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‘Carefree enjoyment - can you tick that box?’ A story of thriving following experiences of abusive coaching in gymnastics

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ABSTRACT

Within this paper, we aim to utilise a creative analytical practice to embody the experience of thriving and show the ways in which the coach-athlete relationship may influence an athlete’s ability to thrive. By using an evocative autoethnographic approach, we hope to connect the reader to the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of a gymnast. To achieve this, I, the first author, used three main strategies to build the story presented in this study: use of memory, memory writing, and emotional recall. I adopted the role of ‘storyteller’, and the story was constructed through an evocative autoethnography with the aim to show emotional experiences that encourage empathy, social awareness, and reflection within the reader. Four memory fragments depict my own gymnastics experience presented in relation to key moments of my performance and well-being. The story chronicles how the coach-athlete relationship affected my personal experiences of thriving, including initial interactions, navigating feelings of anxiety and panic at competitions, and finishing my university sporting experience. We’d like to invite you, the reader, to *live* the first author’s story and immerse yourself in her experience of how the coach-athlete relationship impacted her experiences of thriving as a gymnast.

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Introduction

All athletes’ sporting experiences are shaped by the people that coach them. In 2021, British Gymnastics faced a group-claim lawsuit from 17 gymnasts alleging psychological and physical abuse from their coaches (BBC Sport 2021). As a result, UK Sport and Sport England commissioned an independent review into the allegations of abuse in gymnastics, the so-called Whyte Review. The Whyte Review (2022) reported that over 40% of submissions received described physically abusive behaviour (e.g. enforcement of excessive training hours and loads, inappropriate training on injury, physical criticism), and over 50% of submissions reported an element of emotional abuse (e.g. name calling, swearing, gaslighting). Alarmingly, several abusive practices initiated by coaches (e.g. physical punishment, inappropriate verbal communications) were reported to have often happened in front of other gymnasts and coaches, suggesting that coach practices were not being questioned. Whyte (2022) cited a historic culture of fear, reporting that 58% of coaches are former gymnasts that may have experienced inappropriate coaching during their own sporting careers. Without space or opportunity to critically appraise their own experiences, including normalised practices that they

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may have been subjected to (e.g. bullying, belittling, diminishing pain and injury; J. McMahon et al. 2020), former athletes turned coaches may unintentionally recycle abusive practices (e.g. physical, social, emotional, psychological; J. McMahon and McGannon 2021), and thus sustain a legitimised, dangerous culture.

Difficulties with gymnastics cultures are not exclusive to the UK, with examples also found globally within Australia, Canada, and the USA (see e.g. Australian Human Rights Commission 2021; McLaren Global Sport Solutions 2023; McPhee and Dowden 2018). Moreover, problematic practices are not exclusive to gymnastics and have been reported in a range of sports, such as swimming (e.g. daily weigh-ins, regular skin fold tests; J. McMahon and McGannon 2020), figure skating (e.g. shaming, non-acceptance; McHenry et al. 2019), and athletics (e.g. sexual and physical abuse; Timpka et al. 2021). Despite researchers noting recent exposures of abusive practices and championing mental health as a priority (e.g. Reardon et al. 2019), it is important to caveat why abuse in sport may continue to be normalised. For example, Douglas and Carless (2016, 73) suggest the performance narrative remains predominant, which 'justifies, and even demands, the exclusion or relegation of all other areas of life and self'. Emphasising the performance narrative as central to the identity of an athlete and as an indicator of normative success can subsequently contribute to a variety of mental ill-health symptomologies (e.g. isolation, withdrawal) and mental health disorders (e.g. anxiety, depression, disordered eating; Åkesdotter, Kenttä, and Sparkes 2024). Similarly, Rylander (2015) highlighted coaches' manipulation of power (e.g. expert, coercive, reward, informational) could result in athlete compliance which, in turn, creates an environment where negative pedagogy and subsequent abuse in sport can continue. Given the urgency to promote safe sport (Mountjoy et al. 2016), recent research has highlighted education to be necessary to teach key stakeholders (e.g. athletes, coaches, parents) about abuse and subsequent prevention (e.g. J. McMahon, Knight, and McGannon 2018). As such, not only is it our duty of care as practitioners to continue raising awareness and exposing abusive practices, but we must also reflect on how we can create more positive coaching opportunities and foster positive sporting experiences.

