



Storytelling and tennis: Coaching, marketing and selling the game

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling, understood as the art of sharing stories that support a certain narrative, has evolved into an extremely useful tool for conveying the message appropriate to a given purpose. It is used by organisations and individuals and applied to many contexts that range from politics to business, arts, or sports. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the main characteristics of this phenomena including its definition, importance, origin, evolution but, most importantly, its application to different tennis contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

What is storytelling and why it's important?

Storytelling, or the "art of storytelling", is a technique that refers to the process of sharing stories that are effective fictions and useful narratives. Its relevance has been noted by authors such, among others, Carville and Begala (2003; 12) who stated that "If you don't communicate with stories, you don't communicate".

It is an extremely efficient technique as it has been shown that human beings deal with information in a narrative form. Since the dawn of time, mankind has passed on its experiences and beliefs through stories and narratives that have included heroes, heroines, gods, myths, imaginary characters, and unbelievable events. Peoples, tribes, and communities in all times, places and societies have built their identities on the stories that explain their origins. Common stories and individual narratives of those who have excelled by their deeds (Cobley, 2013).

Some authors consider the human being a "storytelling animal" a "homo fictus" or fiction man and see fictions and stories as tools that make us humans because we are addicted to them (Gottschall, 2012).

When did it appear and how did it evolve?

Telling stories has been considered by authors such as Barthes (1966) as one of the great categories of knowledge which has been used to understand and order the world by clarifying the experience of humanity since its inception. However, not until late-1960s, that it was introduced a new discipline called "narratology" or the science of stories (Todorov, 1969) as a discipline to explain how stories could be a powerful tool to create reality.



It was initially restricted to the children's world and to be used in the leisure time. However, it gradually evolved and spread over to a wider context: culture, politics, business, and sport. Its key principle is that all messages, to be effective, should adopt a narrative form. By mid-1980s, the birth of a new era in communication was identified: the "narrative era" (Fisher, 1984).

In what contexts and how has it been used?

Since its beginnings, it has been used practically everywhere in increasingly sophisticated ways. The world of management and marketing, as well as the world of politics are clear examples of widespread uses of storytelling. It is spreading into unexpected terrain. It is a form of discourse that is being imposed in all sectors of society. Reality is now enveloped in a narrative network that filters perceptions and stimulates useful emotions. For instance, in the case of education, storytelling is used to build emotional, social, and academic skills across the primary curriculum (Fox, 2006). This author

reinforces the importance of stories and storytelling as well as the role of children as storytellers that can create unique stories that foster thinking skills, reflection, and emotional literacy.

Storytelling has very different applications, from oral storytelling practiced by griots and storytellers to digital storytelling that practices virtual immersion in multi-sensory universes and involves highly elaborate staging. These are compelling and captivating stories that offer plausible explanations. Storytelling establishes narrative pathways that lead individuals to identify with models and adhere to protocols. Formal discourse appeals to emotions more than their opinions, with narrative illustrations that speak to the listener's heart more than reason. Anecdotes have replaced discourse statistics. And the narrator's fiction replaced reality.

For what purpose?

It can be used to educate and train people, but it is also used as a technique of communication, control, and power. It is used by educators as a teaching method and by psychologists as a trauma healing tool. It is an answer to the meaning crisis in organizations, a propaganda tool, an immersion mechanism, a tool for profiling people, a technology for visualizing information, and a terrifying weapon of disinformation.

As Si (2016, p. 224) stated: "Narrative has always been an important part of human communication. We tell stories not only for entertainment, but also for sharing information and influencing others".

Why is it successful?

How can this impact of storytelling be explained, and why is storytelling considered the new paradigm of communication? Generally speaking, there are three kinds of reasons: The first is the emotional nature of the individual, the second is the talent of the leader, and the third attributes this change to the "modern psyche" that we call postmodern. A small narrative mirage that shows the value of legitimacy and the fierce competition of values.

Narrative has been considered essential for people to understand and organise their experiences, their memories of what happened, their knowledge, and the succession of time. Things become more understandable, memorable, and closer to the person when they are shared using stories (Bruner, 1991).

STORYTELLING AND SPORT

The use of telling stories in sport and physical education was already suggested by Sparkes (2002) who embraced the potential of tales in the understanding and acceptance of sport and physical activity. This author suggested the use of storytelling as a process of discovery, understanding, and analysis to better disseminate research in the area.

