

# Beyond the Game

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Edited by Phil Crockett Thomas



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## Introduction – Phil Crockett Thomas and Hee Jung Hong

### Phil:

*Beyond the Game* (2024) is a collection of creative writing by current and former athletes that was developed as part of a research project called *Crafting the Future* led by Phil Crockett Thomas and Hee Jung Hong. Although we work on different topics – Hee Jung on sports, myself on social harm and justice – we share an interest in the lived experience of transitions and imagined futures. As the playful, insightful, and sometimes pained writing in this book shows, transitioning out of a high-performance sports career can be a difficult thing for athletes to imagine and experience, and we wanted to see if creative writing workshops could create a space to explore these issues in a supportive and imaginative way.

As well as being a researcher I am a writer of fiction and poetry, and I take a creative and collaborative approach to research wherever possible, because I have found that the arts can create a space for participants to explore experience and tap into their expertise in different ways, even if they have never experimented with these art forms before. It is also a way of honouring the situatedness and partiality of all our knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988), supporting an ethical encounter with research participants based on them sharing what they are comfortable with, rather than the researcher extracting information from them (Crockett Thomas, 2022). For example, in a previous project I explored people’s experiences of preparing for and leaving prison, using collaborative songwriting to express the complex interplay of emotions like fear and excitement, and the relational and practical issues that attend such a transition (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020).

The writing in this book was created in a series of workshops that I designed and led, based on an approach I developed in a recent research project: *Prison Break* (2021-22). In this former project I worked with activists and scholars involved in the movement for prison abolition, supporting them to write science fiction imagining futures after the abolition of prisons or

punishment.<sup>1</sup> As an approach, “collaborative fictioning” entails a group with a shared problem or knowledge, reading and writing together to explore the problem in creative ways. Through this collaborative work we share and challenge our knowledge and might come to pose solutions or redefine the problem. As part of *Prison Break* I produced *Abolition Science Fiction* (2022): an open access collection of our creative writing, reflections, and exercises. This was done in the hope that readers could use the book to support their own creative explorations of abolitionist themes. I hope that *Beyond the Game* can similarly inspire its readers to think about collective ways to tackle the issues detailed in the book, as what might be felt as individual problems are also social and systemic.

In the workshops for *Crafting the Future* we started by reading extracts from interesting works of fiction about sports (we looked at David Peace’s (2006) *The Damned United* and Kathryn Scanlan’s (2022) *Kick the Latch*) to help inspire our writing. We then did a mix of creative writing exercises of differing lengths and emotional intensity. For example, lots of participants mentioned *Rocky* (1976) as their favourite sports movie, so I got them to relate what happens in the film in exactly 100 words, as a warm-up exercise. As longer exercises we wrote haiku about things we valued outside of sports, love letters to our body, “blackout poetry” using famous sporting figures’ retirement speeches, and manifestos, among other exercises. The workshops were in two parts, so as homework from the first workshop I invited the participants to write letters to an agony aunt about their feelings on retirement. These were then answered by someone else in the group. We did a longer exercise over both parts of the workshop which involved individual reflections on a break taken from training or competition (due to illness for example), then trying to translate those feelings into the physical description of a landscape. People then developed this description by introducing characters or some element of dynamic change. The workshops were really fun to lead, and the participants were game in trying

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<sup>1</sup> *Prison Break: Imagining Alternatives to Prison in the UK* (2021-2022) was funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation: Independent Scholar Fellowship. The *Abolition Science Fiction* (2022) e-book and audiobook are available open access at <https://abolitionscifi.org/>

the different exercises, despite most of them being new to creative writing. I learned a lot about the challenges of sports transitions and the passion and commitment that sports careers require. It has been a pleasure to work with the book's contributors to support their writing. I hope you enjoy reading it!

### **Hee Jung:**

I grew up surrounded by elite judokas as my dad ran a judo gym when I was young. I have seen many elite judokas, including my own brother, endure extreme training demands to pursue excellence; get injured, lose their way, and leave judo. I practiced judo until I earned a black belt, and I knew my dad wanted me to pursue the elite pathway. However, I said no. I knew I could not manage what it takes to be an elite athlete. It is such a challenging and demanding journey that I could not possibly go through it. But my brother did it. He went through the entire journey gracefully, which I have always admired. Likewise, I admire all athletes who go through such a journey as I have witnessed the ups and downs as a family member. Some athletes are remembered for a long time, and others are forgotten as if they were never there. Whether they are remembered or forgotten, we do not always know what happens to them after all the limelight has gone.

Due to the exclusive nature of their athletic careers, where athletes focus solely on their sport, they tend not to be well-prepared for their post-athletic careers. This indicates the significance of and need for pre-retirement planning (Park et al., 2013). As awareness of supporting athletes for their post-athletic careers has increased, sport organisations and governing bodies have developed career assistance programmes to support their athletes (Hong and Coffee, 2018; Hong and Minikin, 2023). While this is encouraging, there still needs to be further exploration of ways to better support athletes. This is because it is still unclear how many athletes have benefited from such assistance programmes and schemes, and these programmes are mainly available for athletes at the highest level who compete in the Olympic Games or World Championships. Athletes who have not reached this level may be more in need of support. I appreciate that it is challenging for sports governing bodies and organisations to provide support to athletes at all levels due to limited resources. Thus, it is critical to develop and suggest different

ways to support athletes when they need it. This may involve developing internal resources such as coping skills and strategies rather than relying solely on external resources such as organisational support.

Whilst support for retiring and retired athletes is critical, it is also crucial to support dual career athletes who have two heavy commitments: sport and study or sport and work, especially at higher education institutions. These dual-career athletes experience several transitions at different levels. For instance, at the athletic level, they may transition from junior to senior level, moving towards mastery. At the psychological level, they move from adolescence to young adulthood. In addition, at the academic level, they transition from secondary school to higher education (Wylleman, 2019). Altogether, such transitions pose increased demands and challenges, causing many dual-career athletes to drop either sport or education. For this reason, their mental health and wellbeing may be at risk, which requires support (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). As mentioned above, it is critical to develop their own internal resources in this respect. Thus, once again, it is significant to provide different options for managing the demands and challenges they need to navigate during their dual careers.