One construct that could be used to understand and promote positive experiences is thriving, with thriving in sport characterised by 'a high-level of well-being and a perceived high-level of performance' (Brown et al. 2018, 130). From this characterisation of thriving, a growing body of research is developing that advocates for, and has elucidated contributing factors to, environments that enable sporting success without compromising athlete well-being (see, for a review, Brown et al. 2024). Furthermore, Brown et al. (2018) described how experiences of thriving resulted not only in increases in performance (e.g. athlete ranking), but also increases in self-confidence, perception of ability, and personal development (e.g. maturity, rationalisation). Outside of sport, thriving has been successfully used to promote positive experiences in other high-pressure contexts such as the military (e.g. spousal support during military transition; Cole and Cowen 2022), work (e.g. work-life balance; Peters et al. 2021), and healthcare (e.g. caring for persons with COVID-19; Aygei et al. 2021). However, shifting narratives from performance-only to thriving will not be simple and neither will it easily overcome the structures that have previously contributed to problematic and abusive practices. Indeed, Passaportis et al. (2024) highlighted the barriers and resistance encountered by one practitioner when trying to initiate such a shift in a high-performance sport organisation, including entrenched mentalities from a history of success (i.e. 'if it ain't broke' mentality), hierarchical leadership (i.e. 'my way or no way'), regimented training structure (i.e. a timetable that prioritises physical rather than psychological prowess), and person versus performer conflict (i.e. person as a quantifiable statistic versus a living, breathing, feeling human). Nevertheless, to support a positive shift in gymnastics specifically, and sport more widely, it is important to understand how positive experiences such as thriving can be promoted and to showcase lived experiences of good practice in coaching.

Within the thriving literature, the depth and quality of relationships that an athlete holds with others in their environment have been shown to be critical to their experiences of thriving. For example, Passaportis et al. (2022, 5) observed the coach-athlete relationship to be deeply embedded

within the culture of an Olympic and Paralympic organisation, noting the 'make or break' outcome of the dynamic for thriving. Key themes of collaboration, partnership, open and safe space, athlete-centred coaching, and trust were identified, including in observations of 'tough love' that were largely initiated if the coach felt their relationship with the athlete was established, showed high levels of empathetic accuracy, and created a perception of authenticity. Likewise, building from the extensive work that depicts the coach-athlete relationship to be vital for athletic success, performance, and well-being (Jowett 2017), Davis et al. (2021) found athletes' secure attachment (i.e. trust and communication) to their coach to be significantly associated with athlete thriving. Furthermore, in qualitative interviews with retired elite figure skaters, thriving was suggested to be cultivated through the essence of a coach (i.e. consistency with their way of being through mannerisms and qualities) and facilitated by the coach provision of authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard for their athletes (McHenry et al. 2022). Despite the positive messaging regarding the role of the coach when promoting in their athletes, it has been recognised that that coaches may waver in demonstrations of trust and closeness through fear of association of grooming (Stirling 2013). Consequently, it is imperative to highlight and edify distinct differences between non-possessive (i.e. closeness, trust) and possessive care (i.e. manipulation, ill-intent) within the coach-athlete relationship (McHenry et al. 2022). Overall, despite the extensive work regarding the importance of the coach-athlete relationship, there is opportunity to better demonstrate differences in athlete-care (i.e. possessive versus non-possessive) and the impact these may have on athlete performance and well-being.

One approach that could be used to better showcase the felt impact of the coach-athlete relationship on the athlete, is to transport the reader to the athlete's environment and connect them with the athlete through a first-person account. More specifically, a personalised retelling of experiences can 'lift the lid' on the athlete's world and position the reader to live this world through and with the athlete, thereby creating a reader's sense of lived experience of the coach-athlete relationship, thriving, and gymnastics. To provide accounts of these innately personal relationships, researchers have been encouraged to use a methodology that fosters connection to personal accounts and cultural phenomenon, such as autoethnography (Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013). For example, within the last decade, autoethnographies have been chosen as a tool to portray powerful stories ranging from disability (e.g. sport as a deaf athlete; Irish, Cavallerio, and McDonald 2018), marginalisation (e.g. gender; Kitching, Bowes, and MacLaren 2021) and problematic practices (e.g. grooming; Prewitt-White 2019) in sport. With regards to coach practices, Zehntner and McMahon (2014) used autoethnography to highlight how a wider sporting organisation encouraged conformity in mentee coaches, thus normalising and recycling problematic practices. Similarly, Purdy, Potrac, and Jones (2008) illustrated the power-ridden nature of coaching within elite rowing, in particular highlighting the coach-athlete relationship deteriorating due to 'broken promises', and disrespectful behaviour norms. Evocative autoethnographies do not only provide an intricate insight into a phenomenon a reader may not have experienced, but they also provide opportunities for conversation, curiosity, community, and healing. Of course, we recognise that the effectiveness of evocative autoethnographies to create these opportunities relies on the strength of connection made between the story and the reader. Consequently, this approach may be limited by the extent of honesty and authenticity in the stories presented, the author's ability to craft an engaging story, and the reader's cultural familiarity with the context within which the story is situated.

