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Coaching the beautiful game: an actor-network theory study of sport coaching

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ABSTRACT

Sport coaches continue to coach without reference to a conceptualisation of coaching. Indeed, coaching research has been caught in a chasm between process and practice conceptualisations, further widening the application of theory to practice. And coaches are often the protagonists in both of these accounts. Yet, as we will see, this is controversial for several reasons. Inspired by actor-network theory and the theory of the quasi-object (Serres, M. [1980] 2007. *The Parasite*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press), I go to the local, material, mundane sites where coaching is practiced and follow the ball (the 12th player!) in action. Three anecdotes are described: moving from the game towards a field of practice, to be seduced, and or not to be seduced. This article presents an innovative way of observing the coaching process that brings about new insights for how coaching is conceived, understood and practiced. I conclude with some implications of articulating the sociomaterialities for coaching education.

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What hardness, what energy and violence of limb, I thought, seeing men in white drawers' scouring after a football on a patch of snow in January. (Woolf [1931] 2000, 188–9)

Introduction

What draws the men in white drawers' attention to the football? Hardness, energy and violence of limb is far from beautiful. Yet, scouring after footballs continues to this day even in the snowy months of January. And now an agonistarch or the sport coach (derived from the Greek word *agonistarkhes*) coaches this game (Online etymology dictionary 2019). But how do we move from the game towards a field of practice?¹ Although coaching research has gone some way towards finding an epistemology (i.e. theory of knowledge) of coaching, it has often done so, as we shall see, with the coach as the protagonist.

Coaching practice research is a contested game of 'ologies' (North 2013). Inspired by the 'systematic empiricism' (observing, collecting, listing and classifying natural

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phenomena) of positivism (Chia 2003) early commitments of ‘coaching science’ (Jones 2007) applied this empiricism for studying coaching behaviours. Albeit still a current research stream in coaching research but less prominent, the pitfalls of behavioural approaches has led to the emergence of two alternative streams: process (psychological scientism) and practice (sociological) approaches to coaching (North 2017). Coaching as process models aim to inform or guide practice. Several process models have been developed, including mental models, decision making models and practitioner-based models (Abraham and Collins 2011; Cooper and Allen 2018; Côté et al. 1995; Lyle and Cushion 2017). Process approaches attempt to ‘accurately map phenomena and events in the external world in order to establish their causal relationships in a rationalist system of explanation’ (Chia 2003, 13). Whilst articulating the processes of coaching, modelling has been criticised on grounds of de-contextualisation; for ignoring the tensions and social dilemmas that characterise the practising of coaching (Jones, Bowes, and Kingston 2010). Alternatively, practice approaches argue that coaching is best understood as an activity situated within the social and cultural contexts where coaching takes place. Several theoretical contributions have been developed: complexity theory, orchestration and activity theory, to name a few (Jones and Wallace 2005; Jones and Ronglan 2018; Jones, Edwards, and Tuim Viotto Filho 2016). Although in agreement with Jones and Hemmestad’s (2019, 11) sentiment, ‘to better understand and develop coaching we should start with practice’, we diverge on how practice is conceptualised. In both process and practice approaches, there has been a privileging of human actors, such as coaches and athletes, and a ‘benighted meaningfulness’ to materials and materiality (Latour 2005). With the exception of Jones, Edwards, and Tuim Viotto Filho (2016) who brought material artefacts to attention, including coloured cones and the chalk line, they are, however, only considered as ‘tools’ mediating coaches’ actions.² In other recent empirical studies, Evans (2017) and Evans and Reynolds’s (2016) ethnomethodological conversational analyses capture coaching as an embodied practice between coaches and athletes, with particular attention given to their contextual orientations to material objects during moments of correction. Whilst materials are identified in the studies above, they are considered ‘subordinate’ (Waltz 2006) or an ‘appendage’ (Fenwick 2012) to the actions of coaches and athletes. In other words, the very materials of coaching practices have most often been downplayed or completely ignored. It is of little surprise then that coaching researchers have often been caught in a chasm between research/knowledge and practice (Abraham and Collins 2011; Stodter and Cushion 2019).