Having interviewed a number of both retired and dual-career athletes over the past few years, I have found that telling a story helps them release their emotions, thereby assisting in coping with their current issues and challenges. Since writing is another way to tell a story and express emotions, as well as an opportunity for reflection, I thought introducing creative writing as a coping skill for athletes would be insightful. At the right time, I met Phil and learned of her expertise, which was a great fit for establishing a meaningful interdisciplinary project. The involvement of dual-career athletes, retired athletes, active athlete-academics, and academics in sport as participants has made our project fulfilling, of which we are greatly appreciative.

Also, I must admit that it was a therapeutic journey for me to participate in our project workshops led by Phil, engaging in creative writing beyond academic writing. Through these sessions, I uncovered old, hidden feelings and many regrets about not properly supporting my brother's athletic journey. By participating in the workshops, I was able to let go of my regrets

and become more motivated to research athletes' career development and transitions. I am so grateful to Phil and my fellow writers. I do hope more athletes can engage in creative writing and develop new coping skills and strategies. I am more than happy to support this endeavour!

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## Fragments on Time – Andrew Mark Gillott

*8th December*: Last dash by a chatty brook. I imagine the heron is still hunting there.

*19th June*: Last run down a brash side fell and back up to a pike.

Mercurial topography. Ups-and-downs.

This landscape is all sawtooth waves and then ... flatline. Amplitudes, and then discontent. This prompt is a plot, where X = time (I remember this as being the variable I can't change).

Yes, this landscape resides in another dimension, life – lived on a graphed line that spools out on its axis.

...

I need a time-machine. Not so I can fling things into reverse — what would I change? — but just to get another ten years of muddy legs and the spatter of shale and the marble-chatter of scree and the danger of a possible foothold in a final descent.

You know, the way your eyes shake, the way your pins get needles.

I need a time-machine. A contraption that takes times — events, encounters, tongue-tastes-like-battery-moments — and blends them together. Exhilaration smoothie, or something.

Like the end of a seven-day race in the worst winter Wales had ever seen.



## Rocky in 100 Words – Ollie A.J. Carter

Just a feel-good sports movie. The classic underdog story. Not just that but almost a drama. Story isn't about sports performance, but about life around sport and how interconnected they are. Stars "Rocky" the Italian Stallion. An immigrant that works as muscle, collector for the Philly mafia. Just a good guy. The classic everyman. Decent boxer, nothing special. Clearly a friendly staple of the community. Looks out for folk and begins courting his friend's sister. Muhammad Ali stand-in "Apollo" chooses Rocky for his next sell out fight. Because the name can really sell the fight. Local hero vs undisputed king.



## Into Time Added On – Emma Mathers

*As long as there are games to play, it's not over.*

– Sir Alex Ferguson

The warm, sweet smell of freshly cut grass wafted through the air, accompanied by the soft purr of a mower moving back and forth in a garden nearby. Daisies, arranged in ring formations, their under-petals painted pink by Blyton's fairies, were smiling encouragingly. The sky was blue, and the early-May sun was doing its best to add a touch of comforting heat to the morning breeze. *Surely this would be enough to remove the moisture left over from last night's brief drizzle?*

It seemed like the whole school was lined up today. Last week's rumours that the grass might be playable had spread. The few hopefuls who had assembled on Friday just to be disappointed with the news of the pitch being "too muddy" had been joined on Monday by some eager Year 4s.

"Tomorrow maybe" had been Mr West's promise. Of course, by the end of break, the news had got around so everyone knew!

As the crowd began to shuffle towards the edge of the playground that Tuesday, I found myself in a decent position on the start line. Glancing to my left, I could see Jonny Howlett lined up in a good space too. *Perhaps us Year 5s were going to get off to a fast start in the race against the 6s!*

Even at that age, I was aware that my speed was what made the boys accept me into the world they owned (for at that time the sport was very much a boys' game). I had proven myself at last year's Sports Day, and victory in the annual race to the top goal was too important to let the normal view of a girl's sporting ability get in the way. Tradition had it that the first to touch the goalposts won the right to choose ends for their year group. Winning the race was my ticket into the game.

Mr West did one final turn, inspecting the field like a farmer surveying his crops. I *saw* his decision a split second before I heard it.

"Yes –" the rest was inaudible as everyone cheered in celebration as if they had just won a cup. The excitement was enough even to rival the feeling of the end of the school year.

I was out of the blocks like the Enterprise hitting warp factor ten. Head down, arms and legs pumping hard. Although I was charging up a slight incline, it literally felt like I was flying. I've always struggled to describe it, but the feeling I get when I'm running fast is like I've tamed the wind just enough, so I get to ride it like it's a wild horse.

With eyes focused solely on the goalposts, I was unaware of anyone else until entering the penalty box. Eighteen yards out and I was ahead of the Year 6s around me. Jonny Howlett was putting in a good effort for our team, but I could tell he was desperately hanging on. Twelve yards out (a distance that was to become one of my future strengths), I had a clear line to the right-hand goalpost. Six yards, and I knew I had it! I reached out, tapping the cool metal, slightly rusted upright a couple of paces before anyone else crossed the line!

All of the Year 5s were buzzing! It had been ages since a lower year group had beaten the Year 6s. Of course, I made the time-honoured popular choice to shoot downhill towards the goal nearest the playground. This gave us the advantage of attacking downhill, but it also meant that being the team the furthest away from the school building, we got to savour the very last seconds of breaktime before starting classes again.

For the next fifteen minutes we played. It wasn't exactly the Association game. The rules were customs of our own, passed down through story-telling from one year group to the next. The contest was more akin to the popular village ba' games of Ashbourne, Kirkwall and Jedburgh. The games which I fell in love with studying when I came to university and the ones that I still enjoy teaching people about now.

The sides were made up of way more than eleven players. No one was concerned with having subs and the idea of a formation went out of the window as soon as kick-off happened. Fergus Suter and the rest of the Scotch



Professors<sup>2</sup> would've had a nightmare trying to encourage us to spread out and play in specific positions. Everyone attacked and everyone defended. It was a derby full of daring, end-to-end entertainment where the score line would carry over from one breaktime to the next until one of the teams emerged victorious on the last day of term.

Yes, there was the occasional disagreement over what the current tally was, or whether we were going to play to the “hack-football” rules (that some preferred) on a particular day. But in general, we all ref'd it together. It was our game, played during a time within the school day that belonged to us. It was a chance for anyone who played it to achieve legendary status but only in the archives of our own memories.

