"Bigger Than the Game": Reflections on the Potential Impacts of Sport and Desistance Beyond Academia

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This reflection piece draws on how my experiences as a self-confessed "jock" and PhD student has shaped my research, and how I believe this relatively new area of "sports criminology" can help soften the perceived barriers to academia.

Spark of Interest

Since I was a child, I have been extremely invested in sports and school. The further I went in my academic journey, the more I believed that there could be little to no intersection between these two interests of mine. After all, in popular culture, "jocks" and "nerds" do not sit at the same table, let alone share any interests. During a work placement module on our MSc course in Applied Criminology and Forensic Psychology at Edinburgh Napier University, an opportunity to work with 'Sport Soccer Scotland' arose. This organisation uses football as a vehicle to support marginalised individuals in society. Sadly, this opportunity happened virtually over the Covid-19 pandemic, however it was still enlightening and exciting to see sport used in such a tangible and positive manner. This was the first time I realised both my passions of sport and criminology could be used in tandem and that led me to apply for a PhD.

When an opportunity to do a PhD on sport-based interventions (SBIs) and their potential impact on desistance transitions was published, I applied without even knowing what an ESRC 1+3 funded PhD was. I just knew that this project sounded tailor-made for me. Desistance has always been an interest of mine since I spent some time working in the probation service in France. This experience showed me that desistance is a real-world social issue, with concrete stakes. In the UK, the latest overall proven reoffending rate was 37.2% within the first year of release from custody (MoJ, 2025). This number is significant despite rehabilitation being a core premise of the prison service's commitment (MoJ, 2025) and a report from 2019 estimating the total economic and social cost of reoffending to be around £18.1 billion (MoJ, 2019). Desistance is therefore an important part of criminological research (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Maruna, 2001), and more

recently research regarding sports-based interventions (Kelly, 2013; Meek & Lewis, 2014) has aimed to complement existing literature in desistance studies. My project specifically aims to address a distinct lack of research on the effects of SBIs on desistance efforts in the early transitional phase of release from prison into the community. This shall be achieved by interviewing past participants of an SBI in prison who have been released from prison in the last two years.

Growing Understanding of Research and Social Impact

As I began refining my research questions, I found myself wrestling with the concept of desistance: how do we measure or observe a person "turning away" from past behaviours? The more I investigated the existing theories on desistance, the more I recognised the need for a dynamic approach that moves beyond 'no longer offending' and considers the creation of new identities and behaviours--something I believe sport can nurture. My framework is slowly taking shape, but I am constantly challenged to think about how we define change in the most human way. As I delve deeper into the research, I feel more responsibility toward the communities I hope to support. Whilst I have only just started working with participants, I am starting to see how important it is to conduct research that not only advances theory but also respects the lived experiences of those who are part of rehabilitation and sport programmes. This has pushed me to think critically about the ethical implications of my work and how I can approach it in a way that empowers and supports rather than objectifies.

I am curious about how SBIs could be integrated into desistance frameworks and rehabilitation models. Whist there is research on the importance of support within desistance, this support is usually families or other relationships which are not accessible to all (Bahr et al., 2005). What if we could enrich the narratives around desistance by incorporating more community-driven, participatory approaches like sport? These are the questions that drive my research and I'm excited by the idea that my work could help push these boundaries. The notion that sport can have a hand in reducing some of the reconviction rates, and aid individuals on their desistance journeys is an exciting prospect and one that already has practical examples. For example, *The Twinning* Project links prisons with football clubs, who go into prisons to deliver coaching sessions to inmates and provide a certificate once they graduate. *The 3 Pillars Project* is a similar organisation which uses rugby instead of football. The idea is therefore present, that just as we have been successfully using art to help support desistance efforts for years (Cheliotis et al., 2014), sport can also act as such a vehicle.

My identity as a researcher-athlete has enabled me to build good rapport with participants, which helps massively with data collection during my interviews, as we usually spend some time chatting about various sporting endeavours. However, I must be mindful, despite my deep-rooted love for sport, not to go into data analysis and collection with the preconceived notion that sport is the "be-all end-all" and definitely contributed to desistance efforts. Whilst sport is not a panacea

nor miracle solution, it can be used as a tool which some people may find useful in supporting their desistance journeys.

The Future: Looking Towards and Beyond Academia

Although I have only just started my fieldwork, I'm eager to meet more individuals who are navigating the process of desistance through sport. I am especially curious about their personal stories: how they see sport as part of their transformation, and whether they feel the programmes are truly helping them shift their identities and behaviours. I hope to approach this with an open mind and a willingness to be surprised by what I learn, rather than being boxed into preconceived academic ideas. I want the individual and their interpretations to be prioritised over preconceived academic notions. Academic theories and notions shall here be used to enhance lived experience. My hope is that my research will contribute to academic discourse and provide tangible insights that can help shape future rehabilitation practices. I want my research to encourage discussions about integrating sport more intentionally into desistance programs, potentially advocating for more funding or policy shifts to support these initiatives. I want my project to be a bridge between academic theory and practical, community-based solutions that can help support people through a difficult time in their life.

When I was interviewed for this PhD opportunity, my background in both sports and academia influenced one of the cornerstones of my project, which is that I want my research to be accessible *to* all in order to be applicable *for* all. In my eyes sport has always strived to be a level playing field; no matter where you are from, the minute you step on that field, you are all even. Of course, this is not completely true as factors like skill and socioeconomic background do impact availability and performance. However, ultimately, you are an athlete. This is especially true in grassroots team sports, where you become a teammate, acting for a cause bigger than yourself. Moreover, sport is adept at being adjusted to make it accessible to all, without losing any of its legitimacy. I believe academia could take a leaf out of sport's book. To conduct a project using everyday language to make it accessible to more people, should be perceived as an asset not as 'a lack of academic rigour'. After all, what is education if not knowledge to be shared? Being able to share one's knowledge to a wide audience is an essential skill to educators and researchers alike. Whenever I have the conversation about what my research involves, happily the most common response I get is, "oh, that is *so cool*". Whilst I am, of course, slightly biased when it comes to my research, I do think that too often the "coolness" of social sciences gets hidden behind jargon and barriers which academia has, in many ways, placed on itself.

I believe that interesting subjects pertaining to real-world problems, conveyed in simple terms, could be a gateway to social sciences for many people. In this sense, sport could be an impactful two-way street; both an entry point into academia, and a gateway to go further than academia and into the real world.

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