Who do we follow in the field of practice? Not with coaches as has long been the case. In comparison with the game where coaches are absent, they encroach on the Field of Play in practices. Perhaps we should start with players because they do, after all, move between the game and practices. But players, like coaches, are not a good starting point for our analysis either, as they often play on one of two sides! So, who then do we follow in this field of practice? What else moves between the game and practices? The ball. What if the ball was the protagonist of our account? The ball, which has been absented in the courtship of controversies in coaching research, now becomes a ‘transversal object’ (Latour 1999a) that might help to move beyond hitherto patchwork critiques. For the ball is not a mere appendage of the foot even though we talk of *football*. By granting the ball agency in making up its own account of what coaching *is*, an

alternative conceptualisation can be produced that gives insight into how the ‘actor-network’ hangs together (or not) in practices.

Although accounting for materials and materiality is still relatively new to sport and exercise (Chamberlain and Lyons 2019), much work has been done in sociomaterial studies in education (Fenwick and Edwards 2010; Mulcahy 2012; Sørensen 2009). For example, Mitchell (2019) employed an actor-network theory (ANT) praxiographic approach for reconceptualising improvement science as a relational pedagogical practice. She found that once humans were de-centred as the ‘sole source of agency’ and instead viewed in symmetry or democratically with nonhumans, the taken-for-granted materialities often overlooked in healthcare practices became visible. In another ANT study, Scoles (2018) grappled with a messy object, the penned signature, to understand how engineer’s knowledge practices were enacted in the negotiation of contracts. The signature was an openly contested ‘matter of concern’ (Latour 2004) in the negotiation of contracts. Drawing inspiration from these studies, I follow the ball as a quasi-object in coaching practices.

In the next section, I introduce Serres’s ([1980] 2007) theory of the quasi-object and Latour’s (2005) actants. Following this, three anecdotes describe the ball in action. I conclude with implications of articulating the sociomaterialities for coaching education.

The ball as a quasi-object

In his theory of the quasi-object, Serres ([1980] 2007) eloquently brings us closer to what a beautiful game might be like.³ The collective (i.e. the game) is weaved from objects and subjects together. For Serres, an object does not exist unless it is in relation with others; subjects do not exist unless they are in relation with the ball. The body follows the ball and moves around it. As the ball circulates, the better the team the quicker the ball is passed. The ball is the subject of circulation, where players are only the station and relays. The ball is referential to the written laws for the moving game. According to Serres ([1980] 2007, 224–234) a quasi-object is:

not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. The one carrying the ball is marked as the victim until the sky falls on its head [and the] speeds, forces, angles, shocks, and strategic thoughts is woven here and now ... [but] suddenly, it is no longer true; what was supposed to be decided isn’t; the knot comes undone ... history and attention bifurcate ... The game is this vicariance ... The ball is the quasi-object and quasi-subject by which I am a subject, that is to say, sub-mitted ... Fallen, put beneath, trampled, tackled, thrown about, subjugated, exposed, then substituted, suddenly, by that vicariance.

Similar to the quasi-object, Latour (1999a, 1999b, 303) employs Greimas’s (cited in Czarniawska 2017) semiotic term ‘actant’ which gives agency to both human and nonhuman actors. Actors are not defined *a priori* or in advance but instead by what they *do*. According to Harman (2009, 17) all actors are granted an ‘equal right to existence’ irrespective of size or complexity, natural or artificial, human or nonhuman. The democratic rights of actors have been well documented in Latour’s (1987, 1992, 1996, 1999a, 2004) work ranging from microbes, lawyers’ texts, scientists’ objects, doors and the French railway system, Aramis. The network of actors is not inert, like a black box, but

designates the flows of translations (Latour 2005). Translation refers to ‘all the displacements through other actors whose mediations is indispensable for any action to occur ... actors modify, displace and translate their various and contradictory interests’ (Latour 1999a, 311). Actors become translated in relation to other actors and some are more indispensable than others. Following the quasi-object has the potential for developing more *objectful* descriptions of practices so that coaches are better prepared to speak on behalf of the material agency of actors.