To our knowledge, limited evocative autoethnographies have portrayed positive practices. Providing a lived experience of the coach-athlete relationship and how this can influence thriving could be impactful alongside previous autoethnographic work to highlight differences between what athletes should and should not (e.g. 'slim to win' narrative; J. McMahon, McGannon, and Zehntner 2019) accept as coaching practices. Accordingly, in the present study, we share the story of the first author – a former gymnast – and how a specific experience of the coach-athlete relationship positively affected her performance and well-being; that is, her experience of thriving. Specifically, we, the authors, used an evocative autoethnography to address the following research

aims: 1) utilise a creative analytical practice to embody the experience of thriving, and 2) show the ways in which the coach-athlete relationship may influence an athlete's ability to thrive. We hope this evocative autoethnography provides readers with the opportunity to empathise, reflect, and learn with the story presented to further encourage social awareness and meaningful change within sporting stakeholders, organisations, and systems (Méndez 2013).

Methods

Research philosophy and methodology

The philosophical assumptions that underpin the present study are those of ontological relativism (i.e. reality is multiple and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e. knowledge is constructed and subjective). In line with these assumptions, we selected autoethnography as the chosen methodology. Autoethnographic writing is an approach that allows the author to explore, interpret, and represent (*graphy*) their personal experiences (*auto*), whilst also considering the relational and cultural construction of their stories (*ethno*) (Ellis 2004). Autoethnography is an example of creative analytical practices that seek to combine the process and product of writing, in which the writing itself becomes a method of qualitative inquiry and a finished piece of research (Richardson 2000). Traditional social science contested that writing could not be scientific and literary, yet the voice and experiences of researchers have presented compelling stories that create emotional resonance with individual experiences, and also illuminate and interrogate cultural beliefs, practices, and identities (Sparkes 2020). For example, the reader could connect with the research through their own personal experiences, events that they have witnessed or heard about, settings that they live in, and people they have spoken to, thus achieving aspects of naturalistic generalisability (B. Smith 2018). Moreover, qualitative research can promote transferability; this provides the reader with an opportunity to assess if the research is relevant to their own situation and if they can transfer the findings to their own actions (B. Smith 2018). The process of writing an autoethnography involves two techniques: firstly, an 'ethnographic wide-angle lens' is adopted to explore the social and cultural components of a particular phenomenon; secondly, the author adopts an inward approach to explore their personal experiences of the phenomenon (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Within this study, evocative autoethnography was chosen as it can be used to create compelling stories that seek to *show* rather than *tell* (A. Bochner and Ellis 2016), and it produces observations that are accessible to insiders and outsiders of the culture (Marvasti 2005). Moreover, if the reader thinks, feels, and embodies the unique experiences of another person, it is possible to encourage reflection, conversation, enlightenment, and initiate change (Pelias 2011). Consequently, I, Lauren, have chosen to write an evocative autoethnography to invite the reader to *live* my story, and be immersed in my experience of how the coach-athlete relationship impacted my experiences of thriving as a gymnast.

Before my story can proceed, it is important to state my positionality because, as a female postgraduate student who has been involved in gymnastics since the age of five, both as an athlete and coach, this will have shaped the wealth and breadth of insight I can offer this area of research (Rowe 2014). I was involved in competitive clubs throughout my childhood and adolescence, sometimes training between three and six hours at a time, three to four times a week, until I left for university. Starting university was supposed to be a clean break from gymnastics and I never expected to re-join a gymnastics club, nor experience anything different from what I had before. My three co-authors are all academics: Dan and Chris supervised my studies at university, and Fran was latterly invited to join this project due to her passion for, and knowledge of, gymnastics and the use of creative analytical practices. Collectively, their work is married through the aspiration to improve the health, well-being, and sustainable performance of individuals within sport environments and systems. In relation to this project, Dan, Chris, and Fran embodied a holistic role as they listened to

me, helped me navigate difficult and conflicting emotions, communicated confidence, acted as critical friends, and, ultimately, empowered me to tell my story.

Drafting an autoethnography

Autoethnography begins with the gathering and re-engagement of existing materials, such as diaries, photographs, videos, song writing, and free writing (Douglas and Carless 2016). To construct the stories presented in this study, three main strategies were utilised. Firstly, 'memory writing' was used (Poulos 2016). Through this technique, I looked through original materials such as photographs, video footage, training diaries, competition programmes, certificates, and awards. This helped me reconnect to my experiences of the coach-athlete relationship when training as a gymnast from childhood through to adulthood (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). For example, in one diary entry I had written, 'I don't want to be here', another read, 'I don't want to cry this time', and a letter written by my mum as part of a school project, dated 15 January 2008, said 'Trampolining is your love, and you dream to be world champion. Work hard and stick to your dream!'. When reading back through these entries, it was necessary for my co-authors and I to be mindful of the risk of re-traumatisation following the re-engagement with past experiences (e.g. anxiety, physical pain, distress, emotional exhaustion, numbness; Emerald and Carpenter 2015), and we employed trauma-informed strategies (e.g. peer support, mutuality, and open dialogue among authors, empowerment and choice around story selection, reflexive diary to track triggers) to mitigate this risk and to limit harm, whilst still fostering vulnerability between myself and them (J. A. McMahon and McGannon 2024).

