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# **Experiences and Expectations of Biographical Time among Young Athletes**

## **A life course perspective**

**Cassandra Phoenix, Brett Smith and Andrew C. Sparkes**

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, we explore how biographical time is storied by a particular group of young athletes in relation to their experiences and expectations of embodied ageing. The data suggests that at present, as able and sporting bodies, their everyday experiences are framed by the cyclical, maximizing, and disciplined notions of time associated with the social organization of sport. In their middle years, however, it was perceived that time would be pressured. In contrast, when talking about old age, empty time and static time were expected. The ways in which three different narratives of self operate to shape the projected experiences of time for these individuals are highlighted, and the implications of this process for their ability to access diverse narrative resources of ageing is discussed. **KEY WORDS** • ageing • bodies • self • time • young athletes

### **Introduction**

According to Erben (1998), time permeates everything that we do and thus lives have to be understood as lived within time. Furthermore, he notes that time is experienced according to narrative, and narratives – of past, present or future – are the means by which biographical experience is given meaning. Likewise,

Ezzy (1998) argues that narrative and temporality are closely related, with the former being a primary way of organizing our experience of time. Moreover, for him, narratives are at work in constituting our selves and identities. As such, Ezzy suggests, it is difficult to tease apart conceptions of time, narrative and self. Indeed, 'One of the most important consequences of a narrative conception of self is that it incorporates temporality' (Ezzy, 1998: 239). In a similar fashion, Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001: 15) propose that identity is formed in and through narratives, and 'the self in time – can *only* exist as a narrative construction'. Importantly, this relationship between time, self, and narrative is *embodied*. For example, Kelly and Field (1996: 248–9) note that the construction of self and identity is a 'social process which alters through *time*, as the *bodily contingences change*' (emphasis in original). Likewise, Watson (2000: 109) observes how, 'the salience of embodiment can be explained in terms of the relationship that pertains between the body/self and time'.

The view that time, self, and narrative is embodied has also been highlighted by Sparkes and Smith (2007). As they point out, we live time *in* and *through* the materiality of our ageing, individual, fleshy bodies as biological entities. *We feel* it in our bones. Yet, they add, time is in addition a social experience that is storied and can shape, and impact on, our senses of self. Others also suggest this. For example, Turner (1995) emphasizes how individual features of the ageing corporeal body (e.g. the spread of grey hair, the decline of bodily mobility, or the loss of skin tone) become the subject of social observations and interpersonal monitoring in such a way that the transformation of bodies is our best index of the passing of time and, on occasions, who we are and might be. For him, 'An individual experiences the process of ageing in relation to the maturation of their body, and also in relation to their collective generational body-image' (Turner, 1995: 255). In this regard, societies use systems of social classification that conceptually order and control the meanings of the changes that time brings to the material body. This is particularly so in terms of the moral and aesthetic significance given to change in the body's external surfaces and how these are interpreted as symbols of the self in a culture that values and celebrates youthful, physically active bodies (Faircloth, 2003; Tsuji, 2005).

Furthermore, similar to Anderson et al. (2005), Brockmeier (2000), Flaherty and Fine (2001), and Southerton and Tomlinson (2005), Adam (2004: 1) argues that time is lived, experienced, known, theorized, constructed, and 'controlled'. It is contextual and historical, embodied and objectified, abstracted and constructed, represented and commodified. In these multiple expressions time is an inescapable fact of social and cultural existence.' Thus, for Adam, the relationship to time is at the very root of what makes us human. Indeed, all that we recognize as society and culture arises with and from efforts to transcend various key temporal delimitations of embodied human existence, including change, the rhythmicity of the physical environment, and, importantly for this article, efforts

to outdo ageing. Accordingly, there is an intimate connection between time, self, narrative, body, society, and ageing.

Against this background, in this article we seek to make explicit the ways in which young, physically active people experience 'biographical time' as it is implied in human ageing. For Corbin and Strauss (1987: 253), biographical time is composed partly of time 'present and future over the course of a life; plus a person's perception of time, at any moment within the life course; plus the use of clock time (a day, week, year) in the performance of biographical or trajectory related tasks'. Thus, we are interested in exploring how a group of young athletes now experience time as youthful and sporting bodies, and how they expect to experience time in the future. Furthermore, we seek to understand the ways in which these experiences within the life course are shaped by what we term the sporting self, settled self, and reflective self. Such purposes are significant and of use, we feel, for the following reasons.

According to Baars (1997: 283), 'Time and concepts of time play a crucial role in the study of aging'. Indeed, to 'understand aging it is essential to disentangle the complex relation between chronological time and other temporal structures' (Baars, 1997: 284). Yet, the phenomenon of time in relation to ageing has received little attention within sociology in general, and social gerontology related research in particular. As De Vries et al. (2001) and Tsuji (2005) suggest, despite the pervasive role it occupies in how people story and *do age*, in the qualitative literature that focuses on ageing there have been surprisingly few efforts to grapple with the different ways time is constructed and experienced. Further, little thought has been given to the manner in which time is storied by young people in ways that link how they experience time in the present to their expectations of experiencing time in the anticipated future (for exceptions see Greene and Wheatley 1992; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Oechsle and Geissler, 2003; Anderson et al., 2005).

