

Article

'Falling Upward' into Sports Retirement: A Rohrsian Exploration of the Sports Retirement Experience

Luke Jones ^{1,*} and Nick J. Watson ²¹ Department for Health, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK² Transforming Lives for Good, National Support Centre, Hope Park, Bradford BD5 8 HH, UK; nickj.watson@outlook.com

* Correspondence: lj36@bath.ac.uk

Abstract: Retirement from sport is widely reported as a challenging time of transition in the lives of elite athletes and is one that has been explored from a range of different perspectives both by sport psychologists and socio-cultural scholars of sport. However, of late, a small number of scholars have considered athlete career transition within the context of religion and spirituality, identifying the religious identity and belief of athletes as central to their transition experiences. That said, this work does not go as far as developing a theological understanding of sports retirement. Here, we explore and frame the phenomenon of sports retirement through the theological lens put forward by the neo-Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. In this paper, we suggest how Rohr's ideas might help develop an alternative and more nuanced understanding of sports retirement, building on those currently promoted in sport psychology and the sociology of sport the literature.

Keywords: sports retirement; Richard Rohr; transition; spirituality; falling upward



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Sooner or later, if you are on any classic “spiritual schedule”, some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must “lose” at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further, larger journey. I wish I could say that this was not true, but it is darn near absolute in the spiritual literature of the world (Rohr 2012), *Falling Upward*.

Structure, which is needed in the first half of life, tends to become a prison as we grow older (Rohr 2004), *Adams Return*.

1. Introduction

Retirement from sport is widely reported as a challenging time of transition in the lives of elite athletes and one that has been explored from a range of different perspectives both by sport psychologists (Park et al. 2013; Stambulova et al. 2020) and socio-cultural scholars of sport (Andrijew 2020; Hickey and Roderick 2017; Stamp et al. 2021; Jones and Denison 2019). The majority of academic work in this area has focused on the initial aftermath of transitions away from sport (see Barth et al. 2020) and the ongoing social and psychological adjustments to life thereafter (Cavallerio et al. 2017). However, of late, a small number of scholars have considered athlete career transition within the context of religion and spirituality.

Ronkainen et al. (2020), for example, explored the lived experience of Christian athlete journeys and found that it is important for those working with such individuals to be aware

of the unique ways in which religion influences the sporting life. Ronkainen et al.'s (2020) work makes a significant contribution to the sports retirement literature because it uniquely locates the religious identity and belief systems of athletes as central to their transition experiences. That said, this work does not go as far as attempting to develop a theological understanding of retirement transition experiences in sport.

It is the aim of the present paper to explore and frame the phenomenon of sports retirement through the theological lens put forward by the neo-Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr (2012) in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. We suggest that Rohr's framing of the 'two stages of spiritual life' can be adopted as a useful heuristic via which to chart the spiritual journey and psycho-social aspects of athlete retirement from a high-performance sporting perspective. Our intention is to map out some of the synergies between Rohr's work and the practical outworking of sporting transition whilst, at the same time, providing an interesting angle for those invested in the fortunes of former athletes, for example, fans. Also, we provide some practical recommendations for the emotional and spiritual welfare of athletes, for those who steward and care for them (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists, and chaplains).

Additionally, this paper provides insights for the broader readership of this journal, including those interested in the intersections between theology and sport. While it is not the focus of this paper, a burgeoning literature on the sport–religion interface has emerged within the last two decades (e.g., Alpert 2015; Gibbons and Braye 2020; Parry et al. 2007). This corpus of work includes analyses of how athletes deploy coping strategies and prayer to assist during periods of transition, in particular, for Christians involved in sport (Hemmings et al. 2019).

We begin by providing a conceptual backdrop for our theological framework by reviewing the sports retirement literature. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of Rohr's main ideas. We conclude by proposing how Rohr's work might help us to develop alternative and more nuanced understandings of sports retirement that acknowledge the spiritual intricacies of athletes' lives after sport.

2. Sports Retirement Research

A range of problematic psychological outcomes often accompany athletic career cessation, these include emotional distress, depression, feelings of loss and isolation, diminished subjective well-being and identity disruption (Aston et al. 2020). More recently, these outcomes have been tied to formative sports contexts (Stambulova et al. 2020), and sports psychology researchers have suggested that retirement from sport is less problematic when it is planned as a process (with the support of others), rather than if it occurs as a sudden event, for example, as a result of injury or de-selection (Esopenko et al. 2020; Lally 2007; Park et al. 2013), as well as in scenarios where athletes align with a purpose-based identity rather than a performance-based identity—that is, an identity that is more vulnerable to contingency-based self-esteem issues (Houlthberg et al. 2018).