Next, I used 'emotional recall' to visualise myself in each scene as 'if you can revisit the scene emotionally, then you remember other details' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 752). Moreover, I was able to physically revisit several of the places where I used to train as a gymnast, which provided retrieval cues and further enhanced my emotional recall (Buchanan 2007). The final technique I used to write my autoethnography is memory. Memory can be both resolute and fragile, making it a complex concept. Traditionally, memory is described as an 'archive', yet Brockmeier (2015, 57) has highlighted that, 'each act of remembering an experience is itself a new experience which, in the very act, subtly transforms the "old" experience'. Therefore, memory can be a social and cultural practice that is influenced by our current perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and personal experiences that have occurred between the initial event and the moment of remembering (Brockmeier 2015). Overall, using memory to generate autoethnographic stories can never be an exact reproduction of the initial experience, yet provide opportunity for inquiry, interpretation, engagement, and enlightenment (A. P. Bochner 2007). Grounded in these data, to create an evocative story that engages and extends to multiple audiences, we adopted fiction-writing techniques (e.g. flashbacks, interior monologue, dialogue, everyday language) that would provoke the reader's thoughts, feelings, and senses (Richardson 2000).

Relational ethics

Autoethnographic writing is inherently personal, yet Freadman (2004) emphasised that self-revelations always involve revelations about others. This observation shows that writing one's personal experience would undoubtedly include the portrayal of others, emphasising the importance of ethical practice when writing an autoethnography. As a result, it is my responsibility to consider how intimate others will be portrayed in my story and how I can act in a non-exploitative, ethical self-conscious manner, whilst also being true to myself and my role as a researcher (Ellis 2007). I adopted three main techniques to maintain confidentiality and safeguard the privacy of the people that are included in this autoethnography. Firstly, pseudonyms are used for any individual person mentioned in my story. Secondly, some of the characters within the story are hybrids (i.e. a mixture of individuals that are amalgamated into one character). Finally, I asked questions, described my research, and openly discussed my previous

gymnastics experiences with my co-authors to critically reflect on my ethical practices throughout this process (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). By adopting these techniques, I hoped to maintain mutual respect, dignity, and privacy of 'others' present in my story. Institutional ethical approval was provided for this study through the University of Portsmouth School Ethics Research Committee (reference number: SERC 2018–066).

Quality criteria

A. Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggested that evocative autoethnographic writing should not aim to comply with scientific standards such as validity, data collection, categorisation processes, or generalisability. Rather, A. Bochner and Ellis (2016) proposed a list of quality criteria they believe characterise evocative autoethnography. For example, it is proposed that evocative autoethnography should present structurally complex narratives that are told in a temporal framework. Moreover, evocative autoethnography should combine two narratives: firstly, the author's journey of their previous identity to their current identity; and secondly, how the author's journey in life could be reimagined by crisis. Yet, J. K. Smith and Deemer (2000) explain that any list of criteria should be open-ended to prevent autoethnographic writing becoming exclusionary, rigid, or standardised as this would contradict the purpose of an autoethnography. Arguably, the most important purpose of autoethnographic writing is to move the reader in their 'heart, belly, and head' (A. Bochner and Ellis 2016, 212).

Storytelling techniques

To create the four evocative vignettes, I used A. Bochner and Ellis (2016) guidance on storytelling, including the introduction of different characters and scenery, a temporal framework, an experience of crisis, building a dramatic tension around which the plot revolves, and providing a moral to the story which can provide meaning and significance to the experience. I used multiple formatting techniques to set the scene and create a sense of time. For example, quotation marks and italics are used when reliving experiences to differentiate between spoken dialogue (i.e. quotations) and inner thoughts and feelings (italicised). Additionally, asterisks (*) are used to show separate scenes within the same story. I would now like to invite you to read the vignettes with the following points of reflection in mind: Does this story connect with you? Can you picture yourself in the athlete's shoes? What emotions are you feeling when reading this story? Are your emotions different at the end of the story than at the beginning of the story? What do you perceive the meaning of this story to be?

Results

Reignited

Leotard, shorts, spare hair ties, water bottle, three pairs of socks, Nike bag. Sorted. I sling the bag over my shoulder, walk out of my room, and poke my head into my kitchen to see my flatmates cooking dinner.

'See you after training', I say.

How long are you gonna be Cleave, do you want leftovers?