Actor-network theory praxiography

Actor-network theory (ANT) is an empirical philosophy which asks ontological questions concerned with ‘how something has to *be*, before it can properly be called “objective”, “visible reality”’ (de Vries 2016, 10).⁴ Reality is also not exclusively produced by humans either but extends to nonhumans. ANT’s focus on nonhumans is best captured methodologically where ‘subjects, culture and nonhumans are placed on equal footing’ (Bryant 2011a, 225). This is not to say that nonhumans are more important than humans but that they are both on the same ontological footing. In other words, nonhumans are no longer treated as an opposing pole necessarily related to culture or human subjects but are autonomous actors in their own right (Latour 1993).

Relational materialism is a central thesis of ANT which starts from a democratic (ontological) view of actors. In Latour’s (2005, 11) ‘sociology of associations’, the inquirer must ‘follow the actors themselves’ as they ‘make up their theories of what the social is made of’. According to Law (2008) ANT presents the actors accounts as little stories about how relations between actors assemble or don’t assemble. The assembling of the actor-network can be articulated by attuning to materials and materialities (Law and Mol 1995). Materiality and sociality are produced together in which the sites of practices become important places of investigation. Practices are sociomaterial from the coming together of actors of both social and material relations. According to Gherardi (2012, 78) in a relational sociomaterial epistemology ‘doing and knowing are not separated and the known object emerges in the ongoing interaction’. Thinking relationally allows categories, such as social and material, to be grouped together without erasing one or the other, or introducing a gap that needs to be bridged (Mulcahy 2013).

A praxiography was employed given ANT’s empirical focus on practices (Law 2008). Praxiography coincides with the ‘material turn’ (Clever and Willemijn 2014), as it is more interested in *praxis* (practice) and ‘graphy’ through description, recording and writing than *ethno* (culture), which is commonly associated with ethnographies (Bueger 2014, 385). According to Mol (2002, 158) ‘[t]he praxiographic approach allows and requires one to take objects and events of all kinds into consideration when trying to understand the world’. This is consistent with ANT’s principle of ‘generalised symmetry’ (Callon 1986) in which all actors have free association to enter into a relation. For example, Mol (2002) eloquently describes how the body becomes multiple as the disease atherosclerosis moves from surgery, radiography, ultrasounds department and the operating theatre. In each *being*, atherosclerosis is a different actor-network: first as pain in walking, second as narrowed blood vessels on an X-ray photo, third as Doppler readings of blood vessels and fourth as white paste scraped out of the blood vessel. I draw inspiration from Mol’s (2002) praxiographic approach for developing detailed descriptions

that can inform our knowledge and understanding of the actor-network of coaching practices.

Method

Drawing inspiration from Giardina (2017), method is not a step-by-step recipe of ‘toolbox or bookshelf conventions’, as this would be antithetical with an ANT study. In keeping with observation in previous ANT studies (e.g. Latour 2010; Latour and Woolgar 1986), I observed two community children’s/youth (aged between eight to twelve years) football clubs’ coaching practices over an eight-month period across two regions in Scotland. The rationale for observing two clubs was to allow for comparisons of coaching practices in two different sites. Access to clubs and coaches was granted by the Scottish Football Association (SFA), the governing body for football in Scotland. Inspired by Mulcahy’s (2012) purposeful nomination sampling for identifying teachers, the SFA were invited to nominate two ‘legacy clubs’ (now ‘platinum’) endorsed in relation to the Quality Mark scheme; a tiered quality assurance framework that sets rigorous standards for community clubs in Scotland (SFA 2020). In face of the increased accountability of sport coaches (Taylor, Piper, and Garratt 2016), there is an even greater need for a conceptualisation more conducive to practices.

Audio-visual observations (approximately 80 hours) took place twice a week, lasting approximately two hours in each club during the 2018/19 season. A single camera (Go Pro Hero 7) mounted on a tripod was placed outside the field of practices. A stationary video camera was chosen over a roving video camera due to the fluidity of actors moving in and out of practices (Luff and Heath 2012). To mitigate for any sound distortions an audio recorder was carried by the head coaches. I made fieldnotes simultaneously with the audio-visual recordings, jotting down in a tiny notebook the movement of the actors (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2006). The fieldnotes acted as initial threads for tracing the network of associations and unravelling the translations in the passages of practices. Ethics approval granted the reuse of visual data with permission from the coaches and children’s parents/carers. Pseudonyms were given to both lead coaches, assistant coaches and the participating children to respect anonymity.

