and developmental journeys. Their  
918 own success could have tinted their memories to offer a fable-like account of their rise to the  
919 top and their day-to-day activities. Likewise, athletes were selected into the study through the  
920 recommendation of their coach and the condition that they had to have won a gold medal  
921 under the coach. These two elements could have created a bias towards speaking positively  
922 about the coach or selected athletes that were naturally in agreement with the coaches' ways  
923 of working and that, similar to the coaches, had success-coloured memories of their work  
924 together. Furthermore, due to the broad geographical spread and multi-lingual nature of the  
925 coaches and athletes, the authors did not conduct all the interviews. Instead, a network of  
926 local interviewers was trained by the authors to conduct the interviews in the coaches'  
927 locality and language. All interviews were subsequently translated into English. As a result,  
928 there is a potential 'lost in translation effect' that could have impacted on the reliability of  
929 some of the interview answers. Finally, despite efforts to obtain a more diverse sample, the  
930 majority of the interviewed coaches and athletes were predominantly white, western and male  
931 limiting the generalisation power of the findings.

932 As a result of the findings we propose some ideas for further research. First,  
933 conducting a similar study with a more diverse sample to include coaches and athletes from  
934 different cultural backgrounds and more female coaches would allow us to determine if the  
935 findings of our study are applicable across cultures. Second, to the best of our knowledge, a

936 long-term ethnographic account (i.e., two seasons or more, or a full Olympic cycle) of the  
937 work of a Serial Winning Coach has not been conducted. This approach would afford  
938 researchers the possibility to observe coaches in their natural habitat and interact with them,  
939 and their staff and athletes in real-time. In this way, a more nuanced understanding of their  
940 work may emerge. An alternative to this very time-intensive research may be a combined  
941 design including time-lapse immersion, stimulated recall, and coach reflective journal  
942 analysis, which may provide a more nuanced picture of the work of high performance  
943 coaches. Similarly, no study has tracked the career progression of emerging high  
944 performance coaches. A longitudinal study following the developmental journey of a number  
945 of promising high performance coaches could elicit a map of the personality and experiential  
946 profiles that lead to success. Finally, the prominent role played by performance managers and  
947 directors in modern professional and Olympic sport has been recently investigated (Arnold,  
948 Fletcher & Molineux, 2012; Arnold, Fletcher & Anderson, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011)  
949 and is potentially a generative field of enquiry in relation to sports coaching. The interaction  
950 and reciprocal influence between them and the high performance coach needs to be better  
951 understood to maximise its contribution to coach and athlete learning and development, and  
952 subsequent programme success.

### 953 **Conclusions**

954 In the present paper, we aimed to provide a representative profile of the practices and  
955 developmental journeys of SWC to aid recruitment and development of prospective high  
956 performance coaches (see Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016 for a full list of recommendations).  
957 In relation to their practices, four central themes were identified: a well-established  
958 philosophy, a compelling and clear vision of success, the need to pull together the right  
959 people and manage them effectively, and the creation of an optimal environment where these  
960 people can thrive and realise the vision. With regards to SWC's developmental journeys, the

961 findings highlighted the relevance of an early desire and aptitude to coach, an insatiable thirst  
962 for knowledge, and a relentless and purposeful quest for self-improvement and victory.  
963 Informing and guiding all of the above, the researchers identified a key operational principle  
964 termed as Driven Benevolence: the purposeful and determined pursuit of excellence that  
965 hinges on an enduring and balanced desire to considerately support oneself and others.

966         However, it is important to recognise that no two coaches from the sample were the  
967 same, and that, perhaps, a large part of their success lies in their individual characteristics.  
968 Notwithstanding this, the results offer a composite philosophical and operational framework,  
969 which guides SWC's practice, and identify key developmental milestones, which can  
970 contribute to more informed recruitment and development in the future. Most importantly,  
971 the outputs of the study offer a compelling account of the key features of the world of high  
972 performance sport coaching. These central elements of elite sport coaching, although  
973 interpreted and operationalised in distinctive ways by different coaches, represent a powerful  
974 reference point from which to understand this very unique environment and the required  
975 skills and attitudes of coaches to succeed within it.

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995 We climbed up the beanstalk looking for fierce giants and met a group of gentle ordinary  
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997

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