Over the years, the “start line” has changed. Moving from that break between the line of tarmac and grass, to the first fixture in the season, and then in more recent times, to the beginning of pre-season. The rules have changed too, becoming more structured and governed by an outside force. But every year, I have lined up as before – to take part in the most magical, thrilling, awe-inspiring tradition that has been around for centuries.

Now at 43, I find myself wondering dangerously about how many more years I will get to be part of this contest. I guess my career is heading into time added on. Injury has led to a stuttered involvement on the pitch this season and it has become boringly frustrating answering the question that I always get from the opposition team or manager, “Why are you not playing?”

Due to my Captain's role, I've still had a job to do, but much of this has been setting an example from the fringed side-lines or in an organisational capacity

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<sup>2</sup> Fergus Suter was a Scottish footballer who played from 1878 to 1888. He and fellow footballers from Scotland (nicknamed the “Scotch Professors” due to their highly skilled style of play) moved to play for clubs in England, with the reward of payment (even though the game was still amateur at the time). These Scottish players are credited with introducing the skills of passing and heading to the game of football, creating more emphasis on teamwork than individuality. Some Scots were also instrumental in the organisational structures within the game. Thus these “Scotch Professors” are argued to be the creators of the style of play we know and celebrate in football today.

rather than getting to play. Watching on at training, to see my favourite crossing and finishing drill, or hearing the laughter and the delighted cheers of my teammates when one of them scores a “worldie”, is torment beyond that which Tantalus felt. I smile and act pleased for fellow injured players when they make their way back into training and then matches, but a good detective investigating the scene would be able to see right into my green eyes.

Just as I am (almost) ready to give up though, we move into May – the “business end” of the season. I can hear the lawn mowers starting up again, smell the newly cut grass, and feel the sun whispering promises of a warm summer. My hibernation through the winter of injury is over and thanks to some encouraging words from the physio, I've got renewed confidence that I can run (fly!) again.

The bike that has been my fitness-buddy for the past few months is now having a well-earned rest, and the positive attitude and example I've set throughout my hiatus is my new ticket to the game. With four games left and my team in the spot primed for relegation, there is still a lot to play for ... and to be honest, I am just pleased to be back in training.

My time out from playing has caused me to reflect on my experiences. Fortune and opportunity have been kind and I have been afforded many special moments. Being allowed to stay up late to watch *Match Of The Day* and hear my Dad and Grandad speak in wonder at how good Bryan Robson and United were; following my sister's advice to go for placement over power to score the winning penalty and qualify for a national six-a-side tournament during Euro '96; beating Edinburgh 8-2 in the annual grudge match; Captaining Scotland against England in the British University Games; scoring a flying-volley in the 90<sup>th</sup> minute to beat Rangers 1-0! There are honestly so many more moments that I could list but perhaps I should keep them stored away for now so that I can reminisce about them when I finally do retire!

I'm not sure how many more times I will step up to the start line – I think there will be a few more – but I do know that whenever I do decide to stop, football will have given me some brilliant memories to look back on and I will be forever grateful for that.

## Dinner with Sir Alex – Ross Walker

Cathy [Cathy knocks on the door of Alex's office]: Alex, dinner will be ready in five minutes.

Alex: Okay, thank you! I am just finishing this last piece of work just now.

Cathy [five minutes later Cathy shouts up the stairs]: Alex, dinner is on the table.

Alex: I am just coming!

[Five minutes passes by and no sign of Alex at the dinner table.]

Cathy [shouts up the stairs for a second time]: Alex, are you coming? Your dinner is getting cold.

Alex: Two minutes and then I will be down.

[Five minutes passes by and no sign of Alex at the dinner table.]

Cathy [shouts up the stairs for a third time]: Alex?

Alex: Coming down now.

[Another five minutes passes by and no sign of Alex at the dinner table.]

[Cathy puts Alex's dinner on a tray before taking it up the stairs and placing it on his desk.]

Alex: Thank you, dear, but I was just coming down.

[A noise of football celebrations and cheers can be heard from the television in Alex's office, and the chant of "Glory, glory, Man United".]

Cathy: It is okay – enjoy the football. I will see you later.

[Cathy goes back downstairs and starts to eat her dinner alone at the table.]

## Agony Aunt Mailbox

Dear Agony Aunt,

I feel I am nearing the end of my sports career, and I don't know what to do. My whole life has been dedicated to my career in sport and now I will have nothing! I'm scared. My self-worth is tied so closely to my sports performance and recently it has not been going so well. I don't want to be seen as an athlete in decline. It takes me longer to recover when I'm at higher risk of injury.

Not only am I going to have the sport at the centre of my life removed, I'm scared that not having the professional athlete identity will create barriers between myself and the friends and connections I have made through my sport. I won't see the people that I normally compete with and against, I won't see my coach as regularly, I won't have access to the support staff (psych and physios) that have been crucial to my success and my ability to overcome major hurdles in my career.

Please help! What can I do to overcome this black cloud that is coming thick and fast?

Anonymous

...

Dear Anonymous,

Let me first thank you by saying I understand how you feel. I myself went through the same crisis. Sport is who we are, right? It is our identity, what makes us special. Well, I hate to tell you but you are wrong. You are much more than your sport. Your identity is much more. You are a person first.

Life is not over because sport is not where you want it to be. You talked in your letter about connections and socialisation and how those things are lost. What you've identified is that sport has taught you a lot of transferable skills you can take into the next part of your life and has given you a platform and basis to excel.

You're not losing anything, you've actually gained so much and you have nothing to be scared about. What is constraining you right now is believing that life is over because sport is over. Your actual life is just beginning. New exciting opportunities are closer than you think, ones which will give your life new meaning and in ways that can draw upon your happy memories from sport.

However, what you need to promise is that no matter what happens, you will continue to still play sport afterwards. No matter what the capacity or level, there is no worse feeling than the regret of walking away from your sport altogether. The reason you love sport is clear. Competition and winning is great but the memories and relationships we form for life have so much more meaning.

All the best,

Agony Aunt

## Go to Hell! – Hee Jung Hong

“Hey, nobody,” the fan shouted.

“What did you say?” the athlete asked sharply.