The transcription was based on standard orthography and punctuation with the omission of intonation and interruptions to promote ease of readability (Lapadat and Lindsay 2016). This is consistent with the transcription of previous ANT analyses where the focus has been on the re-presentation of talk in a reduced written form (e.g. Latour 1996, 2010). The quotes foreground the agency of the ball from the sayings and doings of coaches, as they often spoke on behalf of the sociomateriality of both human and nonhuman actors in coaching practices.

Results

In what follows, I draw upon the heuristic ‘anecdotes’ (Adams and Thompson 2016) for retelling – ‘shift our understanding and attune to reality differently’ (Mol 2010) – the Field of Play. According to Michael (2012, 25), anecdotes are a literary device in the form of a ‘material-semiotic dialogue between past and present through and with bodies, memories, stories, objects, and texts’. Anecdotes, which were curated from a

combination of the fieldnotes and audio-visual data, are presented as little stories for describing ‘more-than-human’ entanglements (Lupton 2019). The first anecdote, ‘moving from the game towards a field of practice’, allowed me to sensitise towards materials, and how configurations of humans and nonhumans enacted coaching practices. This then led to the development of the second and third anecdotes, where I dive into the passages following the ball as it circulates in practices. As the ball moves quickly, contrary to slowness of this ontology (Ulmer 2016), we come to see that some actors are seduced (or not) in taking an alternative passage.

Anecdote one: moving from the game towards a field of practice

You might assume in [Figure 1](#) that the team huddled will quickly disperse into their positions in preparation for the game against the other team in the distance. And the people standing near the sideline might be spectators or parents. You can decipher the eleven-a-side pitch from the white lines marking some areas on the Field of Play: six-yard box, eighteen-yard box, sidelines, by-line and, of course, the two eleven-a-side goals. A ball is also on the Field of Play which is consistent with the laws of the game (IFAB 2019). But don’t be fooled! This was the very start of a coaching practice where the coaches gathered the players in for a discussion. I had just pressed the button on my GoPro to start recording and moments later I, too, would walk near to the players jotting down initial musings. On closer inspection, you will also notice a semi-circular yellow line where a smaller goal is located. Looking further afield, you will notice several of these goals. The huddled players would quickly disperse not into position but back towards my camera, while George (head coach of club one) would take some cones and place them down onto the Field of Play. The players on the other side are a second club team and the people at the sideline are a third club team who will shortly be coming onto the middle third of the pitch. The Field of Play has been split in three thirds with three different club teams’ practices occurring simultaneously. This is not a familiar



Figure 1. The illuminated Field of Play.

Field of Play. Soon, there will be up to fifty players and just as many balls, cones and bibs on the eleven-a-side pitch.

Anecdote two: to be seduced ...

Paul (head coach of club two) clutches an arm full of bibs and cones and drops some down as he marks the field of practice. Next, Paul positions players within the practice arrangement with some wearing bibs and others not. Players with green bibs stand shoulder-to-shoulder inside the eighteen-yard box and another two players outside of it. Non-bibs are more dispersed with two to three players standing at four orange cones. Balls are stored and enrolled at the topmost orange cones.⁵ Now that cones, bibs, players and balls are arranged, Paul gives some information about the practice:

All I want you guys to do is get an understanding of playing on a bigger park. So, you don't play narrow. Wide players are going to go and get wide. Defenders, you're going to work as a unit. Midfielders, you're going to go and press. Strikers, you're going to go and affect the game up there ... [attackers] you want to go and score a goal. If the defending team wins the ball, they get an opportunity to score in either of the yellow gates.

We're not playing normal eleven's guys because we've got a shorter park. I'm trying to get you guys to get wider, then we find the passes and the gaps to go and play.

The field of practice simulated the game to a certain extent as players were known as defenders, wide players, midfielders and strikers having particular strategies: non-bibs to score in the eleven-a-side goal and bibs to score in either of the yellow gates positioned on both flanks. Paul also wanted the players to develop an understanding of playing on a bigger park. Passages unfolded until an interruption occurs in the practice. After an interruption occurred, Paul said:

Freeze. Right, what you would expect for getting back into it. Where's the danger? Hold the ball there, Anthony. Hold the ball. Back in there, Jim, drop it in. Who's playing right midfield? So, why are you there? You go and be disciplined and take them away.