In fact, as stated by Rinehart (2005, p. 507) "Sport is an activity that lends itself readily to the personal experience narrative". This author identified several types of narratives which include the body, culture of pain, disability/ability, coming-of-age, and fictionalized personal modes. Authors such as Smith and Sparkes (2012, p. 80) stated that we "swim in sea of sporting stories and tales that we hear or read or listen to or see". Furthermore, Kretchmar (2017, p. 56) saw important semantic, structural, and cultural similarities between fiction

and sport since "sport commonly provides subject matter for fiction".

For a comprehensive review on the use of narrative research in physical education and sport see Pérez et al. (2011) and Devis (2017) who emphasised the need for studies in which the voices and experiences of individuals and groups, their experiences and the implications of the stories for those who share them have to acquire a better understanding of this field.

As per professional sport, Denison (1996) explored the various stages of the retirement process of athletes who had represented their country at the Olympics or world championships. The author presented short stories that reflected his understanding of the sports retirement experiences of these top athletes. In a study on high-performance sport Tsang (2000) wrote about experiences of identity including both academic and athletic voices to show how different stories are told and mirror the ambiguity of identity.

Douglas & Carless (2006) studied the narratives among women professional tournament golfers. They concluded that women use certain narratives to make sense of their experiences in elite sport which include alternatives to the dominant performance narrative existing in professional sport. These narratives are the discovery and the relational narratives which have considerable implications for all those involved. These authors also investigated the use of stories as an effective pedagogical tool in coach education (Douglas & Carless, 2008). Coaches in a development seminar responded by questioning, summarizing, and incorporating the stories provided by the researchers. It was concluded that stories could stimulate reflective practice, increase professional development, and facilitate person-centred approaches with athletes. They provided a practical division of the stories into performance, discovery and relational according to the coaches' views. In this context, Gilbert (2008, p. 51) believed that "the storytelling approach both complements and extends similar approaches in coach education such as coaching scenarios and critical incidents". In fact, the same author stated that "great coaches are indeed great storytellers". He understands that this technique is fully used when helps the learner to reflect and make sense of their own coaching experience. Finally, Douglas and Carless (2015) presented the life stories of real elite athletes along with a careful analysis and interpretation of those stories to better understand the experience of living in sport.

In the case of athletes with spinal cord injury, Perrier et al. (2015) examined how their mentors responded to mentee narratives of sport participation framed with stories of various disabilities. It was concluded that peers and mentors of the athletes were responsive to the mentee's description of the disability and provided a variety of resources and sports information. These stories can support and validate the experiences of these mentees and increase their chances of trying the sport. However, they expressed difficulty in responding to highly defiant narratives, and it was suggested that mentoring training of prospective peer athletes could be designed to help them by practicing methods of communicating with individuals sharing defiant narratives.

In the case of injured athletes, Williams (2020) stressed the relevance of stories and narratives to shape the interpretation of the experience of illness and injury. Athletes can use stories to bring order and provide a sense of identity in a stressful,

disruptive, and confused scenario such as that of an injury. They can use the appropriate narratives to understand health, performance and to frame powerful resources that will assist in their recovery process.

The visual analytics and explanatory storytelling for advanced team sport analysis was explored by Stein et al. (2018) who proposed a method to identify and explain strategies in a team sport. They suggested the classification, specification, explanation, and alteration of match situations by using descriptive storylines. They concluded that their method was useful since it improved understanding and favoured a more effective use of data analysis.

In the context of women sports, authors such as Evans and Pfister (2021) conducted a narrative review on women in sports leadership and concluded that women continued to be under-represented in leadership positions. The authors suggested the need to understand the electoral procedures in place and the experiences of women that step down or were not appointed to different positions. Furthermore, Moyer (2022) have reflected on the narrative of who constitutes a “woman” in sport by analysing the trans-exclusionary narratives in women’s sports activism.

In the case of sport management, authors such as Rinehart (2005) argued for the use of a personal narrative and personal storytelling for sport managers to understand how they work affects people and how they interact with others. The use of stories was also explored by Si (2016) to facilitate knowledge using an automated agent which acted as a narrator for the knowledge network applied to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. One relevant aspect is that of crisis management, DiSanza et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of incorporating narrative management techniques into the adaptation phase of crisis communication by assessing reputational threats to determine appropriate responses. They first suggested identifying a crisis type based on several factors that shape stakeholder attributes, and then choosing appropriate response strategies for that type of crisis. They suggested that practitioners could benefit from stories in crisis situations.

