COACH WELL-BEING: PART THREE

Four topics from two points of view: the practical and the philosophical

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INTRODUCTION

This article, with contributions from both Josh Fletcher (JF) and Richard Husseiny (RH), takes four really pertinent and sometimes painful topic areas and discusses them from two very different angles to give S&C coaches a diverse and informed stance.

Fundamental to each article in this coach wellness series is the practical advice. Some of this relates to tangible actions you can take now, whereas other concepts encourage you to think deeper and peel back the layers relating to you the practitioner and you the person.

1. Work-life balance is a myth

JF: The work-life balance is a purple unicorn situation for me: in my view it does not exist – it's something we can chase after like a rainbow, but we'll never find it, or maybe we'll find it for a short time and then it will disappear.

I prefer the term work-life harmony: as work is a part of our lives, we have to find a way to integrate it into our lives, not let it take over our lives.

There are always going to be ups and downs personally and professionally which are going to require more time and attention than we might like; for example if we are involved in the playoffs or a World Cup, this will probably require us to put extra time and energy into our work. But this needs to come with the understanding and conscious awareness that time/energy needs to be reclaimed later in order to regenerate effectively.

Work-life harmony to me is about integrating work into life, not the other way around.

RH: I believe you can aim for a work-life balance.

Certainly, from my research, the demands of high-performance sport are making many coaches unable to experience any form of balance in their life and searching for this elusive balance in some cases is causing many practitioners more struggle than relief.

Just the very fact that many sports are played at weekends makes this balance difficult, before even thinking about the travel to local and international competitions, the training camps and the major tournaments.

It seems to me that a major element as to why balance is unobtainable is down to many practitioners accepting and buying into the cultural pressure promoting the idea that it requires sacrifice to be a successful and world-class practitioner in elite sport.

However, we need to investigate what sacrifice truly means:

a) Sacrifice over the short term. For example, a 6-12 week period leading into and including training camps and major competitions. This requires being away from home and family, with long days (>14 hours) that lead to less available time to devote to self-care.

b) Sacrifice over the long term that is underpinned by a mindset that it needs to be a 24/7 mentality, a 'first in, last out' attitude, which is a skewed sense of loyalty to the idea of team organisation.

Here is a quote from a senior technical coach (Elite Rugby League) who bought into this idea of sacrifice:

'I had my dream job, but it ended when I found out they were replacing me three months before the event. I knew who they were offering the job to and they didn't know that I knew. I was so into that 'dream' job that things passed me by – I didn't go on a summer holiday for nearly 20 years. It took me a long time to get over being let go, and for those two years I was useless, I didn't want to work, my long-term relationship finished. From all the stress I ended up in hospital with ridiculous blood pressure.'

Table 1: Five strategies to help you reconnect with harmony between work and life

STRATEGY	WHY	QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF
Values	In order to decrease the discrepancy between values and actual values lived, it's important to create awareness of the discrepancy in the first place	1. What are three values that you want to embody? 2. What do they mean to you? 3. Why are they important to you? 4. Are you currently living aligned to this value in all areas of your life? 5. If not, why not?
Decompression strategy	If you haven't got a conscious process, you'll never create separation from your work life and personal life	1. Are you turning your work phone off at set times, eg, after 7:00pm and back on 8:30am in the morning? 2. Are you moving your body in some way? (simply and regeneratively) 3. What about getting into nature? 4. Are you connecting with your partner – spiritually, emotionally and physically? 5. Are you doing breath practice (there is a large body of research highlighting the benefits of changing our physiological state)?
Clarity in role	If you don't have total clarity on direction or other staff's involvement in what is perceived to be your role, this can lead to a lack of direction regarding what you're supposed to be doing or what you're supposed to be leading on. This could be due to a lack of trust from those in positions above you or a whole host of other reasons. Or perhaps your own expectations and understanding don't match the reality of your day-to-day?	1. What pressures are you putting on yourself? 2. What do you need to do to get clarity on your role and the expectations from yourself and those that you work with?
Check assumptions	Without actively seeking to challenge your assumptions, you create huge blind spots in seeing how your thoughts, feelings, and actions influence your life and those that matter around you	1. What are you assuming and of whom? 2. What are your expectations of yourself? 3. Who defines that? 4. What jobs are you adding to for yourself, and what are you avoiding?
Self-honesty	This means you need to look at the options you're choosing to ignore. Most notably the position you are in that's leading you to feel so out of balance; low energy and feeling lonely may have run their course, and it's now time for you to move on to other opportunities, other jobs, other places, maybe a new career	1. What are you pretending not to know about your situation?