“I said NOBODY,” the fan laughed.

The athlete pressed the emergency button without hesitation and two police men arrived in under five minutes.

The fan was confused. But the confusion did not help understand the situation. It never did.

The athlete watched the fan being squeezed into the police car and continuing to insult him. “No mercy will be granted,” he thought. I know you. I might have seen you hundreds of times in the stadium and elsewhere. Yes, you had wholeheartedly supported me, no, maybe not me, my performance. Not only you. Many. So many people loved my performance. A graceful performance. Excellent performance. Legendary performance. It's gone. It's gone indeed.

...

The judge asked the athlete, “Do we send this disrespectful fan to hell? What is your opinion, yes or no?”

“Who am I?” the athlete suddenly questioned himself. “What am I? Why am I here?” He kept on questioning. He didn't have any answers. He left the court.

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I existed when I was not an athlete.  
I existed when I was an athlete.  
I existed when I was not an athlete again.  
I am existing when I am not an athlete now.  
I will exist whatever I am.  
I can be anyone.  
An athlete was part of me. A huge part of me. But it is not all of me.  
Nobody.  
Anybody.  
Everybody.  
It doesn't matter.  
I am all of them.  
I am the one who can choose to be what.  
So, it's fine.  
It is fine.  
Eventually, it is fine for me.





## Injury as Landscape – Ollie A.J. Carter

I am in a former meadow. It was lush and green. Filled with wavy long grass, pretty colourful flowers, spongy moss, and peaceful mystical creatures; all atop gentle rolling hills, between which tranquil aquatinted steams flow; and all beneath clear blue warm sunny skies. But that all changed suddenly and violently.

Earthquakes rattled and flattened the land, cracks opened up and swallowed the utopia that covered them. Small volcanoes jutted out the ground and spat out grim clouds of ash and smoke, covering the squashed, trampled and broken meadow in silty black and grey ash. The skies above have been blocked out and hold a sad grey-and-brown colour from the smoke and smog. The mystical creatures all around in the land and sky have transformed into ugly shadows of their previous forms. I am surrounded by scuttling, disfigured, humanoid gremlins, scurrying around, hiding behind rocks, and giggling mischievously. And manically screeching above me, vulture-like bat creatures and dragon-like fell beasts circle around in huge arcs.

I look around and just on the horizon I can see the continuation of the utopian meadow. A faint line of green separating the fractured black and grey wasteland from the smog-filled sky. The disaster hadn't destroyed everything. I just had to make my way back to where I was when everything was going so well. I begin my journey, but progress was slow at best and Sisyphian at worst. The ground below is unnatural and difficult to navigate and the further I travel, the more secondary earthquakes rattle the land, halting or reversing my progress. There appear to be small, secluded areas of greenery, with tiny ponds that offer sanctuary, but they do not get me closer to where I need to go, and are soon swallowed up by new cracks in the barren wastes opening up. The harder I attempt to traverse the wastes, the more I am pestered by gremlins and fell beasts, the more my strides are swallowed by the soft consuming floor ash, and the further away the horizon seems to shift. Like a rainbow of hope the meadow taunts me with by moving me further away. Attempting to find this pot of gold seems to damage me more. This journey of navigation is slow, arduous, and frustrating; and it takes place in a sad, gloomy, and desolate world.

This however gradually begins to change. The severity of the wasteland changes. The earthquakes stop coming, the patches of green stop getting swallowed up and the horizon stops running away. Even the landscape underfoot becomes more manageable. The road ahead isn't clear by any means, and the volcanoes and shifting cracks constantly remain me of the hostile, volatile landscape I remain within, but the journey ahead seems achievable. I only need to traverse the harsh, sad, and lonely wasteland and wade through the difficult journey to eventually make it back to where I was before.



## More Sleep – Gabriella Wood

Big stretch as I roll over to the cool side of the bed, dragging my fluffy pillows and blankets with me as I roll myself back into a toasty burrito shape, ignoring my blaring alarms and the sun in my face, and going back to sleep.

The alarm continues in the background screaming for my attention as I sneak in just a few more minutes of precious z's before the reality of the early morning sets in and the busy day that comes with it.

## Haiku – Jennifer Wright

Sun resting on pale faces  
Energises bodies as they lie pitch side  
Only one more half left.

## Doc and Charlie – Michael McDougall

1.

The world has died. The Earth's natural resources were spent years ago and where we live now is a wasteland, sand and dust for as far as the eye can see. The structures and systems that held it all together, made it what it was, have gone. Centralised government, international trade, the post office, vanilla chai lattes; gone. The Elders all agree that looking back, it was amazing it all went on as long as it did.

Sport doesn't exist anymore. That was part of the old world. For those who lived through the end, sport is little more than a trace memory, an oddity, like birthday parties or parent-teacher evenings, that when recounted sounds like a strange mass ritual that people used to partake in for no good reasons. There are still athletes, of a sort anyway. "The Conscripted." Those who show extraordinary physical prowess before their fifth birthday are collected and matched to one task – running, cycling, rowing, throwing – and trained day and night to fulfil their athletic promise. They no longer compete against one other, or even themselves, but are plugged into huge generators that dominate the desert skyline from here to where the sea used to be and that power the villages and the remnants of towns. They train daily in body and mind, supported by the Healers and the Wise Ones to increase their prowess and physical output, and they run, they cycle, they row, they throw. Every day, until they are spent and can run, cycle, row, and throw no more. Then they are replaced. There are always others to take their place so there is never any disruption to the generators. We have the identification and training of the Young Ones down to a tee now. Seamless efficiency. No one knows where the Conscripted go when they're done. They just disappear. Maybe someone should ask but this is a hard world and there isn't much time for curiosity.

As the region's First Healer, I host the Council that is called to gather when we need to talk about an injured or ailing Conscript. We have a decision to make on Charlie today. Charlie, our region's most valued Conscript for the last decade – according to all the energy production metrics – has slowed down, his output diminishing day by day. The will is still there, and we've

tried to reinvigorate him, but his body cannot keep up any longer. For our way of life to continue there is little room for sentiment, so the decision is more of a formality really, rather than something we have to spend much energy on. We have even less of that.

2.