Stride et al. (2017) analysed the use of narrative approach in sport management. They used non-fictional stories to present the key findings of a study they did with the Football Association. They concluded that narrative inquiry is an efficient tool for looking into the relationships between societal and sport management issues. In this context, the use of storytelling as a communication tool for creating an organizational culture in a sport organization, which is focused on innovation and change was explored by Gajic (2020). It was concluded that stories can convey knowledge in sport organisations by sharing experiential situations (i.e., case studies, roles playing, etc.), referring to valuable sources, or accessing to valuable images, objects, or situations. Therefore, storytelling used by leaders and organization members can be a tool to generate change in sporting contexts.

As per digital storytelling, Matsiola, et al (2022) analysed the use of digital storytelling in sports narrations with the use of audiovisual tools in a sport journalism course. The authors felt that creating digital stories (i.e., using videos to showcase sports) could help students learning process and facilitate knowledge acquisition. The use of digital tools for creation and presentation of stories was very well received and participants felt that this contributed to the acquisition of skills and the improvement of their educational process.

Sport sciences such as sport and exercise psychology have also analysed the use of storytelling. Smith and Sparkes (2009) stated that sport psychologists can explore the meaning and experience of athletes through the narratives they tell and enact. The stories will help to arise personal and social aspects of the individual lives by showing their complexity and providing an understanding of lives in diverse ways. In this context, personal stories of sport, physical activity, and mental health within a narrative approach to mental health research and physical activity were explored by Carless and Douglas (2010) to rebuild identity through sport and physical activity. Moreover, the way in which sport psychologists communicate with their athletes through storytelling was reviewed by Waumsley (2015) who stressed the importance of using stories with an apparent meaning to the athletes by stating that: “The art of good storytelling is in the process of the delivery not just in the content of the story, much the same in fact, as is the process of building the relationship” (p. 100).

In the area of sports coaching, the application of a narrative approach through stories to articulate and develop the coaching philosophy of the coach has been emphasized. In this context, it has been stated that storytelling is an adequate tool to assist in “clarifying values, articulating a philosophy and aligning actions with values” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 237).

Furthermore, Carless and Douglas (2011) analysed the role of stories as strategies the coaches can use to articulate their personal coaching philosophies because they start with personal embodied experiences which include social and cultural factors and provide an opportunity to recreate significant aspects whose meaning could be explored and reconsidered. They proposed the use of storytelling as a philosophy and as alternative form of reflective exercise by suggesting coaches to identify events clearly remembered and create stories around them that can provide valuable insights.

The use of narrative in coach education and the effect on short-and long-term practice was explored by McMahon (2013) who examined how storytelling can challenge coaches' thinking and doing. This author stated that storytelling offers new ways of seeing the world by allowing us to reflect on our experiences while observing new ways of being. In this study, coaches were presented with stories from athletes to provide alternative perspectives to challenge current and long-term coaching practices. This process provided an important space for coaches to be more aware on what they did or said to their athletes. As a result, a more holistic approach to empathy and coaching was encouraged. It was concluded that athlete stories in narrative form can serve as a powerful tool for challenging coaching practices, thereby developing more socially sensitive practices.

STORYTELLING AND TENNIS

The relationship between storytelling and tennis, although it may not seem like it, goes back to the origins of the game. It is well known that the history of tennis is full of legends about great champions, memorable tournaments, magic events, and unrepeatable matches (Clerici, 1975). Many of these great stories are based on the idea of an admirable feat or achievement. In all of them appear the ideas that are intrinsically associated with our sport: greatness, effort, respect, charisma, grace, style. These are the pillars on which the narrative construction of tennis has been built over the centuries.

For a long time, tennis, more than a sport played in a scenic environment as suggested by Huizinga (2014), has represented a "narrative horizon", magnified by the images of champions and tournaments, which it offered to everyone. Our game has been explored as a literary technique (Carver, 2022) in the sense of how tennis becomes fiction with references, for instance, to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Furthermore, the game has been mentioned by authors such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Irwin Shaw among others, to name a few examples in the English literature (for a review see Segrave, 2019).

In the next sections, several practical proposals on how storytelling can effectively be used as an adequate tool to market the game are presented. These proposals are focused on both marketing and coaching contexts since they seem to be the ones more likely to benefit from the use of this instrument in the daily operations that may occur in the tennis ecosystem.