I'm already halfway out of the door when I yell, 'yes please, I've gotta go because I don't wanna be lateeeeeeee'

It's a sunny Tuesday afternoon and the city is busy. Google maps seems to be taking me on an excursion but thankfully only two minutes estimated time of arrival. Although it's late September, it is still warm, and I already feel slightly sweaty. I don't know this part of town. *Shit, what if I'm late?* I turn the last corner and my lungs exhale deeply. I'm in the right place and on time. *One less potential reprimand.* This is where the team should be training. *Is it too late to turn back now?* I wipe small beads of sweat from my forehead and ignore the knot in my stomach. *Fuck it. Just do it!* I march

myself through the double doors of the building, down the corridor and into the artificially lit sports hall. *Act confident, feel confident, right?*

*

Three introductions, three different coaches. *I wonder what their motives are for doing this. Do they want a success story, or do they actually enjoy it?* I can tell they are trying to get everyone engaged and interacting, but I'm hoping I can get away with going unnoticed. I spot Henry, the coach who approached me at the start-of-term fayre. The knot in my stomach starts to loosen. He's got one of those familiar faces. Like the type of judge you'd smile at during competition because they're looking for you to do well rather than waiting for you to fall.

*

When it is my turn, I haul myself onto the trampoline. Suddenly, I start to feel the pressure of other people watching. *Ah well, I'm not going to join the club anyway, so I may as well muck around ... Backwards somersault, barani, straddle, barani, backwards somersault, backwards somersault, backwards somersault to seat, half twist to feet, tucked front somersault, lah di dah.*

The skills are messy, but I can't remember the last time I tried; it's more mechanical than fun. As I jump down from the side of the trampoline, this dark-haired guy claps both hands together and announces, 'Finally, a bit of competition!'

I can hear the other members of the club groan with humorous disdain, but I can't help but laugh because what's a gymnast without their confidence?

I can see the head coach, Henry, stood with their arms crossed, eyebrows raised, trying not to laugh.

*

I'm just about to finish my next turn when Henry walks over to the side of the trampoline.

'One more drill before you get down, Lauren, and let's see a little bit more effort this time' he instructs.

He just called me out! How did he know that wasn't my max effort? I could've been trying really, really hard for all he knew. Have I even got max effort left in me at all? I feel defensive. He doesn't know me?! He saw straight through me, but he doesn't know me ... not that makes me any less petulant about wanting to show him what I can actually achieve.

*

Phew. Finally finished! I didn't expect to work *that* hard. I plonk myself into a straddle sit on the wooden floor: time to stretch and cool down. I'm still trying to catch my breath before I realise Henry is sat down next to me.

'So, how did you find today? You look pretty comfortable on the trampoline' he probes.

I quip back, 'Well, you'd hope so after being in this sport for so bloody long, otherwise I've not got a lot to show for the past 14 years'.

A self-satisfied laugh escapes from Henry. *If I do join, I hope he has some patience for smart-ass comments.*

'In all honesty, I wasn't even planning on coming, it was more of a curiosity thing' I explain. 'Well, I'm glad you did, I think you'd fit right in with this riff raff. Reckon you'll be back?'

Weird. He's asked for my opinion. I forgot it's my decision.

'I'm not entirely sure yet but I will have a think' I say.

Henry nods his head, 'we will see you next Tuesday then'.

Maybe he's as much of a smart-ass as I am.

Henry stands, claps his hands together, and tells the team, 'GOOD JOB EVERYONE. LET'S PACK UP THE EQUIPMENT AND HEAD OUT'.

*

As I walk out of the hall, much to my surprise, I am smiling. I actually enjoyed today. I guess that's what happens when you have low expectations; they're usually always surpassed ... Maybe I will join, what have I got to lose?

Competition

It is my first time competing in over five years. The sports hall is an eruption of colour: each club has a different leotard. We could quite easily sponsor a hairspray company; I'm practically choking on the fumes.

I've had to impatiently wait until late afternoon to compete and then watch around 30 other girls warm up identical routines to my own. *That was too low, that wasn't in the middle of the trampoline, she's more flexible than I am ... This leotard feels too tight. Maybe I should have plaited my hair today? Do I usually perform better if my hair is in plaits?! No, wait, that's stupid. What if my routine is boring? Do the judges look bored already? I'm not smiling at them if they're being grouchy. Am I jumping high enough? Is my form good enough? Is the difficulty of my skill set hard enough? Why do I even care?* I roughly tug at the sleeves of the leotard. *Get out of your head and get a grip. Oh wait, Henry's lips are moving, what did he just say?*

'Lauren, look at me and focus'. Henry says. He has placed one hand on my shoulder bringing me back to reality. 'Okay, you're up next. Remember to shake your legs before starting, get all that excess energy out of your body. Our aim today is for you to complete 20 skills, I know it's been a while since you've done this, but I know you *can* do it. Ready?'

I look at Henry and convincingly nod, 'Let's go'.