I found him on the edge of an abandoned border settlement. Years after the time I had seen him last. Older, much older. Face cracked and darker. Inevitable, when you live all your life in this bleak and barren place, but he still looked older than he ought to. He was gathering figs by a rickety old shack, back stooped, deliberately slow in his movements as he transported them from ground to sun bleached satchel. I scan the desolate scene for any signs of hidden danger; someone who could emerge from the ruins and rubble that were once stores, banks, offices, and homes, or arrows or bullets that could be fired from darkened, glassless windows. There is strange, unsettling graffiti scrawled over the toppled, rusted out water tower and windchimes – why is it always windchimes – jingle in the gathering wind. It is as unwelcoming as anywhere I've ever been in recent memory and I'm not sure how either the fig tree or Charlie have survived here.

“Charlie?”

Charlie looked up and squinted into the unflinching sun.

“Doc?” We looked at each other for a moment, neither of us taking the initiative, and as such there was no customary embrace or exchange of pleasantries, as is still usual these days. Civilisation might have crumbled, but that doesn't prevent us from being civilised.

“I wasn't sure it was you.”

“I must look very different to you now, not attached to wires, or you know, *not* running.”

“And no regional kit,” I say, trying to lighten the mood and feeling like I'm missing the mark.

Charlie let in a slow breath, and laughed a little. “Yeah, no kit,” he said evenly, the joke not quite returned.

“How have you been?”

“Since when?”

“Since I last saw you.”

He laughed again, not unkindly. “And when was that, Doc?”

I paused. I didn't know.

## Dear Body – Hee Jung Hong

Dear body,

Thank you for enduring all my misbehaviours, drinking too much, wearing heels all the time, and having too spicy food, in my twenties, and sitting down too much in my thirties. You have been very strong, occasionally unwell for minor reasons, but most of the time you have given me the energy and strength that enabled me to do whatever I wanted to. I don't know how to thank you enough.

Thank you also for enduring the process of a recent whole-body check-up. It was a long journey, but you made it. Some minor concerns. Such a relief. Thank you for being healthy. I won't do bad things to you again. More vegetables, not sitting down too much, more exercise. I want you to stay healthy and happy. I really do.

Many thanks,

Me



## Agony Aunt Mailbox

Dear Auntie,

I feel kinda silly writing to you about this as I don't think you can really do anything to help. But hey, let's give it a go ...

I'm struggling with the decision of whether I should retire or not from the sport I have played for most of my life. I still have the drive to play and compete, but my body seems to be refusing to let me keep going. I'm caught in a loop of injury – working back – playing a few games – and getting injured again. I've rested, had treatment, done all the exercises the physio suggests, and tried various supports – these help me to recover but do not prevent the injury from returning.

I've considered taking longer out to recover but this is difficult. My teammates are getting fitter whilst I feel like I am losing ground on them, which will make it more difficult to get back in the team. Having said that, whilst I'm not playing, the team have not performed well and are in prime position to be relegated. On the one hand it is somewhat comforting to know the team still need me but on the other, I'm fearful that I won't be back in time to contribute enough to help us stay up.

Relegation could be a disaster for the club because it literally could lead to the sacking of the manager, the loss of players, a lack of support from our sponsors, and the team disbanding altogether. If this happens, given the age I am now, I'm not sure any other club would take me on – although, if we do stay up but I don't contribute to that achievement, I'm not sure the manager will see there being a place for me next season.

My fears are not about having to stop – if a medical professional told me I had to give up in order to be able to stay healthy and active in later life, I could accept that. My fear is about not having the opportunity to play again if I was to recover properly. I guess deep down, I believe I can still make it back. I'm just not sure that others will have the same faith as I do.

This leaves me with the question ... Do I assert control and make my own decision to retire? Or do I stay and chance the disappointment and hurt I would feel if someone was to tell me there is no longer a place for me in the sport?

As I say, I'm not really expecting you to be able to help with this – but if you do have any advice, it would be good to hear it.

Yours,

Frustrated!

...

Dear "Frustrated!"

Thank you for your letter and well done on taking the step to write everything out that is bothering you and even asking for help. That isn't an easy thing.

There is a lot going on inside your mind. A lot of worries and pressures for different things that are all linked through sport. All these fires are throwing up a lot of smoke making the whole situation unclear, which further worsens everything. I will attempt to break it all down for you and offer solutions where I can. Hopefully this will give you some clarity which will hopefully help make things easier.

There is your injury/re-occurring injury that I believe you perceive to be holding you back and not allowing you to fully flourish as an athlete and teammate. You feel like you can't give your best performances or improve yourself through training. And you feel you can't flourish as a teammate for this reason also; you feel you can't give your best to and for the team.

All of this weighs extremely heavily on your mind and will feel uncontrollable. It can't be pleasant and must be so hard. But it seems to me that you have done everything you can in your power to help overcome this injury. No stone is left unturned. All of that was in your control and you have done it. You've done what you can to help your body strive to keep up with the ambitions and dedication of your athlete's mind. That is all you can do. I would try to take comfort from this and give yourself credit for what you have done so far.

I feel as though maybe you worry about losing yourself, or losing your sport, and losing your team. A sport and team you certainly feel a strong connection too and belonging too.

For this I would like to emphasise that you can and I'm sure you will still flourish in your sport. Maybe not at the same level to where you have been previously, but certainly to the degree that your body is capable of. The wonderful thing about sport is that it can be undertaken at any level, with any random collection of people. You will never lose that side of you and will never lose your connection to your sport. And through that connection you will connect to others.

The mind of an athlete always outstrides the body's ability to accomplish its desires. Even when at the pinnacle of health. Perhaps the most powerful thing the mind can do is come to terms and accept where the body is at and then continue on from there. Not to worry or get annoyed about not reaching previous or lofty goals, but to instead evaluate and strive for what the body can achieve.

You will always be able to partake in your sport. Maybe not at the same level, or with the same team. But if you allow it and explore, you will experience the wonderful thing about sport, how you will flourish as an athlete and team member, no matter your situation.

I hope this helps!

## Stop/Go – Jennifer Wright

The camera operator navigates their way through the overgrown forest paths and makes their way to the beach. The athlete is waiting for the bigwig. Conversation is stilted and awkward, a little tension in the air perhaps? Has this conversation been looming?