Sport psychology research has also suggested that sports retirement often occurs in three distinct key 'phases': (i) pre-retirement planning and preparation (ii) the retirement transition (resulting in full retirement), and (iii) the post-retirement phase (Stambulova et al. 2020). For example, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) identify that retiring gymnasts routinely experience a feeling of 'nowhere land', before progressing to a place of 'new beginnings'. More recently, Wendling and Sagas (2021, p. 1) have suggested that newly retired athletes should adopt a "... temporary identity moratorium status" (Erikson 1959), whereby they should be encouraged to accept feelings of confusion, emptiness, and ambiguity (what they refer to as a liminal phase of adjustment) in order to 'cement' a synthesized sense of self that can accommodate "... new beginnings and meaningful directions to their life after elite sport". This is a welcome development within the field and especially pertinent to the present discussion, since this is the first study of its kind to consider 'liminal rites' as central to understanding the complexity of the career transition experience. It is important to emphasize that within this model it is the athlete "... who must be encouraged to persevere

in this challenging identity search” (Wendling and Sagas 2021, p. 1), an issue that becomes more important as we consider the relevance of Rohr’s thinking to this context.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of sports psychologists continue to advocate that retiring athletes should receive carefully planned support during their transition (Agnew and Abery 2021). Despite this, Cosh et al. (2020) have argued that up to 20% of retiring athletes continue to experience crisis transitions, characterised by a lack of adjustment, ongoing psychological distress, depression, and low self-esteem. Indeed, findings from sports psychology have consistently emphasised the significant connections between sports careers and mental health issues (Brewer et al. 1993; van Ramele et al. 2017). It is the ‘salience’, strength, and exclusivity of the athletic role during sport participation that increases the potential vulnerability of the athlete to psychological distress in retirement, especially if the attachment to athletic identity is maintained after sport (Wendling and Sagas 2021). In turn, sports psychology research overwhelmingly argues that identity management and development, both during and after sport, should be a primary task when attempting to mitigate against the potential challenges associated with career termination (Carless and Douglas 2009; Wendling and Sagas 2021).

Sport sociologists have also traditionally shared similar concerns, yet their ‘flexible’ epistemological and ontological foundations have helped to position and investigate the social phenomenon of sports retirement in slightly different ways (Jones and Denison 2019). As Denison and Winslade (2006) suggest, moving towards a sports sociology lens helps us think more readily about common problems in sport in a way that takes the focus away from the individual athlete, thereby disrupting the entrenched idea that the ‘athlete’ should be the location where change needs to occur. To this end, whilst socio-cultural scholars have similarly found that retirement from competitive sport is an extremely challenging experience that can have profound implications for physical and mental health (McMahon et al. 2012), this growing field has also helped to frame the retirement transition as a social rather than isolated individualized process (Hickey and Roderick 2017; Stamp et al. 2021), where identities are significantly influenced and regulated over time (Andrijew 2020).

Moreover, sports retirement should be considered an ongoing social experience that includes an unpredictable, paradoxical fluctuation between painful and liberating emotions. In addition, this research has examined the multitude of connections between career experience and the manner in which retired athletes engage with exercise and their bodies after they leave sport (Jones and Denison 2019). In summary, socio-cultural sports retirement scholars have argued for a shift in focus, away from the equipping of transitioning athletes with coping mechanisms, and more towards challenging the structural and cultural arrangements of elite sport that can (and routinely do) lead to problematic transition and retirement experiences. However, while much has been learned from the socio-cultural analysis of sports retirement, very little attention has been given to the role of theological thinking in this area. In response, our next task is to introduce the theology of Richard Rohr before applying some of his ideas to the phenomenon of sports retirement.