In addition to this neglect, a focus on youthful bodies and temporality is worthy of attention because, according to Brannen and Nilsen (2002), the ways in which young people experience time are important influences on whether they have a notion of planning for the future. Time as an embodied, social experience may also influence how young people interact with others, particularly the elderly. Indeed, Lacey et al. (2006) argue that young people's beliefs about ageing are significant because they often frame their stories around ageing in negative terms. For example, they may predict old age as miserable. For these authors, this prediction may cause young people to make risky decisions and avoid preserving themselves for what they assume will be a miserable future. Furthermore, negative beliefs about ageing may socially reproduce and reinforce embodied ageist stereotypes of 'miserable old codgers' and 'carefree youths', potentially driving a wedge between the generations. All this may be particularly so for specific populations, such as young athletes who are inclined

to inhabit and engage with the world via particular kinds of 'high performance' bodies that have certain characteristics.

For example, athletic bodies tend to be highly disciplined and shaped by various regimes and technologies designed to ensure corporal control and predictable performance outcomes (Frank 1991; Sparkes 1998, 2004). The body therefore is often especially important to athletes, and the dynamics of their body-self relationships are likely to differ from those experienced by individuals with less invested in sporting performance. In other words, while the body is immediately relevant to the identity that any individual attempts to promote both at present and in the future, it is to be expected that it will hold particular significance to the young athlete whose self-identity is constructed and maintained around possessing an able, pain-free, physically fit, and performing body. With these points in mind, it is noteworthy that in high-level and elite sport, performance decreases with age.

Furthermore, in relation to young people pursuing alternative occupations, the sporting career is a relatively short span, with many retiring from competition in their late 20s. Unlike young people with a lesser affinity to sport, the passage of time will call into question who young athletes think they are, they were, and who they can become in the future. Thus, young, athletic bodies and the stories they tell can provide some important and potentially different insights into the multiple ways in which self-ageing is perceived, and time is experienced for this particular subsection of young people.

Indeed, even though all bodies are embedded in time, time can take on an imperious position in the embodied lives of young athletes. For example, athletes are particularly familiar with the notion of clock, calendar, or linear time. That is, time based on standardized invariable units. Importantly, for Sparkes and Smith (2003), the technologies associated with the machinery for adding up and capitalizing time in sport actually penetrate individual bodies as part of a disciplinary process. Likewise, in also supporting the view that athletes are a unique set of people, Allen Collinson (2003) notes how time significantly marks athletic bodies, etching itself onto their bodies as they quickly and inevitably become attuned to gauging their sense of progress by time. Notably, athletes also optimistically and uncritically arrange their future by time, investing extensive amounts in physical training and assuming throughout that training in a certain manner for a specific period of time will result in a level of performance or fitness that will translate into predictable performances at a given distance. As such, she suggests, many athletes *become* their times, and identify others by their times in specific events. Time, therefore, becomes part of the tacit knowledge that shapes how athletes engage with their bodies and the bodies of others, and live their lives on a daily basis.

In what follows, therefore, we focus on a group of young athletic bodies and their narratives of experiencing time in the present, and living in and through

time in the anticipated future in relation to ageing. Before turning our attention to these stories of biographical time, however, it needs to be recognized that we clearly do not know if these people will experience time in the future as they anticipate now. That said, exploring their stories of what it might mean to be a body-self in the future as they age is worthy of attention, given that the stories we tell might become the narratives we live by. As Pollner and Stein (1996) suggest, while stories are not deterministic, what people think and talk about now can be their future. This is because through storytelling their embodied social world as it is anticipated may be 'talked into being', thereby becoming their future. Likewise, for Frank (1995), the truth of stories is not only what *was* experienced, but also equally what *becomes* experience in the telling and its reception. As Frank (1995: 22) comments, the stories we tell about our lives are not necessarily those lives as they were lived, but these stories may 'become our experience of those lives . . . Life moves on, stories change with that movement, and experience changes. Stories are true to the flux of experience, and the story affects the direction of that flux.' Further, since a speaker does not start anew when presenting a version of themselves, Taylor (2006) argues that a life narrative as it is told in the present may become a partial resource for future talk. In Davies and Harré's (1990: 49) words, they are part of the 'cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography', which accrues over multiple tellings. A life narrative can therefore be considered as a construction that is resourced by previous constructions that aggregate over time. With all this in mind, we now turn to the methods informing this article and then consider what narrative resources relating to embodied time experiences this group of young athletes drew upon as they described their thoughts of self-ageing.

## Methods

This study forms part of a larger project exploring young athletes' perceptions of self-ageing. The participants were Exercise and Sport Science undergraduates attending a university in the south west of England. Phase one of this project involved 179 participants ( $m = 91$ ,  $f = 88$ ) responding to a collection of questionnaires, which included the General Attitude to Ageing Scale (GAA; O'Hanlon and Coleman, 2000, 2003) and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). Using the results from these questionnaires, we were able to select those individuals who defined themselves as competitive athletes (as opposed to exercisers) and invested heavily in sport as part of who they were. We were also able to select those individuals who represented the highest and lowest tertiles in their scores for the GAA and AIMS. These individuals were used for further analysis (see Phoenix et al., 2005), and to generate a purposeful sample for phase two.