'This is what I'm talking about regarding cultural pressure, and for what? A trophy? A badge on your chest? To say you're the best? Until we change this concept of what it actually means to make sacrifices, we will continue to lose more and more brilliant performance staff who are now choosing their life over sport.'

However, there are strategies that you can take control of today to begin to create harmony within your life – see Table 1.

2. You are not your job – detaching yourself from the logo

JF: This is one topic which is close to my heart because I have been that guy. In fact, I have been the guy who has no boundaries, no work-life balance, nor indeed any deeper understanding of self beyond the job. So, I know how it feels to be all in on the job and industry, to be content with that, and to even want it that way – until the job got pulled from beneath my feet.

I was completely obsessed with my job, and when I was asked to re-apply for my own job and did not get it, it hit me like a steam train. I was completely lost, a zombie for a long time, and I was totally gutted about the situation. I didn't know what else I could do with my life, what I was going to do: I felt unwanted, my self-worth was in the gutter – I was like a total fraud who'd been found out.

No-one should have to put themselves through that. There is a really high chance that you'll lose your job or be moved on at least once in your career, but there is absolutely no need to go through the mental torment that comes with it because you have attached your whole self to that role.

RH: This is an insidious issue that affected me as much as I hear it affected other practitioners in high-performance sport, which is highlighted in a revealing quote from a discussion I had with a leading sport psychologist:

> 'We are continually concerned about having athletes with narrowly limited identities, but look around and show me a staff member who isn't at risk of burnout and isn't being exploited for their passion and identity.'

For me, my identity of working in Olympic sports kept me locked in a profession that had become a trap. I felt shielded by the persona that people put on me when they heard what I did for a living. This led me to maintain a role in professional sport to protect this image, despite being deeply unfulfilled and unhappy. People knew what I did for a career, but they didn't know who I was.

I've discovered that this problem is more widespread than I initially thought. Here is an example of a performance coach struggling with identity:

> 'Trying to understand my own identity is where I'm struggling. I sometimes feel I have control but many of the external pressures, especially professionally, weigh me down. What we've spoken about today has made me understand a little more of why I've yet to really find happiness. I don't know who I am and where I want to go: it's something that I've only thought about through the lens of my career. Never from the lens of me as a person.'

Many performance support staff feel so tied up in their identity of working in high-performance sports that it seems impossible to think of another way.

Here is another example from a leading strength and conditioning coach:

> 'As a man, I have societal beliefs of what I should be and those pressures are real for me, but I feel they aren't spoken about enough. My role has a massive social and personal cost to me. I'm unable to maintain a relationship, miss milestones, have instability due to moving a lot, have regular jet lag, and worst of all I have sleepless nights during competition periods because I get too emotionally invested in the result. If there is a bad result, I end up lying in bed unable to sleep.'

3. Protecting your boundaries

JF: I want to take a different slant on this, because I appreciate that it can be really tough to say no to a boss/line manager as an S&C coach, especially in the earlier years of your career where there is a line of coaches waiting to replace you.

So, my angle is around protecting you from you, creating boundaries for yourself with your practice and life – in order to ensure that you don't over-deliver, that you actually switch off and regenerate effectively outside of work.

'People knew what I did for a career, but they didn't know who I was'

Will these boundaries be sustainable without sacrificing the quality of your daily engagement with your family?