3. Richard Rohr

Father Richard Rohr is a neo-Franciscan Priest of the New Mexico Province. He founded the Centre for Action and Contemplation, a ‘meditation hub and religious school’, in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1986. Rohr is an internationally recognized author and spiritual leader, teaching primarily on incarnational mysticism, nondual consciousness, and contemplation, with a particular interest in social justice. Over the last four decades, Rohr has gained a devoted following that he attributes to a deep spiritual hunger on the part of younger people in particular who no longer claim an affiliation to traditional religion. Rohr is arguably most well-known (perhaps even notorious) for his book, *The Universal Christ* (Rohr 2019). While we do not agree with Rohr’s Christology (and related conclusions regarding ethics and the resurrection), we do suggest that his thinking around the ‘human journey’ (and in particular, the ‘masculine journey’), as articulated in *Falling Upward* (Rohr 2012) and his previous work on male initiation (Rohr 2004), provide use-

ful conceptual mechanisms via which to explore the spiritual dimensions of the sports retirement experience.

4. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*

First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, (Julian of Norwich [1393] 2020)

Rohr (2012) opens his book with the above quote which neatly summarizes the main gist of his thesis. Rohr's point in *'Falling Upward'* is to highlight and embellish the imperative journey into the second half of one's spiritual life; a journey that he claims many are unaware of, and that differs greatly from the first half of life—being commonly defined as it is by the search for significance, acceptance, and belonging. Drawing upon universal myths, as well as secular and sacred texts, Rohr explains that in the first half of our lives we build a container that allows us to survive and make sense of our initial spiritual and interpersonal experiences and identities. This is an important and necessary process.

However, Rohr argues that amid a preoccupation with survival, individuals often fail to recognize the more redemptive journey entwined within the second half of life, in which time we have the opportunity to (re)acquaint ourselves with our deepest identity, our 'true self' (Merton 2007), as bequeathed by God. On this latter journey, we must discover how to fill, rather than construct, our container. According to Rohr, this can only occur if we unlearn a lot (and discharge the loyal soldier) of our first-half-of-life identity, and meet what he calls 'necessary suffering' in order to 'grow up' (within our souls) in the ongoing process of becoming an elder. In this second half of life where "... if you have forgiven yourself for being imperfect and falling, you can now do it for just about anybody else" (p. 114) and become a second-half-of-life person. Then and only then, we have the opportunity of seeing and accepting the mystery and ambiguities of life. For example, this might include how the retired athlete may come to view the institution of sport and those therein through a alternative and more informed lens.

Suffice to say that in Rohr's view, there is a period of time when one develops a container (order), a period where the individual stumbles over the stumbling stone and experiences necessary suffering (disorder), and then embarks upon the second journey towards a more peaceful existence typified by both and thinking (re-order). In what follows, we harness these three phases from Rohr (2012) to make some observations and tentative suggestions regarding how to re-frame the experiences of retired athletes, and, in particular, to promote a consideration of the spiritual component of this transition.

5. Order: Container Development in High Performance Sport

One issue that previous research has consistently identified as a danger to the smooth transition into sports retirement and beyond is that of identity foreclosure (Brewer et al. 1993), or the problematic development of a one-dimensional athletic or performance-based identity that precludes alternative narratives of self after sport (Carless and Douglas 2009). Socio-cultural researchers have also explained how the relations of power that oscillate in sport normalize the acceptance of certain subjectivities and the production of docile, compliant bodies (Shogan 1999). These relations of power accelerate identity politics in young athletes as a result of the fact that they are often exposed to (and subsequently) embody the values of (McKenna and Thomas 2007) hypercompetitive and toxic/destructive sporting sub-cultures (Feddersen et al. 2020). These are often sub-cultures where questioning authority is frowned upon or punished (Roderick 2006) and which has the potential to jeopardize an athlete's hard-earned position in a team, or organization, or entire career (as well as their long term emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing, Jones et al. 2020).

When held against Rohr's (2012) description of the first-half-of-life container construction process, it is clear that the formative experiences of the elite athlete can and do, for various reasons, fit Rohr's first-half-of-life template for ego development, personal achievement, and success. Even when young, elite athletes are often able to firmly and

confidently answer Rohr's key questions: 'What makes me significant?', and 'How can I support myself?' In these formative years, Rohr identifies that, "a foil, a goad, a wall, to butt up against" (p. 35) may help an individual develop a strong ego or identity structure. As people whose very existence is defined by a hypercompetitive butting up against opponents and rivals, whistles and watches, training regimes and coaches, it is perhaps little wonder that elite athletes are so adept at developing their container, or false self. Indeed, there are few vocations in western industrialized society where the first half of life conditions are so richly fertile for the development of a strong 'container' than that of elite, professional, and competitive sport.