Phase two of the study (see Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006a,b, 2007), the data on which this article is based, involved confidential, semi-structured, life history interviews with 22 young athletes ( $m = 9$ ,  $f = 13$ ) with a mean age of 20 years (ranging from 19–27 years). The athletes participated in either team ( $n = 15$ ) or individual ( $n = 7$ ) sports ranging from international ( $n = 7$ ) to regional representation ( $n = 5$ ) to at least university level ( $n = 10$ ). The primary investigator [Cassandra Phoenix] conducted the interviews, encouraging the participants to tell their life story in their own way and in their own words while also elaborating on the meanings they ascribed to certain events and people so that she could better understand their views of self-ageing. Participants were interviewed between one and three times, with each interview lasting between one and two hours.

As the interviews progressed and data were accumulated, connections were sought across narrative segments and themes in an attempt to identify patterns and meanings constructed both within and between the stories told by the participants. This was done in order to facilitate a comparative analysis of present and future selves that were described, and the experiences of time that were seemingly associated with these selves. This process is similar to the categorical-content analysis described by Lieblich et al. (1998) and Smith and Sparkes (2005) that focuses upon the thematic similarities and differences between the narratives generated during interview situations. In addition, the interview transcripts were subjected to a structural analysis. This type of analysis according to Sparkes (2005) focuses on the formal plot and organization of the narrative to tease out the distinct structures that hold it together with a view to identifying it as a particular narrative type.

The analyses revealed that three types of selves shaped the ways in which this particular subsection of young people storied and understood time across the life course. That is, the 'sporting self' framed how they experience time now. As they anticipated ageing into their middle years, a 'settled self' was expected to take over and exert its influence differently on the ways in which they would experience time. Finally, the participant's perceptions of later life were dominated by the anticipated emergence of a 'reflective self', and the ways in which time would be encountered was thought to change once again. Each of these selves and their associated time experiences will now be focused on in turn.

### **The Sporting Self and Experiences of Time at Present**

At present, the athletes who participated in this study live as a sporting self, enjoying the relative absence of responsibility and commitment to anything other than sport, and its associated social activities. Furthermore, living with an absence of responsibility or commitment to anything other than their sport

potentially facilitates the belief that life at present is 'unbeatable' in terms of enjoyment, and accordingly represents 'the best days of one's life' – a narrative commonly associated with university days in general within the UK. To successfully develop and maintain a sporting self, the individual must discipline their body through investing in extensive and time-consuming training regimes, and also make social connections with team-mates and other athletes while 'off the field'. Thus, to successfully develop and live as a sporting self, not only must the participant use their body to perform in sport, but they must also regularly interact with similar bodies by engaging in training sessions, competitive fixtures and social gatherings throughout the week. As part of this, those pursuing the sporting self often embody many of the various commandments characteristic of 'jock culture' (Sparkes et al., in press). For example, the athlete will 'play high level university sport', but also 'commit to the social life'. In this sense, drawing upon the work of Frank (1995) the sporting self exists *for itself*; its responsibility is primarily to itself, limited to the sphere of its own self-interest. While this sphere may include others, these others are often included 'until further notice' – in this instance, for the duration of university.

Accordingly, one of the ways a sporting self experiences biographical time reverberates with what Brockmeier (2000) refers to as 'cyclical time'. This is a narrative model or map of autobiographical time that depicts life as if it were a repetitive structure. While Brockmeier acknowledges that in 'real time' there is no identical repetition, he does suggest that this narrative model offers a particular vision of the course and direction of time that, in turn, help frame, and structure storytelling. Cyclical time and the manner in which the social organization of sport shapes this embodied experience are reflected in the comments by Jill.

Sport is my life, and my life revolves around sport. During the season, I have university training on a Monday, fitness and then pitch time. Tuesdays I'll have club training in the evening. Wednesdays we'll have a match in the afternoon after our lectures. Thursdays we have another fitness session but Fridays I wouldn't normally do anything because it's the day of rest before the big match. Saturdays we have a game and then most Sundays we have off, but occasionally we have a game as well. It sounds a lot, but I like it. It's my life. I don't know what I'd do without sport. (Age 19, hockey)

These comments signal that a cyclical narrative model of time organizes complex temporal scenarios that are developed and maintained in part through the participant's involvement in sport within a university context. For example, the sporting season in relation to match days and training sessions with the club are divided up, thereby helping to create a repetitive temporal biographical structure and sustain a sporting self. Further, involvement in sport led the participants to conceive of time as controllable and linked to specific 'objective' outcomes associated with enhanced performance, such as, improved fitness levels (e.g. a



reduction in recovery time or the stamina to cover greater distance in less time), and better skill execution (e.g. ability to perform skills in less time under pressure). Importantly, the time spent participating in sport and other social and cultural practices associated with it are storied as pleasurable and enjoyable. Accordingly, a cyclical narrative model permeates the young athletes' lives, influences the ways they manage and conceptualize everyday time, and helps cultivate and sustain their sporting self. This cyclical notion of time was supported and strengthened by the nature of academic life. For example, teaching weeks, terms, semesters, and years, punctuated by exams, vacations and so forth, not only helped create a supportive context for the sporting self in time, it also reinforced the temporary nature of this existence. That is, few students perceived this particular phase of their life as lasting more than 3 or 4 years.