The ball and players came to a halt as Paul had anticipated the action of the players. After repositioning some players, the passage was reworked. Paul asked two questions in succession: first about a player's position, and second why the player was narrow. Paul then asked for the right midfield player to be *disciplined* and take them away, and shortly after the player moved out wide. Here, discipline was associated with the player's position as a right midfielder and would fit in well with Foucault's (1991) notion of 'docile bodies', where players remain disciplined to their position on the pitch. This is unsurprising given a desire for control by coaches can lead to increased instances of athlete docility (Mills and Denison 2018). But as the ball bobs and weaves the docility of players becomes weak, as another passage was interrupted, and Paul asked:

Where's the danger? The danger's here because I've got the ball. Yeah? I'm expecting you to press. Yeah, so you come and press me. You've put me under pressure, but I've got options, I've got to go there. If I drop back in, we shuffle across ... So, let's go and reset again. We don't all have to chase the ball, we work in depth.

The ball located at the feet of Paul signified danger as it attracted opposing players. But as Paul had stopped the practice, he simulates possible future actions in anticipation of

bodies approaching him. Then, as Paul signals for the start of the next passage, he reminds the defenders that they don't all have to chase the ball. The ball becomes an actor of interest particularly for the team not in possession, as in the case above, where defenders are 'seduced' away from their position. Drawing inspiration from Serres (2019, 264) to be seduced is used in the same sense of Ulysses being 'led outside the normal orbit, the straight, normal or ordered path' by Circe and others. Here, I refer to the Latin etymological roots of the term, *seducere*, composed of the verb *ducere*, 'to lead', and preposition *se*, 'aside, away' (Gherardi and Perrotta 2014). The intervention by Paul below indicates that other actors can seduce (or not) the attackers away from their position:

What we want to do is we want to drive them in. So yeah, I've got the ball. If I play it to Archie, blues come and press it, you come and press it Jack. I've got Stuart over there. Stuart's obviously back in but if there is nothing on, let's see it. You go and stretch the game Stuart. I've got options there. I could go and link play, I could go and find Anthony. Let it go through, let it go through. Anthony, bounce it back into me. Yeah and then Harris breaks the line and we're away! Yeah, alright you don't have to go to the goal straight away, build it up.

Paul highlighted a tension between building it up and going to the goal straight away. The desire to build it up was illustrated with the movement of the ball for how players in different positions must work together to form a coordinated actor-network. Otherwise, the middle of the pitch becomes a traffic jam of players jostling for one ball. The mouth of the goal was another object of interest, where players might try and score rather than play wide. A further tension between the players and Paul became noticeable as the ball and goal might seduce players away from their positions. In the quote below, an interruption in the passage occurred as a defending player tried to score through the yellow gates, and Paul then said:

And freeze there. So, Lewis, you've ran into about eight players. Yeah. Remember what I said a minute ago? You've got loads of team-mates on the park. You can't do everybody's job. So, you've went there thinking that's a good decision. Here's a good decision. Ball comes in, play, play you can go back to Simon, Simon can go and spread the game out to Ashley. Yeah. The ball does the work. You're breathing really heavily aren't you, cause your running everywhere!

Lewis, who tried to score a goal, ended up running into about eight players. Paul offered an alternative passage by letting the ball do the work rather than going alone. In the parlance of ANT, the whole is more important than its parts and the relations are made stronger by their connections. Bryant (2011b) fittingly captures the work of the ball and players from how the ball 'flies up and down the field' in an aleatory fashion but, at the same time, 'brings the players together in constantly shifting configurations or relations'. In coaching terms, the more the players remain disciplined in their positions the more stable the actor-network is from players taking detours and the subsequent deterrence of Paul's intervention.