[one month later]

I have been rattling off my new routines to Henry whilst warming up this afternoon. We are in a different arena, and I can't really decide what's worst: feeling like an unwelcome newbie advertising their self-worth in order to gain some validation, or knowing the arena so well you can fanatically envision every fucking mistake you've ever made there. I hit the 'move up' score at the last competition, which means that I now *have to* compete in the next category. This means harder skills, closer competition, and more attention both in and out of competition. It's pretty fucked up that some think a higher category defines your superiority. I shake my head as I get off the side of the trampoline. *My last warm up and it was *terri* ...*

'STOP THAT. I can see what you're thinking and you stop that, right now' Henry says sternly.

'But ...'

'No, I don't want to hear it'

'Yeah, bu-' 'No, none of that. I know you, and I know what you're like. You know these routines, you've put the hard work in: you just need to focus on one skill at a time'.

I roll my eyes. 'I hate that you're so logical'.

Henry replies, 'No, you hate that you've met your match'.

'I don't think so', I smile.

*

I stand in the middle of the trampoline waiting for the official to tell me I can start my routine. I smile half-heartedly at the five strangers who will be judging me. I feel my stomach drop. *Why am I doing this to myself again?* I turn to look at Henry and he gives a slight nod of encouragement. I feel the tightness in my chest ease. *He's there, I'm fine, I can do this.* I shake my legs out. My muscles twitch, eager to start. As I complete my first skill, I feel wobbly, but I also feel like I am flying.

[one month after Christmas break]

I shove the door and walk irritably out of the sports hall. *What was that?*

The cold air hits me when I walk into the empty car park.

*What was **that**? A waste of time, a waste of effort, a WASTE.*

I grip my temples in attempt to distract from the imminent tide of familiar remarks.

Disgrace. Embarrassment. Shameful. Childish. Lazy. Rude. Disrespectful.

My hands fumble and find the wall behind me. I slide my way down to the floor and catch my reflection in a panel of glass.

I catch my younger self in the reflection. Untamed hair, eyebrows furrowed together, lips sealed tightly as if stitched. Wild eyes staring at me for an answer. *This can't be real.* I can hear my younger self say, 'We haven't come very far, have we?'. *This is all in your head. It's in your head. Stop thinking, just stop thinki-*

Gravel crunches underneath soft footsteps. . . I look up to see that Henry has followed me outside. He opens his mouth to speak but I get there first.

'Please, let's not do this. I know that was embarrassing for you, it was embarrassing for me. If not worse for me *because* I've embarrassed you. I gave up halfway through. The last four skills are obviously going to be disqualified.'

I don't want to look Henry in the eyes. I don't even have an excuse for what I did.

'Lauren, look at what you've achieved so far. Look at the effort. One bad day doesn't mean a bad life'.

'Henry, I copped out because it wasn't going to be perfect. It's *never* going to be perfect'. I feel exasperated, deflated, small. 'I let *you* down, I've let the *team* down', my voice is beginning to wobble.

'The only person you're letting down is yourself by squashing any feelings of success or achievement because you think you've done this before. This has been a new start for you. You need to let go of past expectations.'

'Henry, I don't even know what I want anymore. I've been doing it for so long now that I don't even know *why* I do it anymore', my voice cracks.

I stare at the floor. 'How do I forgive myself for all the things I didn't become, Henry?'

Henry sits down quietly next to me. His steady breathing sounds like a familiar song you've known forever, and tears that were barricaded are now running loose.

'I don't know, but we can try together'.

I feel sad for Henry. I feel sad for myself. Sad, but not lonely.

Catharsis

[8 months later, start of the new season]

My feet feel heavy, like a child getting pulled by their mother into a shop they do not want to go to. This is the fourth time I have been to therapy. *Fuck Henry, why did I listen to him? His head needs looking at if he actually thought that this shit would be helpful.* The smell of musty carpet combined with faint antiseptic fill my nostrils as I walk through the door. It is a small room, with lots of bright posters plastered all over the wall: advice, different telephone numbers, support groups. Most importantly, the two orange chairs positioned opposite each other destined to be the vessel for conversation. I hear the clock mocking me with its incessant tick, tick, tick.

*

We always start with the same question: 'how are you?'

What a stupid fucking question. It's not asking how I am feeling now, this is the gateway to talk about my feelings, to talk about my experiences, to explain the way I am, to justify myself. I don't know what to talk about.

'I just feel like this is such a waste of time and resources, what is the point of talking about something that has been and gone, what difference does it make now?' I sigh.

The woman opposite replies, 'it may have been a long time ago, but sometimes the past can explain how we feel now'.

'Everyone goes through hardships, everyone will have been picked up and dropped by someone else before, I'm not a special case. I'm wasting your time with people that actually need you' I explain.

My heel continuously taps the carpet: this was not my idea and I feel like an idiot. *Why am I being difficult towards someone that didn't even ask me to be here?*

'Okay, but how did that make you feel?'

'How did *what* make me feel?' I ask.