Intimately connected to the experience of cyclical time and the manner in which it helps shape and is shaped by a sporting self, the young athletes' comments also revealed the manner in which 'disciplined time' is experienced and developed via sporting involvement and how closely this is connected with the characteristics of the *disciplined* body (Frank, 1995). Embodied disciplined time, as identified by Seymour (2002), refers to the socialization of individuals and the thoroughgoing engagement of the body in time. Here, human bodies are trained, organized, and disciplined in order to fit into society and the social worlds that a person is involved in. For example, the ingestion of performance-enhancement liquids and high-carbohydrate, low-fat food is brought into a systematic relationship with bodily practices and particular sporting, social arrangements.

In a similar fashion, the data generated in this study indicated how the practices associated with sport and its organization and structure provide a context and framework for the socialization of participants that influenced not only how their bodies were used, but also the types of bodies they developed. As part of this process, athletic bodies became disciplined in time, and time became disciplined in their flesh. As Rosemary (age 19, swimming) commented, 'My time revolves around sport. I sleep it and breathe it. I've trained my body hard over a long time, and I know what it can do. You can see what it can do. I think my efforts definitely show.'

Furthermore, when asked how the relationship with his body had changed over the last 10 years, Gary responded:

I suppose I've done more work in sport, like the warming down, warming up, stretches, working on flexibility and training aerobically and anaerobically. And I have bulked up because of it, you can see that I've put the time in. I'm not huge, I need to get bigger really but I can see and feel differences since doing more training. I think I look more like a rugby player than I did before. (Age 20, rugby)

These comments depict how disciplined time may contribute to the successful

construction of a sporting self by assisting the participant to 'look like' an athlete. Accordingly, disciplined time was interpreted by the athletes as 'time well spent'. Indeed, it enabled them to have something to 'show' for the hours invested in their bodies and in this sense, had the potential to be transformed into physical capital. Thus, disciplined time and the sporting self was inscribed into their bodies and seemingly projected from them onto society. Further, not only was this notion of *showing* how time had been spent in the past salient for the present, it was also connected to their perceptions of the future. In particular, our data revealed that young athletes did on occasions experience moments where they considered what lay ahead. This is shown in the concept of 'maximizing time'.

Maximizing time involves making the most of the here and now. Similar to what Nowotny (1994) refers to as the 'extended present', and Brannen and Nilsen (2002) describe as the 'model of deferment', maximizing time involves living in the present, in order to enjoy oneself and try out new possibilities. Importantly, however, while Brannen and Nilsen (2002: 520) propose that those who experience time akin to the model of deferment postpone or defer serious consideration of the future, 'keeping the future at bay', the young athletes involved in this study demonstrated an orientation towards their future through the very act of maximizing time and living in the present. That is, our data demonstrated that part of the motivation for maximizing time involved a sense of urgency in achieving sport-related accomplishments that the participants did not feel would be possible in the future due to the condensed nature of a sporting career. This is illustrated in the following comments from Joanna, who said:

At the moment, you've just got to do what you can, and when you can do it. For example, I went onto the squash court for the first time a few weeks ago and started hitting the ball around, not having a game or anything but just trying to get the strokes right. It's easy to do stuff like that now, I was like 'right, I want to go and play squash' and so I did. You've got to seize the opportunity while you can, you know live life to the full while you can and play whatever sport, or do whatever you want to do before you can't do it. (Age 21, netball)

Similarly, talking of his involvement in elite hockey, Neil explained:

I think bearing in mind that I'm not going to be as good when I'm older; it gives me the motivation to be at my best now, to maximize what I can do now. Also because then in the future, you'll know that you got the best that you could, and I think it will bother me less being older, because I'll know I've done all of this. I mean, as you get older, you just can't perform as well. There comes a point when your body can't perform like it used to, and it goes down hill. So, you have to make the most of your time. That's what I do. (Age 21, hockey)

These comments illustrate that not only did the young athletes narrate a sense of cyclical and disciplined time, but they also drew upon the narrative of maximiz-

ing time. In doing so, the comments illuminate how this story operated in the shadow of an embodied race against time, where the participant's raced to maximize time through their sporting body-selves, before time was mapped as a sign of decline onto their performing bodies. Indeed, this was further reinforced by the understanding that a career in high-level sport is often short, and therefore exerts a pressure to achieve 'now' while the body is seen to be at its 'peak'. As such, maximizing time now had some meaning for the future by using the apparently extended present as a means for investing in a future that, all being well, will be free from regrets and feelings of missed opportunities. In this sense, the participants currently experienced the 'future in the present' (Roberts, 1999). That is, young athletes maximized time in the present partly because they foresaw their future in terms of physical decline and changes in circumstances, which would prevent them from sustaining current levels of sport performance. Tied to this, and their anticipated experiences of time in the future was the expectation that a *settled self* would emerge during their middle years.