The athlete has dedicated their life to their sport – prioritised training over family gatherings, planned their finances around training and competitions, packed numerous suitcases – all resulting in their highly sought after performance on the pitch. But is this sustainable? Should they press the accelerator again or touch the brake? Which one? When? Now? “Finish on a high” they say. Should they keep pushing and control their own destiny (whatever that looks like they said, shrugging shoulders). Sacrifices are tough. Do they decide or let someone else?

Tape rolls. The bigwig chats superficially about team goals, aims and the season ahead. The athlete looks like they've heard this before, shrinking a little, disengaging in this formal approach from the bigwig. Rumours have it that the coach wants fresh legs in the squad. Just a rumour though. The camera operator watches the dynamics: bigwig and player unable to exchange their true selves.

Bigwig begins to look uneasy; checks their watch, glancing around for answers? Shifting their body position. This decision shouldn't be theirs, but it seems like the athlete is asking them to decide. Both bigwig and athlete are confused; where to go from here? They appear equally isolated and connected at the same time. Time passes and the conversation is subduing, the sooner the better, a decision needs reached. “All good things must come to an end”, “finish on a high”, clichéd phrases to help but they hinder. How do you know when? The athlete appears to be able to hit targets, keep up with the rest, role-model their career. The tide rolls in, the sun is momentarily blocked by clouds, a pause, breath. There is plenty of tape, they keep rolling.



## The Deal – Hee Jung Hong

Sponsor: “Excuse me?”

Me: “Please continue your sponsorship for my brother for the next year.”

Sponsor: “You may be confused but your brother’s contract has been finished following his retirement a month ago.”

Me: “Of course I know. That’s why I am here to request your continued support.”

Sponsor: “What’s the benefits of doing this for us?”

Me: “Supporting a talented human being’s future and dreams.”

Sponsor: “Hahahahahaha you’re joking?”

Me: “I am not.”

Sponsor: “That’s not how business works, young lady.”

Me: “If you are expecting financial benefits, you will have them. However, supporting someone else’s dream and future is more important than anything. You will have a great story out of this. You can use it to your benefit. This is the deal. I even can create a story for you, as I am a story collector and creator.”

Sponsor: “Is that even a job?”

Me: “Yes, it is my job.”

Sponsor: “You sound crazy, you know that.”

Me: staring at the sponsor.

Sponsor: looking in my eyes. My eyes are full of spirits. Nobody can change my mind.

Sponsor: “Deal.”

Me: “Deal.”

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I wish I could have done that, but I couldn’t. I didn’t even think about it back then. I didn’t know what to do for my brother when he retired. I secretly blamed him for retiring earlier than we expected. I did nothing for him. I didn’t know what he had to go through. I was there doing nothing.

I wish someone could do this for every athlete. Stand up to. Request. Make a deal. I wish this could happen to support all athletes who can’t help losing a big part of themselves for a while following leaving their sport. I really wish that would happen.

## The Feeling of Being Stranded on a Desert Island – Ross Walker

For an athlete, transitioning out of sport is a difficult time and has no clear process. One minute you are surrounded by people, and you have an active schedule all planned out and prepared for you. Next, you have little to no direction or routine and must return to your own version of “normality” after having had everything provided for you ranging from your clothes and food, to your accommodation and transport. Your entire day and often, the best part of your time across the year is mapped out and structured for you from start to finish and in some cases, there are people every step of the way to help and support you. Even when you leave the sporting environment for the moment, you know how to behave, act and what you need to do to prepare for the next day because this specific way of living has been engrained into you over time. That is not to say the experience is perfect for everyone. Far from it. There are also people along the way who can get in the way. In some instances, they are only around you when you are in the moment and when it is all over, they disappear until your next appearance or bout of success.

Despite having been the focal point for many years, once you enter the post-career transition phase, aside from the very few athletes who have experienced considerable success and will remain on their pedestal and in the limelight for years to come, the rest of us have feelings of being discarded. You no longer serve a purpose unless it is beneficial to those around you. You are left to see the actual reality of the situation and your life which can be a difficult pill to swallow. While you were and are passionate about your sport, to others, you are a source of entertainment or a stat on a spreadsheet more than a person. You can decide what is worse. They care about you when you are doing well but when it all comes to an end, regardless of whether it was through choice or force, your service is no longer needed and are ejected through the exit much quicker than it ever took to enter. The system cares about what they deem to be “success” which in many cases means medals and silverware alongside the funding and profitability which ensues.

This is and can be a very isolating experience, leaving people feeling disconnected, deflated, and lonely. This experience also applies to other sports operatives from within the industry whether a coach right the way down to a volunteer, the post-career transitions out of sport or alternatively, the post-competition, post-game “blues” can often feel like being trapped on a desert island. Here, there is no easy answer, context, or exit. The island is surrounded by a vast ocean with no object or sight of land in the distance. There are no rescue boats, helicopters, or planes coming to get you. The signals that you make with sticks on the beach asking for help have gone unnoticed or are trapped on a piece of torn paper in an old milk bottle which every time you throw it into the ocean, hoping that it will reach somebody somewhere, you find that it keeps washing back up on the beach just as you have. The fire that you light and black smoke which rises high into the clear blue skies are as futile as your attempts at throwing the milk bottle into the ocean when the tide is out. There are no boats sitting on the shores of the beach, no life rafts and no sign of human existence on the island. You are left to your own devices, your own thoughts and at the end of the day, can only rely on yourself to determine what you do next and ultimately, how you get off the island.

In the middle of the island is a tall mountain which was formerly an active volcano. It may erupt at any point and as you seek to climb the mountain to get back to the feeling of being on top, it will pose challenges to you and spit lava in your direction as you start your climb. This will intensify if you do indeed choose to ascend the mountain. However, what the mountain represents is an unhealthy mindset as it is not sustainable for people to spend the entirety of their life constantly climbing this mountain. Each time it gets harder and harder. Burnout is inevitable. The feeling of being on top of the mountain is at points superficial, filled with short-term satisfaction and has instilled in you a mindset to keep striving to achieve this feat in order to sustain the feeling, but how long can you live this lifestyle and what have you or do you continue to sacrifice in the process? What the island will do is provide you with an opportunity for reflection. It is one that should be embraced before you make the next move and constantly adapt your pathway as you navigate the new, unfound terrain of life. For many, we are worried

about reaching this point, but it is not until we have been off the island for some time that we realise that we really needed that moment to re-evaluate our lives and identify what is best for us.