'You mentioned being picked up and dropped, I want you to talk through why you felt that way, or how it made you feel'.

A sudden THUD of my heartbeat strikes my chest. *I don't know.* I roll my neck slowly.

The woman sat opposite with gentle brown eyes presses me a little further, 'Lauren, how did that make you feel?'

I hadn't realised that my hands were now gripping onto the arms of the chair with such force that my knuckles had turned white. As a gymnast, it's ironic that I feel as if I've lost my balance.

Blood rushes to my cheeks: I feel red hot as if I've just been scolded for being in trouble, as if I'm embarrassed for something that wasn't even my fault, but I was still a part of. I shake my head, trying to snap out of whatever this is, to try and focus on something, one thing, anything. I can feel the frustration lodged in my throat as if I'm now mute. I'm frustrated that I don't understand why this is such a big deal, why I can't find the words to speak, what emotion I'm feeling, because it is definitely *not* anger.

THUD.

THUD.

THUD.

I can feel my breathing getting heavier, quicker, erratic before stopping all together.

I can't tell if the woman has asked me again or if the question is just spinning round in my head but all I can hear now is, *how did that make you feel?*

How did it make me feel?

How did it make me feel?

*I don't **want** to feel whatever this is.*

My shortcomings?

The words tumble out of my mouth in a weird collusion of exasperation and disdain for being here, for needing this, for *feeling*.

'Am I being judgmental or overly emotional for the coaches that I did not have a great experience with or is it true that we were churned in and out like robots, only viewed as a monetary income? Is it true that I was gaslight into prioritising my world around gymnastics when there was so much more to life and to myself as a person, or am I giving myself an excuse? How can I start to tell you what's wrong when we were taught that an obedient, submissive athlete was a good athlete? How am I going to forgive myself for the things I did not become that maybe I didn't even want to be in the first place? I can't tell you how I'm feeling because I barely know myself'.

I don't have the answer but at least now I can breathe.

Coda

When you're little, adults constantly say that time goes faster as you get older. I never expected time to fall through my hands like this. The past three years have flown by. I've completed my university course. We've finished the last competition of the season. We are at our final training session as a team. All of us are running around like children playing silly games, making the most of being together.

Bittersweet.

Henry pulls me aside and we sit on the floor of the sports hall together. I suddenly feel as if someone has punched me in the chest: sitting with Henry now feels like I have been transported back to our first session together, only Henry's dark hair is speckled with grey, which he blames me for . . .

Henry pulls out his laptop and we watch two videos together: my first university competition and my last one. An enormous swell of pride fills my chest, and I can feel my eyes starting to well. I am a different person to when I first walked in here. I don't know if I find myself looking around at the hall filled with my teammates because they've made me feel like I belong, or if I'm trying not to look at Henry to deflect this emotional display. Maybe it's both.

Henry then opens an excel spreadsheet labelled 'Lauren Masterplan'.

I scan Henry to try and make sense of why he's doing this, he knows that I'm not great at expressing my emotions, but I have got better since I've known him. Henry points to the laptop.

I look closer and see that the spreadsheet is a list of goals. Some of which I know I personally made with Henry during goal setting sessions, some of which I'd never seen before.

He smiles and tells me, 'read the goals and we can tick them off if you've completed them'.

I roll my eyes. *May as well humour him considering he's put up with me for three years.*

*

Some of them are objective.

Competing in the second highest category in the league?

Tick.

Winning an overall medal in the league?

Tick.

Winning a gold medal at varsity?

Tick.

18.0 seconds time of flight?

Tick.

Some of them are funny.

Contain her attitude.

Smile at the judges properly at least once.

Henry is smirking when I read the funny goals out loud.

As I go to tick the 'contain her attitude' box, Henry quips, 'are you whole heartedly sure you can tick that box?'

I feign mild dismay, and lightly punch Henry on his arm. *Cheeky shit.* He then ticks the rest of the spreadsheet. All but one.

'Considering you didn't even want to join when you first came to the club, I'd say that's some transformation' Henry says.

But I am too busy reading the last goal to pay attention to him.

In front of me, highlighted in big, bold letters.

Carefree enjoyment.

I stare at those words.

Henry's overall goal was to see me enjoy myself and feel happy.

To say that I've enjoyed the last three years would be a lie. I've loved them.

We tick the last box together.