### **The Settled Self and Expectations of Time in the Middle Years**

The settled self was believed by the participants to begin shifting into the foreground of their life story around the age of 35 years old. This self was relationally constructed against the sporting self. That is, while the sporting self was primarily responsible for *itself*, the perceived emergence of the settled self was believed to signal that responsibility would be *for* an 'other' body: a spouse, a child, a boss. As a sporting self, the young athletes believed they would be 'settled down' and experience a sense of security, certainty, direction and control, across its multifaceted elements. Specifically, living as a settled self, the participants expected to own a home, be established in their career, and be financially secure. Reflecting the observations of De Vries et al. (2001), participants seemingly interpreted the transition into the settled self to reflect a linear passage of time, marking progression from a sporting self into a new kind of existence. Accordingly, this transition was also expected to signal different experiences of biographical time.

For the young athletes, when talking about their expectations of ageing into their middle years and developing a settled self, a narrative of time as *pressured* dominated their stories. For the settled self, experiencing 'pressured time' refers to the belief that time is not for oneself, but is taken up by, or for, another. As a result, unlike a sporting self that valued maximizing time for the self in the relative comfort of university life, the settled self was expected to exert pressure on time because during this period the selves and identities of being a parent, a husband/wife, a homeowner and employee are being extensively invested in. In this investment, time is consumed and rationed out. Time horizons stay close

and neither the past nor the future assumes priority. The present is attended to, but feels pressured. Furthermore, in pressuring time, cyclical time loses its mooring to sport as it becomes less prominent in one's life story. Time instead is believed to feel restrictive as one attempts to meet the demands of other bodies and being a settled self.

Furthermore, in pressured time, disciplined time takes on new meaning. Rather than the body being disciplined via sport, work and family life are expected to discipline it. Thus, believing that one will be unable to participate in sport as one used to when a sporting self (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006b), experiences of time are perceived as being less pleasurable and enjoyable than before. Instead, the settled self is anticipated to feel pressure and restriction in the process of trying to meet society's demands of being 'middle-aged'. Further, instead of being an enabling experience, the settled self that lives in pressured time is constrained. Pressured time is reflected in the comments by Neil:

Now my whole life is geared to playing sport. But it won't be like that forever of course. When I'm older, in middle age, things will naturally change. I won't have the opportunities to play sport and enjoy my time like now because I'll have kids, a wife, a job . . . You can't play sport and settle down properly. If you want a family, a good job, and all that, then you have to give something up. So, the demands of having a job, kids, a house, will stop me playing a lot of sport. So, middle age for me will be a time of pressure. It'll be quite boring I expect. (Age 21, hockey)

Likewise, Jamie reflected:

In the future you're just always going to be on the go – work, kids, owning a house – all those kinds of things. I imagine that you'll just spend your time dealing with all of that kind of stuff and not really have as much time to spend on yourself like you do now. It will be like everyone wants a bit of you, and there are only twenty-four hours in a day, so you're just going to have to get used to that and try to keep on top of everything. Life will be boring and not as enjoyable as now. But you have to sacrifice something if you want to settle down. (Age 27, rugby)

Furthermore, Hannah (age 21, netball) said, 'When I'm older, in middle age, life won't be as fun as it is now. It will be full of pressure. My life will be really constrained. No time for sport, just kids, a husband, and a huge mortgage. I'm not looking forwards to it.' Likewise, for Joanna:

When you're older, you're going to have more time constraints. You're going to have work, you're going to have children and they're going to be very dependent on you. Your husband is also going to be dependent on you for things, and all of that is going to take time. That's how I see it really. That's what's in store. (Age 21, netball)

As shown in the above comments, partly due to the multiple facets of the settled self, time at this stage of the life course was expected to feel as though it

would quicken because more activities (e.g. work, parenting, leisure) were anticipated as being compressed into a shorter time span. Consequently, time was believed to become condensed and compact. One perceived outcome of this was a reduction in time available for oneself – and in particular for participation in sport. Indeed, when the settled self was expected to shift into the foreground of their life story, the young athletes anticipated that their involvement in sport would decrease. Further, rather than being storied in enabling terms, the settled self tied to pressured time was perceived to be a constraining experience.

### **The Reflective Self and Expectations of Time in the Later Years**

For the young athletes, the sporting self was foregrounded in their ageing stories about the present. As one moves through the life course, the sporting self was then expected to move into the background of one's life and a settled self to move into the foreground. In later years, however, the young athletes perceived that both these selves might shift into the background as a reflective self emerges. As a reflective self, the young athletes anticipated looking back over their life course making sense of, and appreciating what *has been*. In its ideal form, the athletes commented on how they would have successfully responded to the cultural expectations of the sporting and settled selves. That is, their biographies would chart earlier confirmation of an athletic identity within the sub-culture of sport, followed by the identities of a successful parent, partner, homeowner and career person throughout their middle years.