S&C coaches are first class at creating work for themselves! Step back and look at what truly moves the needle and focus on that. Try to use your commute to switch off: it isn't a flick switch, it's a dimmer switch – we aren't robots! Be intentional about doing something you like. Top tip: listening to S&C/high performance related podcasts is not switching off!

The final point I want to make is about recharging, that relates to boxing off the basics of being non-contactable, doing something you enjoy, connecting, presence and removal of work when you are not on the clock.

Think of it this way: the already low salaries in this field are simply being diluted by every hour over your contracted hours that you work. Do the maths: are you doing a 60-hour week as opposed to your contracted 40 hours?

RH: To me, protecting boundaries requires you to get clear on understanding what's important to you and why. When you understand that, protecting them becomes an easy process. Yet many practitioners I have spoken to struggle because they have simply not defined their personal boundaries as yet.

A lead technical coach in elite rugby league told me:

'Was I any good at it? I was running regularly into people who asked me "what had happened" after I got fired. I had a lot of identity tied up with what I was. I have regrets, you know: could I have had children? I glorified my badge of honour to how long I could be in on the run. I spent 6-7 weeks in without a day off, I kidded myself that I needed to be in all of the time. The reality is there isn't an endpoint to performance, there is no accepted moment in time when we can say we are done. So it's up to us to set our boundaries, no-one else is going to do it.'

The majority of practitioners I have spoken to feel they need to say yes to more responsibility, more athletes to train, more data to analyse, more meetings to contribute to – whatever it is that makes them feel like they are being a successful member of the performance support team.

When we dig deeper into understanding why, these are the standout reasons I hear regularly:

1. Many people don't know how to say no
2. They express a fear of reprisal if they do because they perceive saying no as solely negative



3. Many are unclear about their personal and professional drivers (values etc)
4. Even if they are aware of them, the work environment requires them to live and work out of alignment with them
5. The fear is that if all goes wrong, then there could be high consequences of saying what they think, such as losing their job – particularly if your employer is providing a visa that allows you to stay in the country.

A boundary is simply an invisible line you draw around yourself to identify what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. It doesn't have to be fixed – in fact, boundaries are often fluid and ever-changing, depending on your goals, relationships and mental states.

Table 2: Five questions to get clarity on your performance sport identity

1) Which stories/roles/identities shape your life? Examples include:
- You're the most experienced and need to know all the answers
- I need to be the best physio, coach, scientist etc.
- People will think I'm good at what I do if I do more hours
- I'm not successful unless I work with the best teams
- I need to prove how good I am
- If I leave my career, I'm a failure
- I need to make this situation work, otherwise it's my fault

2) Which of these stories resonate with you?

3) Do they help you or restrict you?

4) How do they shape your decisions? What do they make you do or not do?

5) What would you do if you let go and redefined your story?

Table 3: Examples of goals and necessary boundaries

	GOALS	BOUNDARIES
PERSONAL	Quality time with family Be present More energy	Clear working hours Priority of self-care Two clear days off a week Delegate more effectively
PROFESSIONAL	Increase quality/depth of work Grow network Effective decisions	Protect your schedule Reduce social engagements Effective delegation Prioritise self-care (to enhance cognitive performance)

What situations should you say no to?

- Technical coaches when they ask for data at night
- Peers that are over-delegating work to you
- Athletes who are disempowered and crossing boundaries
- To yourself
- To your partner
- To your children
- To your friends

This fluctuates each and every day, yet principles stay the same. Your beliefs (values, needs and purpose) and roles define your principles.

Important questions to ask are:

1. Will these boundaries be sustainable without sacrificing the quality of your daily engagement with your family?
2. Will they allow you to maintain your self-care/well-being practices to keep up your health?

These are very common examples of boundary focus that I hear about in my work. Make this specific to you with regards to what your boundaries are aimed at right now. The most important part is to get clear on why you are saying 'no' to something, because a 'no' means you're saying yes to something important to you.

4. Beyond the coach, a practitioner needs analysis

JF: I have been exploring this idea that the more time and attention you place on your life outside of work, the more abundance, growth and progression you will have in work. This reframe seems to really resonate and be impactful for people whose work-

life harmony is quite out of whack at the moment. By placing more attention on life out of work, energy rushes to those areas, having a knock-on impact on overall well-being, and the quality of regeneration which we bring into the workplace.