Discussion

As a research team, it is our priority to encourage readers to consider their own reactions to this story and to develop their own personal interpretations, yet perhaps it is also our responsibility to offer an insight into how we think this study adds to previous research, why we chose an autoethnography,

and what meaningful impact might come from this work. In essence, why does this study matter? When we consider the existing research on thriving, what is presented in this study is the first, personalised, and embodied account of what it can feel like to exist within a coach-athlete relationship that enables an athlete to thrive. While extant research has been effective in describing the essential relational characteristics that can enable an athlete to thrive (e.g. openness, trust; Brown and Arnold 2019; Passaportis et al. 2022), our study invites the reader to *feel* and *connect* with those features through bodily feelings and physical sensations. As such, we hope that the reader can place themselves in Lauren's shoes and experience the supportive coach-athlete relationship *with* her. By embodying the physical and psychological sensations, this may help translate characteristics (e.g. trust) that are otherwise difficult to describe, which may in turn foster self-reflection, critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness in a variety of readers (Sparkes 2007). Through this connection, we hope to move the reader in their 'heart, belly, and head' (A. Bochner and Ellis 2016, 212), and remind them of the powerful and meaningful relationships within their own lives that may have enabled them to thrive, how thriving might feel, and to question how we can support the occurrence of these desirable experiences.

Is another autoethnographic piece needed to achieve this? What can we do with autoethnography? According to Frank (2010, 3), 'stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided'. For example, then, autoethnographic work depicting both positive (i.e. thriving) and negative (i.e. abusive practices) situations, could be used within education interventions (e.g. coaching courses, safeguarding courses, sport psychology workshops) to encourage stakeholders (e.g. athletes, parents, coaches, managers) to reflect – and possibly act – on which behaviours can be considered desirable and which ones are unacceptable (see, e.g. J. McMahon, Knight, and McGannon 2018). Moreover, autoethnographies may aid policy makers working within the sports industry to emphasise and understand athletes' experiences in specific contexts, and how policy will *directly impact* athlete health and well-being. Recently, Wilson et al. (2024) examined how gymnasts around the world used the hashtag #gymnastalliance to share their experiences of feeling silenced by social institutions, how maltreatment caused them enduring physical and psychological damage (e.g. suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress), the immediate need for change, and seeking a safe support network. To create an environment where instances of maltreatment can be safely and effectively disclosed, Wilson et al. (2024) propose athletes should maintain advisory roles within the design and implementation of reporting mechanisms to centralise their voice and create much needed change. In this way, knowledge, empathy, and conversation stimulated through first-person accounts (i.e. autoethnographies) may encourage unity and advocacy for the athlete voice to be heard and acted upon rather than disregarded, especially where sport industry individuals should be creating *for* the athlete in a constructive, collaborative, and safe manner (Barr 2019).

It is also fundamental to highlight that, whilst this study depicts Lauren to experience thriving (i.e. high well-being and performance), the story presented offers a unique perspective on the journey to thriving to that previously described in the sport literature. More specifically, Lauren's journey illustrates how, following adversity, a process of recovery and growth ended in thriving (see Brown, Sarkar, and Howells 2021). Moreover, it showed how coach-athlete connectedness was paramount to Lauren re-visiting, acknowledging, and making sense of previous distress. This connectedness aligns with Feeney and Collins (2015) suggestion of how relationships can support thriving following life adversity by providing a safe haven (e.g. expressing empathy, reassurance), assisting fortification (e.g. developing strengths and talents), assisting the re-construction process (e.g. problem-solving), and reframing adversity as a mechanism for positive change and growth. As such, it seems pertinent that Brown and Wagstaff (2024, 5) describe a thriving environment to be a 'space where individuals are supported to achieve their performance outcomes in a safe, sustainable, and fulfilled way to, ultimately, experience development and success'. This definition reaffirms that our felt safety and fulfilment in the environments in which we operate, and from those within it, are critical to promoting thriving. Last, the coach-athlete connectedness within Lauren's story

provokes questions about her coach's experiences during their interactions and his potential thriving. Future enquiry could explore coaches' experiences of thriving by asking, for example, do coaches experience thriving or merely survive, can thriving be a shared experience, and what do coaches take from these dyads when athletes report that they are thriving?

Finally, for us as a research team, it is important to decipher what this story meant to us. Despite coming from different backgrounds, experiences, and areas of interest, what we all felt within this story was *hope*. We hope for the possibilities of thriving, we hope for secure and collaborative coach-athlete relationships, and we hope for organisations that support these. The power of stories lies within what they can teach us about who we are and who we can imagine being (Frank 2010). Let us balance the use of stories in coaching and safeguarding courses to show what is *possible*. Let us use stories to ask athletes, coaches, parents, and governing bodies what can we learn from this? What can we include in our practice? How can we continue to challenge what is 'normal'? What mentor positively impacted my life, and how did they do that? Let us start using autoethnographies such as this as a source material for coaching courses (e.g. safeguarding, continuing professional development) to encourage reflection on thriving experiences, relationships, and the environments coaches create within their practice. Let us use autoethnographies such as this as source material to encourage stakeholders (e.g. policy makers) to collaborate with athletes and reflect on how to create meaningful change. Above all, we hope that this autoethnography empowers coaches to recognise that they hold the potential to transform a 'good' experience to a life-changing one.

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