Rohr (2012) regards the development of a strong ego and identity in the first half of life as legitimate and necessary for early spiritual growth. In turn, the Christian athlete is often encouraged (and deceived) by the dominant values of elite sporting sub-culture, which means that as part of their container development, they graft their performance-based, sporting identity onto their spiritual purpose. In so doing, they adopt what Null (2008) has called a driven approach to living life as a Christian athlete, whereby they inevitably internalize the problematic perspective that redemption can be 'earned' through personal effort and success in sport (White 2016).

This scenario, while spiritually inhibiting, permits the individual athlete to clearly address the "Who am I?" and "What should I do?" questions, because in the first stage of life "... we all want and need various certitudes, constants and insurance policies" (Rohr, p. 6). Nevertheless, part of Rohr's cautionary tale is that if any individual remains in this spiritual predicament, and continues with a "... pre-occupation with order, control, safety, pleasure, and certitude" (p. 7), this teleological mind-set, has the potential to preclude further growth "... beyond the lower stages of human and spiritual development" (p. 7). In order for things to change and for the individual to fall upwards into the second phase of life, "... there is always something that has to be let go of, moved beyond, given up, or forgiven" (p. xxxv)—in this particular case, the deconstruction of what has been referred to as a performance-based athletic identity (Brewer et al. 1993; Jones et al. 2020). This process of deconstruction is what Rohr would call a 'disordering' or 'stumbling' without which, the "honest reconstruction" (p. xxxiv) required to catalyse the "second journey" (p. xxxv) towards a more mature, unified spiritual identity, cannot begin.

6. Disorder: Stumbling over the Stumbling Stone

As we have seen repeatedly, the identity disruption often experienced by retired elite athletes can be a disordering and painful process (Kerr and Dacyshyn 2000). Sport psychologists working with athletes have noted that this can be even more pronounced in athletes who have problematically and contingently grafted the outcomes of their sporting endeavours and identity to their faith, in what has been identified as 'perceived God perfectionism discrepancy' (Houlthberg et al. 2017). Indeed, when viewed in light of Rohr's (2012) writings, one could argue that the pain associated with this disruption (and in particular, the pain of unplanned retirement from sport for those presenting a performance-based identity) initially might be associated with an individual's inability to "... accept the tragic sense of life" (p. 150). This is perhaps unsurprising given the relative sense of certainty present in an athlete's first-half-of-life container in line with their performance-based identity. The literature on sport retirement also speaks to the intensely confusing nature of this transition (Esopenko et al. 2020; Park et al. 2013).

Rohr suggests that this confusion could be attributed to a feeling of being 'stymied' (p. vii), in a bind between a retained desire to continue to fulfil the 'preoccupations of the first half of life', yet as a result of circumstances, being unable to do so. What is more, this stumbling stone occurs for the retiring athlete at a stage of life where they are often underprepared for such a transition, emotionally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Their pain stems from an acknowledgement of the fact that the transactional logic embedded within the culture of elite sport, that commitment equates to success, has led them up the garden path (Smith 2008). Stymied, they flail around in the dark of

disruption and disorder, gradually coming to the painful realization that their first-half-of-life thinking does not correlate with the future they envisaged, or the values their culture imbibed. This is where Rohr's theorizing regarding disorder feels especially pertinent for the individual experiencing an enforced retirement from their sporting vocation.

7. Discharging the 'Loyal Soldier'

For Rohr (2012), one of the reasons why such a profound sense of disorder is experienced is that after a 'stumbling stone' encounter, a sense of closure is needed, yet, because of the dearth of transitional ritual in contemporary society, "... most people have no clear crossover to the second half of their lives" (p. 44). Drawing on Plotkin's (2008) observations of the Japanese post-Second-World-War ritual of discharging soldiers, Rohr explains how individuals undergoing life transition may rely upon a sense of an internal 'loyal soldier' to secure their identity and 'container' for the first half of life—"... without our loyal soldier we would be aimless and shapeless" (p. 46). Rohr goes on to explain that one must 'discharge the loyal soldier within' in order to evolve spirituality. To this end "... the voice of our loyal soldier gets us through the first half of life safely" (Rohr 2012, p. 45) simply because it provides so much "security and validation" (p. 46) and it is easy to "... confuse his voice with the very voice of God".