In contrast to the sporting self where time was expected to be experienced as being cyclical, disciplined and maximized, and the settled self that was expected to exert pressure on one's life through its multiple demands, the reflective self was believed by the participants to lack vision and direction in time. In this way, stories describing expectations of the reflective self in later life illuminated aspects of what Brockmeier (2000) describes as the 'static model of time'. For Brockmeier, this type of life narration lacks any kind of developmental trajectory. Furthermore, he suggests that these narratives tend to ignore or deny the idea that life is a process, has a direction, and sometimes even a precise goal. The ways in which the reflective self was expected to shape static time is shown in the following comments from Rosemary as she described her perceptions of later life:

I suppose in later life, if you're really frail, and really old, it sounds horrible, but it's like waiting to die. Especially if you're on your own and there's nobody else around. What is the reasoning? You'd have nothing to aim for. You've finished your life, you're just relaxing and reflecting on what you've done, not really starting anything . . . I think it must be really horrible. (Age 19, swimming)

As indicated in this example, expectations of time in old age were relationally constructed against the former active sporting and settled selves. Indeed, when describing the anticipated dominance of the reflective self in later life, experiences of time were understood as static – symptomatic of a life believed to be effectively over. In addition to lacking any sense of forward trajectory, time as a reflective self was also perceived as *empty*.

According to Crossley (2000), when time is experienced as empty, people live without hopes, possibilities and aspirations. They do not think about, plan or commit themselves to future possibilities because they are afraid of disappointment. In other words, expecting to have less physical and mental energy to invest, they become more cautious about involving themselves in projects where it may be wasted. Furthermore, Crossley adds that the apprehension related to such fears means that individuals fail to commit themselves to various projects and possibilities, therefore losing all sense of meaning in their lives. The participant's expectations of experiencing empty time while living as a reflective self are evident in the following examples:

Laura: When you're in old age, it's almost like time doesn't really matter anymore because you don't have anything that you have to do.

Interviewer: Do you think that time matters now?

Laura: Yes, because there are things that you want to accomplish in your life. When you're older, that's all been done. (Age 21, basketball)

Similar to other participants, Hannah's beliefs regarding later life also signalled the perceived dominance of the reflective self and the associated experiences of empty time:

I just don't see what there is to do in later life, what there is to fill your time with at that age. I'm afraid that's how I comprehend it. You'll have this life where you won't have anything to do, you won't have to go to work, you won't have children, well, you may have children but you won't be looking after children. All that has come before . . . I don't know, what do you do? I don't know, I haven't a clue. I just know I don't want to get there. (Age 21, netball)

Besides *static* and *empty* time, as some of the comments suggest, the participants also made connections with the time tense of the 'past in the present' (Roberts, 1999) as they described the reflective self. Living in this temporal orientation involves expecting time in the present (i.e. later life) to be spent looking back over their life course, making sense of and appreciating what has been. The ways in which the participants anticipated the 'past to be in the present' while living as a reflective self is further shown in the following comments:

Being old I think is constantly looking back rather than looking forwards. It's just things like, people you class as old are always talking about how it used to be and

things like that, whereas they don't really speak about things that they're going to do. So at that time of life, I think you're constantly looking back at what you have done. (Lee, age 27, golf)

Importantly, however, central to the reflective self, promoting the temporal shift of the past in the present was the participant's anticipated ability to recount particular moments of their life story that depicted achievement and success. This was likely to be because past achievements were seen to act as building blocks for memories, thereby allowing the past to continually re-enter later years, and subsequently remain in the present. For the young athletes involved in this study, such memories were expected to be closely related to the aspirations of the sporting and settled self, thereby confirming and reinforcing the type of accomplishments that are valued by western society and the sub-culture of sport (i.e. 'living life to the max', achieving in sport in youth, and in middle age having a family, owning a home, and being successful in one's career). Illustrating this, Jamie, like other participants, said:

When I'm old, I'll always have something to tell my grandkids. I mean I can always say 'I played for The Warriors',<sup>1</sup> there's always something to tell there, and all the exploits with the rugby lads. Once I move on from that, I can always say 'this is my wife, this is your mum or your nan'. I hope to go through life with one person, not get divorced. I also hope to have a successful career teaching or something like that, I really would. (Age 27, rugby)

As the comments suggest, the successful accomplishment of the sporting self was believed to be significant for participants in terms of investing in and ensuring a meaningful old age, by providing feelings of competency, achievement and success that may be recalled in later life. That is, having the resources to tell an 'interesting' story, that could depict past 'success' was believed to provide this period of life with some purpose and fulfilment. This reflective process may, however, also have a dark underside. Here, for the participants of this study, when reflecting on one's life, losses to the performing body over time were emphasized. This, in turn, contributed to their expectations of a meaningless old age. As Neil commented:

When growing old has really taken its toll, you're sort of bed bound, wheel chair bound, possibly slightly crippled. I can just imagine lying there in a home or a hospital and just thinking about your life, how different it was when you were young, like now, playing sport. I think with old age, it can be a time for reflection and looking back on your life and reminiscing. I think it can also be a painful time when you have nothing to do but think 'I'd rather be dead', if you know what I mean. And you may be thinking, 'why is my life still stringing on? Why am I still going?' (Age 21, hockey)

Therefore, by looking back, recollecting and by living the past in the present, the *present* and the *future* in old age may become framed only by a sense of loss.