Importantly, this actually allows us to have more to give at work, as essentially we are being much more focused on our lives as a whole, rather than on our work, which is simply just a part of our life.

When I speak about this with my clients, we discuss what they like to spend their time doing which has nothing to do with work and how we can remove the barriers to those things. So, what fills your cup, and how can you fit more of that into your life?

RH: This is a quote from a director of performance:

> 'I was working six to seven days a week across a 12-month period. I wasn't seeing my kids or my wife and I finally hit this brick wall that made me realise that this just wasn't right. But before I hit that wall, I couldn't see it and just thought I was leading the way to something important in sport.'

There are three important truths that we must address:

1. Sacrificing health and family for work is not an expression of loyalty – it's a sign of having poor priorities

Table 4: Three-phase framework for coaches and practitioners

PHASE	KEY QUESTION	KEY COMPONENTS	KEY OUTCOMES
1. How you show up	What do I think?	Self-regulation Visible thinking process Personal traits Drama dynamics (professional and personal) Taking personal responsibility	Ability to self-regulate Ability to move out of reaction into response Extreme ownership of experience Clarity to see where your assumptions contribute to the actions that keep you limited Skills to move out of problems, into creating the outcomes you want in life
2. Your inner compass	What do I want?	Values, needs, wants Belief systems Identities and inner stories Commitments Boundaries Communication and saying no	Clarity on what is blocking you, how it's blocking you and what you need to do to release those blocks Clarity on your values and where you're out of alignment Clarity on the identities you uphold and defend that limit you Skilled in formula for saying no positively, without burning professional or personal bridges A deep understanding of yourself (who you are, what you want, why you want it)
3. Your inner freedom	What do I commit to?	Purpose Visioning Ego versus soul The four areas contributing to your fulfilment and happiness	Clarity on the three cornerstones underpinning your purpose Clarity on the six pillars of your vision Clarity on what you love Clarity on what you're good at, specifically focusing on your transferrable skills A clear vision of how you want your career in sport to be moving forward

2. Dedication is not what you give up for your job – it's what you give to your job

3. Accomplishments highlight your skills. Relationships reveal your values.

Getting clarity on this requires you to look beyond your role as a coach. Once you do this, you will be able to become the type of coach and career you want to be. I know this process as the 'practitioner needs analysis'. You have most likely done many variations of this with the athletes and sports you've worked with over the years. But have you ever turned this process in on yourself?

Doing so allows you to identify what qualities are most important for you to emphasise in your role, career and life – to their fullest expression. It also provides an inner analysis that highlights the components of your life, giving you clarity on what is blocking you, how it's blocking you and what you need to do to release those blocks.

This helps you to tailor your goals and actions away from potential burnout, divorce or illness, and turn instead towards a life where you thrive both as a practitioner and in your home life.

To help you with beginning this process, Table 4 describes the three-phase framework I use with the coaches and practitioners.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES



JOSH FLETCHER, MSC, ASCC

Josh is a performance coach with 15 years of experience working in elite environments. Josh has worked in Olympic sport, pro sport, Special Forces and F2/F3 motorsport. From burn-out to Olympic medals, bullying to military medals of recognition, redundancies to broken relationships, Josh has experienced it. His business, Career Blueprint, is driven to push for better awareness, support and prioritisation of coach well-being.



RICHARD HUSSEINY

Richard was a performance coach for 16 years, including supporting teams preparing for two Summer Olympic Games – London 2012 and Rio 2016 – and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. In 2015 Richard gave end-of-life care to his mother; in 2017 he had surgery due to a serious autoimmune health condition. These two experiences changed his life, allowing him to see what was truly important, and inspiring him to create Men Behind Sport, to provide the support he didn't have as a practitioner. His work supports practitioners and coaches to look beyond just their role to unlock the qualities most important for them in their roles, careers and lives.