Between the ocean and the mountain is a dense jungle; a landscape which you have never seen before. Like the jungle, the pathway through (as in your head), is filled with uncertainty and what will undoubtedly be new discoveries which will vary depending on the route you will take. Some will be easy and exciting. Some will be challenging and rewarding. Others will make you want to give up and will make you question yourself and your decision-making. However, just along the way, you just might find your purpose and be at peace with your new life on this island. Once you have this epiphany, you might start to see that the landscape of your island changes with it, the clouds become clearer, the sun shines more brightly, the temperature is warmer, the ocean is calmer and most crucially, you might even come across other people and realise that you were never alone here. You might even bump into people along the same way or find yourselves at the same time emerging through the clearing at a remote and concealed oasis. The two or even group of you have been brought together.

The time to reach this stage and pinpoint your new pathway has no boundaries or restraints. Some people might find themselves navigating the harshness of the wilderness for longer than others. Some people might need to go for a swim in the glistening pools whilst others might be sat under a tree enjoying the shade when an exotic piece of fruit falls on their head. Many might start with an idea that they will manifest further with the resources from the island around them, some might have their idea changed altogether after further exploration of the island. Others may very well stumble on a tree trunk or rock and upon falling, look up to see that the answer was sat in front of them the entire time. They just never realised because they were trapped in their own head, by their own mindset and most importantly, they were holding onto the past. Yet, what they never once bothered to do was take their sunglasses off to truly see how beautiful and fruitful the island was to begin with and to acknowledge or appreciate the breadth of opportunities which existed before they ever arrived.

While on our own individual island and having these thoughts, it is important to remember that we are not actually alone. We feel alone. We are in many ways alone. But we are actually a part of a much larger series of islets near each other without realising that on each island, there is an athlete having the exact same thoughts. You will start to realise this as you see markings of previous inhabitants of the island who have left messages for the next person. However, to find them, you had to first start moving in a progressive direction. Yet, it would have been much simpler and easier for all involved if these messages were the first point of contact that you had when you arrived on your island to help you have these conversations with yourself, to alert you that there are others on islands nearby and who have come before you, but most importantly, to help guide you through what can be a difficult and upsetting process.

As you contemplate your options and think about your journey to date, the water which surrounds the island alongside the colour of the sky above changes depending on your feelings and experiences leading up to this point; blue if it is successful or positive, black if not. You will soon discover that the entire landscape is changing in alignment with your emotions and represents the highs and lows you will undoubtedly experience during this period of reflection. Around your island, is the water calm or stormy? Is it sunny or raining on your island? Is it a cool breeze or is the wind so fast that you are feared a tornado is about to hit the island? As you stand on the beach and look around, do you take this opportunity to see what else is out there or are you fight the urge and seeking to get back to the top of the mountain? Ultimately, the question to ask yourself is, are you lost? If not, then you must start planning and preparing to make your next move and carve your pathway. If yes, then you need to take more time to further explore what the island has to offer.

As you explore, you will discover that all the resources are there to help you succeed from food and water to the wood and vines in the trees to build a boat. What these resources represent is how through your participation in sporting environments, you have developed a set of valuable transferrable skills from diligence to resilience. You can apply these characteristics,

lessons, traits, and values to new and challenging environments whether sporting or non-sporting. However, there is also the forbidden fruit which you must resist all temptation and comes in different forms. For example, is the temperature of the island and the relaxing, tropical setting convincing you to make this lifestyle permanent or to perhaps go down the wrong path? These temptations can make it hard to stay focused, but they represent the difficult decisions that you must make and the hardships that you will come across and endure no matter the path you walk in life and on the island. There is no direct route off the island, and you must devise how to escape by yourself. On some occasions, you must be willing to take the risk and even though you might be hesitant to test the reliability of the boat that you have built, if you do not, then everything that you have worked, all the time and effort, may be for nothing. Failure and success are all part of the learning process, but you will never know until you first push your boat out into the water to see.

What this narrative and each different environment alongside the collective setting represents is about making the most of your circumstances. It is a scenario which is inevitable and reflects, but also reveals your mindset to yourself and others. How do you view this situation? Do you see it as being stuck in a rut and want to walk away from the sport you love entirely? Is it a dark and scary place with no light up in the sky and daunting sounds appearing from the ocean and wilderness which you are surrounded? Or do you view it as an opportunity to go away and come back stronger in a different capacity, a new challenge in life, a different and unique opportunity to grow and develop as a person, whatever your future holds? In the context of the desert island, is the sun rising or is the sun setting? Is a clear path being carved out for you or is it your job to get into the thick of it and carve your own destiny? In your eyes, is the island a paradise which you wish to explore further or is it a trap which you are determined to find an escape from and get back to the feeling of being on top of the mountain? Are you comfortable and at peace in this environment? Can you take solitude in this new and unusual setting or are you on edge because you are now out of your comfort zone? Does that beg the question: is the comfort zone something to fear or has your sporting journey to date shown you that there is nothing to be afraid

of? Is the island an opportunity in which once you take that first step to your future, you will soon be able to look upon your previous experiences with pride and in a capacity which helps others?

The issue with sporting culture alongside the sport system highlighted in this narrative is that no athlete, coach, staff member or volunteer should feel like they are on a desert island. While the context and feeling of being stranded on a desert island is not applicable to every athlete's experiences, the island metaphor highlights a problem with the system. The issue is that many athletes are left feeling like they are stranded and trapped on a desert island with no escape and that it can take them a considerable amount of time to find their way off. During this time, they are often lost, alone and unsupported after not always being properly developed or given the best guidance around how to survive on the island. While mechanisms and tools are there, they are often a byproduct of participation in sport rather than an intentional outcome. Nobody should find themselves in these circumstances. There should be boats and planes coming to help. There should be a place signposted on the island that if you find yourself in this position there is direction about where to go. Most importantly, there should be a clear route out and somebody with you to share the journey, even if it is a simple conversation to start the process and to hold your hand through what can be a dark and dangerous pathway. There should always be light at the end of your route whether your method of escape is to climb the mountain, carve your own pathway through the jungle, dig a tunnel, fly through the air, or sail outwards to sea.