This again aligns with the findings from Houlberg et al.'s (2017) depiction of how athletes sometimes develop a 'God perfectionism discrepancy'—they are obeying their loyal soldier because they perceive it's voice as God's will. Of course, the loyal soldier cannot move an individual to the second half of life because s/he has never been there—s/he is about winning and solidifying the ego, whereas in the battles that signify the second half of life it is about loss, surrender, and the defeat of the ego—eventualities that the loyal soldier was created to avoid. Little wonder then that "so few want to let go of their loyal soldier, so few have the faith to grow up. The ego hates losing, even to God" (p. 47). In terms of our discussion on sports retirement, what is important here is that the discharging of the loyal soldier often feels like a "severe death", like being "... exiled from ... [one's] first base" (p. 49). This is the gravity of the sense of loss that is often articulated by elite sports personnel when confronted with the cessation of their playing career. The discharging of the loyal soldier can feel like a loss of self, or for the person of faith, a loss of faith, and can be a profoundly disordering and disruptive experience (again see Houlberg et al. 2017)—especially for athletes who have, throughout their careers, contingently derived their self-worth from performance-based outcomes (Shubert et al. 2022).

Therefore, how do retired athletes respond in Rohr's stage of disorder? Moreover, how does Rohr help us to understand and discern this kind of transitional challenge? Firstly, given their attachment to their 'performance-based identities' (Houlberg et al. 2018), elite athletes often take a significant period of time to relinquish their affiliation to their first-half-of-life 'container'. Secondly, the solutions that they are prescribed "... the expected and mainline script of their culture" (p. 83)—derived from a rationalist logic—are focused upon the 'repair work' of their first-half-of-life container, and while seemingly progressive, these can delay an acceptance of the 'necessary suffering' that Rohr sees as an essential component of spiritual growth. Third, and relatedly, Rohr insists that such a focus on rational responses further clouds the wisdom to be gained from marginalized healing myths, which maintain that there is always a wounding that is part of any further journey.

As a result of these tensions, it is commonplace for individual athletes in a stage of disorder to embark on what Wendling and Sagas (2021) have identified as patient time in a liminal space where they begin a self-guided process of identity reformation. Rather than absolving them of their pain and disorder (and despite the best efforts of the individual concerned), for Rohr (2004, p. 116), this "... laborious process of private heroism" has the potential to delay their assent of the necessary suffering that he sees as essential for the second-half-of-life journey. As Rohr notes, "Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable" (p. 74).

8. Re-Order: Towards a Second Simplicity

Like many spiritual nomads, many retired athletes, of all faiths and none, are likely still journeying to [Rohr's \(2012\)](#) second simplicity. Their re-ordering is, and will perhaps always be, a work in progress (a work that may have visited them sooner than for non-athletes). In particular, if an individual's retirement is enforced, this re-ordering process is often laced with resentment that can act as an obstacle to acceptance ([Houlberg et al. 2017](#)). What is more, and for the reasons outlined above, it could be argued that their unlearning is harder for retired athletes than most. This unlearning is further hindered because of the "... lack of prescribed steps and legitimate narratives that can be used by transitioning athletes to help them build a new identity" ([Wendling and Sagas 2021](#), p. 6).

Of course, some retiring athletes may have been given the support and time to engage in an 'identity moratorium' ([Erikson 1959](#)) and may have used this time well to re-establish a new "salient sense of self" (p. 9), to re-story their identities ([Carless and Douglas 2009](#)) in their "post-liminal phase" ([Wendling and Sagas 2021](#), p. 3). That said, when held against Rohr's observations, we might legitimately question whether or not these existing prescriptions are sufficient or deep enough, given the extent of the disorder in play. More importantly, we might query whether or not the questions being asked regarding the spiritual identity of the athlete are prescient to their 'disordered' predicament.

For the disordered retiring/retired athlete, whose experience is almost inevitably one of premature falling and loss, there, according to Rohr, may paradoxically be profound spiritual purpose and meaning to be discerned in this liminal state of disorder or "... detachment from our regular conveyor belt of life" ([Rohr 2004](#), p. 137). Moreover, for [Rohr \(2012\)](#), it is this discernment process that must be accepted if indeed a re-ordering (defined by spiritual growth) is to occur. By way of analogy, Rohr's writings help us to understand that the stumbling stone of retirement from elite sport is a part of the human experience, and that despite being profoundly disordering and painful, it is one that, when re-framed as part of the whole arc of life, might be re-considered as a stage of necessary suffering before a re-ordering can occur in the second half of life.

When (re)framed in this way, we see how traditional responses to retired athletes' travails (i.e., those derived from a rationalist or humanistic understanding of the body and self), appear to ignore the transcendent growth that accompanies disordering—a phenomenon that Rohr (through his in-depth analysis of mythology) observes as having always been part of the spiritual journey.