Anecdote three: ... or not to be seduced

As one practice finishes another begins with a sleight of hand. George lifts and places down three white cones in the shape of an inverted triangle outside of the eighteen-

yard box. Oranges (with balls), greens and non-bibs (without balls) are standing in separate lines at three white cones. Another two players stand at each corner with several footballs. George then gives some information about the practice:

Blacks (non-bibs) are going to shoot. So, what's going to happen is guys here (oranges) will play across. Lewis (green) will collect it and play it back to Harris (non-bib), and Harris will have a shot. Bob or Joe (two players at each corner) will either cross it in. But what I want is front post (oranges), middle (non-bibs) and back post (greens) areas.

Although there was a goalkeeper in the eleven-a-side goal, the field of practice simulated the game to a lesser extent as there were not two but three teams. The second passage was signalled when all three players ran in the eighteen-yard box towards the eleven-a-side goal to a designated area (front, middle or back post). As a passage unfolds and players whirl towards the box and balls whizz from one crosser to the other, George rejoinders:

Guys, we need to attack the ball, c'mon! ... I need more commitment on the ball in the final third. It is too easy. You are by after every final ball, go and challenge it. If the ball is just in front of you, slide in and go and commit to it. If it's in the air do not back off. Ho! Do not pull away from the header.

A whistle from George echoed after a succession of three passages of players never made any contact with the balls crossed in. In a plea for commitment on the ball in the final third, George urged the players to slide in and go and commit and not to pull away from the header. After a flurry of crosses and missed opportunities, James (assistant coach) stepped into the field of practice in a fury and flounced out:

Stop it there. Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! Are you scared to attack the ball? No? Do it! Too many chances that are missing the front post and the guy at the back post is just standing like, *Oh! there's the ball*. It's an astro, slide for it cause if we get contact it might go in.

Assistant coach James intervened as too many chances were missing and asked the players whether they were scared to attack the ball. Unlike Paul's practice in anecdote two where the players had the ball in close proximity, here the players are running towards the goal to meet an aerial ball which is travelling at force from a distance. Similar to an unskilled nonhuman groom, like a door with powerful springs that 'slam shut so violently', it (in this case the ball) could leave the passer-by with a 'shorter and bloody' nose (Latour 1992, 232). In coaching terms, although the attacking players' bodies in the second passage were not seduced away from their position, they still failed to make contact with the ball. Here, the ball features almost as an adversary to the coach which pertains to Latour's (1999a, 309) anti-programs, where the programs of action anticipated by George and his assistant coaches does not occur because the attacking players in these passages failed to become the subject of the ball.

Discussion

Informed by ANT's relational materialism, I did not start with the coach as the protagonist that has been epitomised in process and practice approaches, but instead granted democratic rights to human and nonhuman actors (Harman 2009). The first anecdote articulates moving from the game towards a field of practice. Oriented by the coach,

balls, bibs, cones and goals gave shape to how the players practised. But don't be mistaken, this is often *not* beautiful, as coaching practices are recursive and most often do not resemble anything like the game. In other words, the game is ontologically different to coaching: one ball, two eleven-a-side goals and no bibs or cones. Coaching, however, often revolves around balls, bibs and cones as they are what allow practices to hang together (or not).

Before the start of a practice some actors, such as balls, bibs and cones, became enrolled by coaches with a sleight of hand. Cones placed, bibs draped and balls chased. Borrowing from Bell and Vachhani (2020), this 'handwork' is a necessary part to the craft of coaching. Passages unfolded only once the actors were positioned within a field of practice. Here, attention was given to the quasi-object or the player in connection with the ball (Serres [1980] 2007). For the coaches (Paul and George), the ball became likened to what Kaltoff et al. (2019) call a 'didactic object', as the assumptions of the passages were somewhat prescribed to the actors in the arrangement of the practices (hence, the 'handwork'). But a tension between the actors was made visible as shown in the second anecdote. In Paul's practice, the players were asked to create width in attack and then to find passes from the gaps in the passages. But as passages unfolded, the attacking players narrowed as they became seduced away from their positions in attempt to be the quasi-subject or the subject of the ball (Serres [1980] 2007; Serres [1985] 2019), thus contradicting Paul's intentions in creating width in attack. However, the narrowing of the attacking players might have been a strategic attempt in trying to move the ball towards the eleven-a-side goal, situated at the centre end of the pitch. After all, a narrow attack might have been a more favourable strategy as a linear passage to goal appears to be the easiest and quickest option.