There are many entities and people in the system who have the capacity and capability to prevent people ever reaching the island. While it is inevitable that people will arrive there in some way, shape or form, there are organisations who can rescue them at no major cost or effort. If anything, it is beneficial to these bodies who have the ability as through being rescued, for a lot of these people stranded, it buys a lifetime of gratitude and loyalty in return. This is far more valuable than the time and effort which is initially put in by these organisations to help them in their time of need. More must be done to support people on desert islands, not just so that these organisations can rejoice and share in the exotic fruits and unusual artefacts that they will bring

from the island, but because it is their responsibility to do so. In accepting these people into their ecosystems before later benefiting and sharing in their successes or at very least, their effort, they signed up to a long-term commitment around the duty of care for that person! If a person ends up feeling like they are stranded on a desert island, especially for a considerable time with no interventions or basic efforts such as communication, then the organisation and system has failed in their duty of care to that person.

With the right support, you will soon realise that the island never actually existed. It was all in your head, a part of your imagination albeit feeling very real. As support starts to appear, elements of the island start to disappear. You quickly discover that the island is no longer uninhabited, there was other people on it all along from within and outwith sport. The mountain was never real. It was a reflection and representation of the climb everyone makes through the journey in their individual lives. The jungle was not an unknown complex to fear, but an intriguing opportunity to thrive and improve your life in new and meaningful ways. The note for help in the old milk bottle symbolises how we as athletes have a habit of bottling up our emotions and feelings because we are reluctant to open up and be vulnerable. We lock our thoughts away, waiting and hoping that one day somebody will see through the broken glass and make sense of the cryptic message within. The cry for help thus goes unnoticed for damaging periods of time. The signals and fires we make never reached anyone because we internalise everything, often perceiving speaking out and showing your concerns or fears to be a sign of weakness, worried that ramifications will follow if we do. This is not an individual issue, but a sign that the system has failed us throughout our careers.

The reason why the old milk bottle keeps washing up on shore at your feet is because it is never too late to unscrew the lid and share the contents. It, like the people around you, are constantly giving you opportunities to do so, we just choose to keep throwing it back into the ocean, trying to avoid its return for as long as possible, but it never truly disappears, just comes back each time more damaged than before. Yet, opening that bottle and sharing your experiences and thoughts, no matter how deep or dark, will help connect you to the other islands and get you off quicker than you can build a boat, climb the mountain, dig a tunnel or sail across the sea.

Looking back after this journey, you will discover that your entire experiences and surroundings were determined and created by your outlook and mindset about the situation. However, that does not detract from the fact that help should always exist from those governing and managing the sporting landscape. Systems, precautions, and opportunities should always be made available to those who need it, particularly before they even know just how much it is needed, and before it is too late and they are completely lost on the island. Proactive approaches and measures should exist, and steps put in place to prevent anyone ever getting close to feeling like they are stranded on a desert island.



## Manifesto for Governing Bodies to Aid in Sport Transitions – Ollie A.J. Carter

- Get rid of early specialisation; encourage early diversification through fun and play.
- Young aspiring athletes should be a member of as many different clubs and sports as their heart desires and time can manage.
- Only begin to support young talent when in their later teens and when clearly wanting to specialise and choose that sport to take to the next level.
- Potentially even restrict young athletes from progressing to more elite/senior level competitions and training programs until in later teen years.
- Implement/encourage light “social/fun” cross-training into training programs. For example, once-a-week athletes must go away and do other sports with other clubs, again with the purpose to be fun and social. Nothing serious.
- Continue to offer transitional lifestyle advisors to athletes 3-6 months post-transition away from sport.
- Encourage the idea that a transition away from sport is almost like a second life. An opportunity to pursue some new things.

## Agony Aunt Mailbox

Dear Auntie,

I'm reaching out to you today because I found myself grappling with a mix of emotion as I approach the inevitable decision to retire from professional judo. For years, judo has been not just a sport but a way of life for me. It shaped my identity, instilled discipline and provide me with countless opportunities for growth and self-discovery. However, as my body reminds me more frequently of the toll of years of training and competing, I know that the time has come to move on.

While part of me is relieved at the prospect of no longer enduring the physical demands and the constant pressure to perform at the highest level, another part of me feels lost and uncertain about what lies ahead. Judo has been my passion and my purpose for so long that the thought of leaving it behind has me feeling empty. I've always defined myself by my athletic abilities and achievements and the idea of stepping away from that world feels like I'm losing a part of myself.

Additionally, the thought of transitioning into a new career or lifestyle is overwhelming as I'm not sure where to begin or what path to take. I know that retiring from professional sports is a part of the journey and I want to embrace this new chapter with optimism and excitement. However, I'm finding it challenging to let go of the past and embrace the future with the same level of enthusiasm.

Yours, “Lost”

...

Dear “Lost”

Thank you so much for your letter. I could feel what you are going through at the moment thanks to your honest and detailed story I really appreciate it.

I would like you to imagine you have a huge gift box in front of you which is from your judo. Judo gave you the box celebrating your retirement. In that gift box, you will find all you need for your next chapter. You can just take it out from the box and Judo will answer all your questions and it will be still with you.

You can open the gift box when you are ready. There is no rush. You might want to explore other challenges in your life which can give you the similar feelings that judo gave you. Just go for it, you are young and smart.

Will you remember my letter when things are not going as well as expected? When you need someone to give you some good advice, please go to your bathroom and look at the mirror. The person you can see in the mirror can help you.

If not, send me another letter.

Yours, Auntie

## A Physical Thing – Jennifer Wright

As I gently hold the pencil in my hand, a calm energy and fresh smell evolves. A new chapter on paper, a messiness ready to explode. Swirling fast and slow, lighter and darker, enjoyment, curious and unpredictable. Life. A feeling of colourful surprises, creative and alive.

## Thoughts on Sport Retirement – Ollie A.J. Carter

It's a brand-new adventure! An opportunity to go and do things I never could do before, or had sacrificed before. Just a new exciting and challenging chapter in the book of my life. Maybe even a new sequel book to the one that I had lived. The main sporting storyline is over, and new ones will begin, but call-backs and tie-ins to previous chapters and events are certain to occur.

## Haiku – Gabriella Wood

Up the mountains,  
Seeking a new adventure,  
Walking the path.

First published in 2024.

An eBook version is free to download at <https://beyondthegame.stir.ac.uk/>

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