That is, anticipating life as a reflective self also shaped expectations of time as being orientated to the past in the present; then (youth) constantly being compared with now (later life): what was, with what is. This may further compound perceived and projected experiences of time as empty and static.

### Reflections

Reflecting on the comments made by the participants of our study, we would suggest that their stories empirically illustrate the intimate connections between time, self, and society and the central role that embodied narratives play in how individuals make sense of these connections as they construct personal stories that give meaning to their lives. That is, the young athletes speak of ageing, time, and self in terms that seem 'natural' and for some, 'unsurprising'. However, this process does not occur in a social vacuum and while narrators articulate their life stories in ways that *seem* natural this is not the case. Rather, experiences and expectations of time associated with the sporting, settled and reflective selves need to be considered in relational terms and as culturally and historically contingent. This is because narratives do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations. As Frank (2004: 178) states, 'People build their own stories on the narrative scaffolding that their local worlds make available, and these scaffolding constrain the kind of story that can be told, even as they enable storytelling.' Thus, the participants' reported personal experiences of ageing, time, and self are structured within embodied relationships, according to socially and culturally shared conventions of telling, and the narrative resources they have access to. As Sparkes (1996, 2003) suggests, just what kinds of body-self relationships and experiences of time are constructed depend on the cultural repertoire of stories available for synthesis into personal stories, and the access people have to this repertoire within a political economy of developmental opportunities. Therefore, while the young athletes' individual story, in which time plays a pivotal role, is unique to each of them, it is shaped and given meaning via the narrative resources at their disposal within a cultural setting. In this sense, they are not free to tell just *any* story and temporal tale about themselves. There are expectations they have to meet and conventions they have to work within that act as powerful constraints on what can be said, how it is said, as well as who one is and can be.

Indeed, as their words suggest, the young athletes' embodied stories about time, and how they interpret events in their lives now and in the future as ageing bodies, are shaped by specific narratives of self that can be informed by ageist stereotypes and ideologies. For the athletes at present, the sporting self connected them to cyclical, maximizing, and disciplined notions of time closely associated with the social organization of sport that, in combination, helped



shape their body-self relationships as young athletes. In their middle years, time was perceived, in contrast, to be pressured because a settled self was expected to exert its influence. Conversely, when talking about later life, empty time and static time were anticipated as their past selves were reflected upon. Importantly here, notions of pressured, static and empty time were seemingly viewed in negative terms, and in stark contrast to senses of optimism, hope and freedom associated with maximizing time. The usefulness, then, of certain temporal orientations and types of self in their lives at this moment in time should not be underestimated. For us, there are a number of potential problems and constraints that go with them, which may become 'cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography' (Davies and Harré, 1990: 49) that need to be acknowledged in terms of the embodied narrative resources at the young athletes' current disposal.

In terms of implications for the participants' own ageing, the sporting self, settled self, and reflective self, and associated time orientations, depict and constitute a life course of ageing in terms of decline. Of course, at one level, the athletes are correct. The physical, biological body in performance terms does decline in various ways over time. Thus, it is perhaps understandable that the participants of our study were drawn to focusing their attention on the visible and embodied signs of this decline, and infusing their thoughts about ageing with feelings of anxiety and foreboding. This is particularly so, given their substantial emotional investment in a young, pain-free, able, strong, fast, disciplined, performing body that sustains a strong identity as a sporting self. Further, the narrative of decline is a dominant story of ageing in western cultures. That said, whether understandable or not, it still remains problematic in that when constructing stories of the future, this social narrative may help shape, reinforce, and perpetuate a story of negative ageing for the young athletes that reinforces ageist stereotypes and ideologies. For example, their ageing bodies may be defined as 'problem' bodies in ways that perpetuate the 'misery' perspective on ageing (Öberg, 2003).

Likewise, via the decline narrative, the possible world (Bruner, 1986) and assumptive world in the future could affect the present in potentially negative, problematic, and constraining ways. Indeed, the self in middle and old age can become a feared self (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Moreover, as the participants' earlier comments indicated, successful performances of the sporting self were believed to be significant for recounting the past throughout old age. Therefore, the sporting body was expected to be important for participants in terms of investing in a meaningful old age, by providing feelings of competency, achievement and success that may be recalled in later life. This however, as Hockey and James (2003) warn, may be a problem for individuals as they age. For these authors, focusing upon the body through memories of what it *has been* able to accomplish in the past, further emphasizes the contrast of how the body may be experienced in later life (i.e. weaker, slower, painful). In this sense,

memories constructed around stories based primarily on the body's accomplishments in sport, may heighten senses of loss that are commonly associated with growing old (Gilbert, 2004). As such, the young athletes may become socialized into and through an embodied narrative apprenticeship of negative ageing.