Contrarily, in the third anecdote some of the players in George's practice were reluctant to commit to the ball from an incoming cross. The players were circumspect and not seduced away from their positions, yet still often failed to make a connection with the ball. This resulted in a lack of goals or missed opportunities and, at the same time, increased the frustration of George and his assistant coach James. The docility (Foucault 1991) of the players often did not hold or not for very long as the ball bobbed and weaved between and past the players. Here, the ball was a more faithful protagonist, as it did not make assumptions about the passages and can literally become a '12th player' (Bryant 2011b), like in Paul's practice, but only so long as the players are in possession of the ball, which was often not the case in George's practice.

Coaches often find themselves in the middle of coaching practices acting as a 'spokesperson' (Latour 1987, 71) for the actors as interruptions occur. However, interruptions were not viewed as inhibiting or merely 'corrective' (Evans 2017; Evans and Reynolds 2016), but rather was an indication of how coaches, too, are grappling with the agency of the ball in trying to stabilise the actor-network. Paul and George's interventions demonstrated, to a certain extent, a relational sense of bodies and objects that come together in coaching practices. The conceptualisation of coaching presented here disrupts the idea that people who are running around, talking, interacting and seeming to be the source of all the action. More-than-human methodologies, such as ANT and new materialisms (Monforte 2018), have the potential to produce more faithful descriptions of practices.

Conclusion

Returning to the quote by Virginia Woolf at the start of this paper, we come to see that hardness, energy and violence of limb of men in white drawers was generated from nothing less and nothing more than the ball.

This paper contends that the problem of coaching lies not only with the coach but in the coming together of social and material relations in practices. When we consider the translations in the passages reviewed here, balls, cones and goals seduced (or not) players away from their positions (Serres [1985] 2019). Drawing inspiration from the relational materialism of ANT, the ball was a quasi-object (Serres [1980] 2007) and an actor in its own right (Latour 2005). As I followed the quasi-object its passage was often interrupted, but this was not seen as inhibiting as it reinforced the materiality of coaching practices. As a result, the docility (Foucault 1991) of players' bodies did not hold, or not for very long, and the more difficult it became for coaches to keep coaching practices stable.

As the insights of this study demonstrate, coaching can be understood as a 'sociomaterial practice' (Gherardi 2012). The coaching *process* involves far more than just coaches and athletes and, as we have seen, is shaped by the materials and materiality of *practices*. Here, coaching can only be considered relational if matter is taken as a serious matter of methodological concern (Latour 2004). Grappling with materials should not be left to coaches. This study intends to pave a way for others to consider the effects of materials and materiality in sports other than football. Only once coaching is understood on the grounds on which it is practised can we develop a theory of knowledge for coaching.

The insights also have relevance for providers of coaching education, for considering how coach developers can be pedagogically better supported for the practitioners they are seeking to help. More precisely, we need to grapple with what Gherardi and Perrotta (2014) call 'the induction of seduction' for educating coaches working with children/youth players on the materialities of coaching. But what relational provision looks like or how it can be implemented is not yet understood. A key research priority then is to consider how the findings can be translated into the spaces of practitioners. Otherwise, coaches will remain in a winter mire.

Notes

1. I recognised with some 'disconcertment' (Verran 1999) that the game and coaching practices share the same territory – the Field of Play (i.e., an eleven-a-side pitch). To avoid confusion between the ontologies of the game and coaching, the Field of Play refers to the laws of the game (IFAB 2019), whereas the expression 'field of practice' refers to practices of coaching.
2. For details on the differences between actor-network theory and activity theory, see Miettinen (1999).
3. Although Serres refers to rugby in his theory of the quasi-object, I argue that the same case can be made for football, as it is another time-regulated game. For an argument in favour of event-regulating games, see Kretchmar (2005).
4. Or, for a discussion of what actor-network theory is *not*, see Latour (1999b).
5. The coaches often had a bundle of interchangeable balls in close proximity if another was needed to be mobilised. In the second and third anecdote, the dialogue between the coaches and players refers to a particular ball in an interrupted passage.

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