It is not uncommon for sensible and thought-provoking suggestions to emerge from the sports retirement field that promote the importance of liminality and patience with regard to identity restoration ([Wendling and Sagas 2021](#)). However, given that such suggestions often place responsibility on the athlete to persevere in a self-guided process, we question whether they are in fact (along with all the other well-intentioned responses to retirement issues that have gained traction in this area of sport scholarship) simply veiled attempts to restore or re-brand a fractured first-half-of-life container. We might also question whether this re-branding comes at the expense of embracing an athlete's stumble or fall as an upwards fall that brings them closer to what Rohr calls the 'Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery'?

9. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to draw analogies between [Rohr's \(2012\)](#) analysis of life transition and the career trajectories of elite athletes. Reflecting on the solutions promoted within the sports retirement literature on how to manage career transition, our overwhelming view is that a consideration of the role of the spiritual journey of retiring athletes has, thus far, been neglected. This omission might be acting as a limiting factor for those invested in understanding how to support sports retirees. This status quo may also contribute to the upholding of attitudes that continue to chain retiring/retired athletes to a first-half-of-life thinking. In this sense, the established logic within this field would appear to militate against progressive container building by discouraging athletes from focus on necessary "repair work" to one's container (p. 1), or from remaining connected

to a ‘post-liminal’ process. whereby an individual is free to create a new or alternative container for their second half of life.

Are we encouraging retired athletes to strengthen, or re-brand their container at the expense of embracing their stumble, their fall? Sociologists have helped us understand that a linear and blinkered focus upon the individual can be problematic when considering important social issues related to sport (Denison and Winslade 2006). Another symptom of this rationalist logic, for Rohr, is that it blurs access to the healing myths sacred across time and culture. Alternatively, Rohr suggests that the individual should embrace these myths in order to understand the importance of developing an awareness of the need to let their first-half-of-life container fail them, to let it “... stretch, die in its present form, or even replace itself with something better” (p. 2).

What Rohr (2012) helps us to observe is that with the right mindset and approach, the premature or pronounced experience of the retiring athlete can be reframed as a ‘falling upward’. In this sense, Rohr’s writings explain that despite being disordering and painful, the stumbling stone of retirement from elite sport can be viewed as a valuable and necessary part of the human experience. Rohr does not provide a solution to this pain of disorder, but he does provide a resonant script that gives meaning to these oftentimes bewildering experiences.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that a theologically informed framework has been applied to the retirement experiences of elite athletes. In turn, there is significant scope for further research in this area both in relation to alternative spiritual approaches and the exploration of various stages of the athlete life-course, such as career ending injuries, team de-selection, or contractual termination or ‘transfer’. For example, what can a theological lens reveal about the longer-term retirement experience of elite athletes? Or, how can a theological perspective contribute to recent calls for a better understanding of how the coach may be implicated in how an athlete negotiates their retirement? (Boardman et al. 2023).

Some of the fifteenth-century writings of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) could be helpful for those experiencing (and examining) the sport retirement experience and individuals supporting and caring for athletes, such as, coaches. Ignatian spirituality is perhaps best known for the idea that we can “find God in all things” (including sport and its concomitant challenges) during life. In addition, Silf’s (1998) work, *Landmarks: An Ignatian Journey*, is a helpful (and practical) starting point. Merton (2007) in his seminal work, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (see also, Thomas 2020), was the first spiritual writer to talk about the ‘false’ and ‘real (or God)’ self, which Rohr borrows from significantly. Additionally, Buford’s (1984) best-selling *Half Time: Moving from Success to Significance*, provides an insightful and practical assessment of the possibility for growth out of existential crisis, challenge, and disorder, so to move toward a less narcissistic and ‘other focused’ life.

Suffice to say, for those practitioners and fans invested in better understanding the ongoing spiritual journeys and evolving identities of retiring elite athletes, we argue that there is a need to allow these individuals the space to stumble on their own and in their own time, in the hope that they might pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and allow the ongoing composition of the “pearl of great price” that is hidden inside each of their “lovely but passing shells” (Rohr 2012, p. 86). Then, maybe, they can be people “... who turn their wounds into sacred wounds that liberate both themselves and others” (p. 34), and in doing so, find and secure a peace that is so rare among this specific demographic who often experience a falling upwards before their time.

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