By setting different goals and using appealing stories, which are based around meaningful key words that act as a catalyser driving force, facility managers, coaches and others involved can generate the right environments to communicate their vision and ideas.

Tennis leaders both on- and off-court can utilise stories to clearly articulate their own leadership philosophies to support the personal and organisational goals and ambitions for the good of the game.

Storytelling and tennis marketing

Table 1 provides some practical examples on how interested tennis stakeholders can create and maintain a culture where everyone thrives to increase participation at all levels of the game.

Table 1
Practical examples of possible stories that can be used to convey certain marketing goals.

Context	Main goal	Story	Key words
Marketing	Future of the game - Newcomers	"This is the story of the next generation of players. The individual stories of each of them to reach the top, their pathways, their trajectories, the challenges, and opportunities they face. Let's start with player X ..."	Generation, youth, energy
	Gender equality - social change	"Tennis is an equal gender sport. It is a sport in which females are recognised at all levels of the game. This is the story of the pioneers of this movement and how they paved the way to where the game is now..."	Inclusion, rights, champions
	Sport for all - participation	"No matter your age, skill level, gender, physical ability, or condition tennis is your game... This is the story of Y, who is 90 years old and plays tennis twice a week. Y started playing..."	More people, more often, more fun
	Health, psychosocial - benefits	"Have you ever wondered how many calories you burn when you play tennis? How does the game improve your reaction speed? In which ways can tennis reinforce your confidence? here are some stories of people that share with us the benefits that they have obtained from the game at various levels ..."	Wellbeing, care, life quality

Storytelling and tennis coaching

From a research perspective, Kavanagh (2010) explored the use of narrative by tennis players who became coaches. She tried to understand players' retirement transition experiences, and more specifically, determining what paths lead to successful adjustments. Stories were presented as case studies which showed that the transition from athlete to coach is a complex process that is characterized by having many facets and depend on the idiosyncrasy of the individuals and is best understood on a case- by-case basis.

The narrative of female tennis coaches was studied by Jones et al. (2022). They found that the success of the coaches' career was considered according to the dominant existing narrative which demanded a performance orientation based on a full dedication to coaching. This scenario generated conflict and tension among some coaches who had to face resistance from cultural norms and followed less dominant narratives. It was concluded that career success in tennis coaching is multidimensional concept and alternative narratives should

be more available to produce higher levels of female coach attraction, retention, and progression.

From an applied perspective, in the coaching practice, the ability to structure a vision of tennis and its teaching by telling stories can become the key to seduce and motivate players. How can coaches do this? the coach can base each session around a class story. This story inserts certain words or phrases that emphasise the message to be conveyed. It is a matter of defining a script for each lesson.

There are several key ingredients for a good story. The narration should be told with passion, emotion, humour, tenderness, and warmth. The story needs to be congruent and appropriate to the objective. It should start with a phrase that connects the person to the story and catches their attention: "I am sure you have already been in this situation that I am going to share with you...", "Let me tell you something interesting that happened to me a minute ago...", "Here's a story I think you would like to hear...". Table 2 provides some practical examples.

Table 2
Practical examples of possible stories that can be used to convey certain coaching goals.

Context	Main goal	Story	Key words
Coaching	Tactics - consistency	"This is the story of a player that was not enjoying the game because he was taking lots of risks when playing the points. One day he asked his coach..."	Ball in, no mistakes, extra ball
	Technique - grip change	"There was once a player that knew she had to change her serve grip but did not want to because she was afraid of the process..."	Feel it, smooth, loose
	Mental - concentration	"This top player had a challenge in controlling his attention mainly between points. He sought the advice of a sport psychologist..."	Focus, here, now
	Conditioning - speed	"Once there was a player who felt she was quite slow when running to hit the wide balls back. What do you think she did? She..."	Anticipation, positioning, reading

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to reflect on the importance of using stories in the context of tennis to get a message across that will allow others (i.e., players, coaches, fans, parents, volunteers, administrators, media, members, etc.) to identify themselves with the plot, the characters, or the environment. If the people can take a personal meaning to the story by mirroring the action in it with something they have experienced or they believe in, then it will be easier to motivate them, to "buy" the message and to engage with what it means to them.

This article is also a call to action since it is well known that everyone is capable of telling good stories that will make others think, feel, understand, and act. Storytelling is a powerful tool to change behaviours, motivate individuals, and build relationships through empathy and reflection.

Are you ready to tell your story?

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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