Furthermore, not only are there potential implications for their own ageing and apprenticeship, such narrow and negative interpretations of the ageing process might ultimately influence how young athletes relate to *other* ageing bodies. Indeed, as Hodgetts et al. (2003) point out, while youthfulness remains valued over and above growing old, aged bodies may continue to be marginalized and/or subjected to ridicule. Similarly, Neikrug (2003) also highlights the connection between negative perceptions of ageing, and negative attitudes towards those who are older. He notes, 'For younger individuals, internalized negative stereotypes of ageing can support ageist attitudes, affect their relationships with older persons in their lives as well as causing worry about their own future' (Neikrug, 2003: 327). Thus, partly via the combination of the sporting self, the settled self, and the reflective self, and associated time orientations, a problem of self-perpetuating a narrative of decline and its negative connotations of ageing could be sustained. The decline narrative therefore functions as a resource that may limit the selves and identities in relation to ageing that can plausibly be constructed both for the young athletes and other bodies they interact with. This is particularly so, given that the young athletes' stories revealed a serious lack of alternative narratives and different emplotments to potentially live by (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006a).

Accordingly, the young athletes' stories reveal a limited repertoire of alternative narrative resources for themselves, or others, to draw upon and appropriate to story ageing that enable more positive and different selves to emerge. Indeed, they harbour few inspiring stories that might enable them to perceive ageing in more positive and optimistic forms. Certain narratives are foregrounded and celebrated in the young athletes' stories while others are marginalized and silenced. This, it might be said, is the dark underside of the combination of narratives of the sporting self, the settled self, and the reflective self, and their associated time orientations, in which ageing becomes problematic partly due to the lack of narrative resources each person has available to tell his or her story. Yet this does not have to be the case, both now and in the expected future. That is, there *are* alternative narratives, including counter-narratives, which resist a narrative of decline and provide alternative stories regarding ageing that enable different selves to emerge.

For example, according to Tsuji (2005), rather than experiencing time as static or empty in old age, people can and do fill time with activities, such as hobbies, travelling, and volunteer work, that are meaningful and enjoyable for them. Filling time in old age with such activities instead of simply reflecting on the past also has some merit for both the individual and society in that they may

boost the individual's morale, provide an opportunity to form new social relationships, and contribute to enhancing the community. Moreover, for Tsuji, reflecting on the past does not have to instigate feelings of loss or be a refuge from the negative present. The process of reflection and collective reminiscing on the past can sometimes invigorate people, generate laughter, instigate storytelling, provide others with different stories to live by, invite others into one's life, and function as a source of biographical coherence. Likewise, as an alternative to expecting a futureless time in old age where one sits idly, reflecting on the past, and waiting for death, Tsuji notes that the future may hold great pleasure for some via developing new tastes (e.g. for music or technology) and sharing stories with significant others. Therefore, as he argues, within culture, among the young and the old, people's bodies and selves should not be simply dismissed as always a steady, irreversible downhill slide to death. There are indeed different ways to live and age.

At present, however, this is no easy task, given that western societies provide limited narrative resources on which to build alternative time experiences, identities, notions of self, and forms of embodiment in terms of ageing in positive, meaningful ways. Likewise, we would not want to imply that the young athletes would, or should, embrace other stories or any counter-narrative that might be made available to them. Our point is that for this to even become a possibility, they need a diversity of different stories to draw upon to shape their own personal experiences and expectations of time and ageing now and in the future. In effect, without an increase in their narrative resources, without there being more diverse stories of ageing circulating through people, the space and opportunity to craft an affirmative, hopeful, and valued future as sporting ageing bodies remains constrained for the time being.

Given that this article presents data from a group of young athletes, the findings regarding the experiences and expectations of biographical time across the life course need to be viewed as illuminative rather than definitive. That said, we hope that this study indicates how a focus on athletic bodies has the potential to make a positive contribution to research into the area of biographical time. To understand these issues more fully, however, future research will need to explore the extent to which the issues raised within this article concerning experiences and expectations of biographical time, and their associations with notions of self, may also relate to different groups of individuals. For example, given the dominant studentship narrative of 'these are the best days of your life', it would be both informative and interesting to note how the very experience of attending university may operate to shape both personal and public understandings of biographical time regardless of whether or not one is also an athlete, and for athletes at various stages in their career. In addition, the ways in which developing a settled self is taken for granted and/or relies on, for example ones' sexuality and/or social class may be another fruitful avenue of research. Finally,

the issues raised in this article could also be explored in relation to the ‘non-elite majority’ who are engaged with sport and physical activity in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. How might, for instance, a 42-year-old, overweight smoker, who plays soccer for a pub team on a Sunday experience their body and narrate time? What are their narratives of the body, time, sport and the life course?

Clearly, then, there is much work to be done in relation to time, sport, the body, and ageing. We hope this article, as a potential resource, invites others to critically reflect on their storied resources of ageing in ways that might enable people to enhance and enrich not only *their* experiences of time and ageing, but also the experiences of *others*, as they inhabit, develop, construct, and share different body-selves throughout their lives.

## Note

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1. ‘The Warriors’ is a pseudonym used for an elite rugby club that Jamie played professionally for prior to attending university.

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