

Reality and Dreams

A Comparison of Elite Athletes' Lived Career Paths with Young Talented Athletes' Imagined Career Paths

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Abstract

The road to international sporting success is paved with difficult transitions. The present study is a qualitative in-depth interview study with 16 athletes. We first asked eight *elite level* athletes to provide a biographical description of their career path. We then asked eight *young talented* athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career and invited them to portray their imagined path. The elite athletes portrayed their career path as full of challenging transitions and existential concerns, and readily emphasized a number of internal and external resources as prerequisites for their successful careers. The young athletes portrayed an easy path with few hardships and emphasized internal resources over external ones. The study sets as a question for future research whether young athletes' naïve and pervasive optimism is a cause for concern or an important internal resource for their further career development

Key words: athletic career paths, transitions, career challenges and resources, talent development, youth sport, athletes' existential concerns

Introduction

The road to international sporting success is paved with success and failure, joy and hardship, mindless repetitions and existential concerns. Along this path are a number of transitions within sport as well as outside of it. Managing these transitions successfully is a prerequisite for a long and successful career, while failure to cope with the demands of transitions may lead to premature career termination (Stambulova, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009).

Athletic pathways are dynamic and complex entities that are often unique to the individual athlete and culturally situated in the sense that national and sport specific cultures hold important implications in terms of available pathways (Storm, Henriksen & Christensen, 2012). Although most athletic careers go through a number of main stages, such as initiation, development, specialization and mastery (e.g., Bloom, 1985) it has been suggested that expert athletes progress through unique and non-linear trajectories towards sporting expertise because each athlete's acquisition of expertise is limited by a unique dynamics of individual, task and environmental constraints (Phillips, Davids, Renshaw & Portus, 2010).

Although athletic career paths must be construed as messy and non-linear and seem continuous, athletes tend to describe their careers in terms of significant events (e.g. a team selection) or non-events that were expected but never occurred (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). An event that plays a critical role in the overall athletic career is the transition from talented junior to the elite senior level. This transition is described as a very difficult one and many athletes acknowledge failure to cope with it (Stambulova et al., 2009). Among the most prominent demands involved in this transition are learning to balance sporting goals with other life goals, reorganizing your lifestyle to fit life as an elite athlete, finding your individual path in sport, coping with the pressure of selections, winning prestige among peers, judges and coaches, and maintaining positive relationships (Stambulova, 2009). In a Danish study (Storm et al, 2012) elite athletes highlighted as the most crucial characteristic of this career transition “the shift in the social logic of the sport from fun, enjoyment and being together to seriousness, competition and investment” (p. 216). Such critical transitions and other events of the athletic career often coincide with transitions in other spheres of life such as the academic/vocational or social sphere (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The transition from junior to senior level is an example of a normative athletic career transition in the sense that it is predictable and a transition all elite athletes have to go through. Athletes very often also go through a number of non-normative and unpredictable transitions such as injuries, changing teams or coach, selections and deselections. Normative and non-normative transitions are turning points in an athlete's career and hold the potential for both crisis and growth (Stambulova et al., 2009). Being well prepared for the demands of a transition exerts major positive influence on the athlete's ability to cope with these demands (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). In an in-depth narrative single-case study (Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012), a French elite fencer described her career in three stages: (a) a stage of equilibrium between family life, sports and studies, (b) a stage of primacy to the sports career, and (c) a stage of stability due to living as part of a couple. Only one stage solely focused on the sport career, and even in the stage of primacy to the sports career her personal sense of wellbeing was highly related to the psychosocial sphere of her development and to support from the non-sport environment.

The heartfelt ambition to succeed in sport sometimes creates stress and anxiety in athletes related to uncertainty about the future outcome of the venture. Arguably, successes and setbacks may prompt athletes to ponder greater existential questions in relation to their life as athletes. Existential psychology deals with fundamental issues of human existence (Rees & Freeman, 2007), which are often pondered in transitional periods. In sport, the existential-psychological perspective (Nesti, 2004) is valuable in understanding athletes' aspirations, hopes and fears and how these affect their sporting trajectories. Existential concerns prominent during the transition to elite level sport could be *meaning* (what is the greater meaning of my doing sport?), *anxiety* (what if I am injured or deselected?), *isolation* (how do I find my own path?) and the pressure of total *responsibility* (the realization that reaching my goal is ultimately up to me).

A successful transition in any stage of the athletic career takes place when the athlete is able to develop and effectively use the necessary resources to cope with the demands of the transition. Widely accepted career transition models (Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) have in common the idea that coping strategies are central to the transition process. A match between an athlete's resources and the demands of transition will allow an athlete to enjoy a successful transition whereas a mis-

match is likely to result in a crisis transition. These transition resources are internal and external factors that help athletes manage the transition.

Internal resources include an athlete's previous experience, motivation, and also a number of psychological characteristics and skills. Martindale & Mortimer (2011) assert that the primary task of a talent development environment is to equip the athletes with a holistic skills package containing "a wide variety of cognitive, perceptual and motor skills" (p.71). Recent studies have investigated young athletes as a specific group, and demonstrated that a specific set of psychological characteristics is associated with making a successful transition into elite sport, acknowledging that the skills needed to reach the elite level are different from the skills needed to succeed at the elite level (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen, Alfermann & Christensen, 2012) and that we therefore need to make a distinction between the psychological characteristics of excellence (PCE) and the psychological characteristics of *developing* excellence (PCDE) (MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010). On the list of PCDEs are motivation, commitment, goal setting, quality practice, imagery, realistic performance evaluations, coping under pressure, and social skills.

External resources refer to support from the environment. Young athletes struggling to manage a transition to the elite level benefit from social, organizational and financial support, and supportive relationships affect the athletes directly by positively influencing cognitive and behavioral outcomes, and indirectly by moderating the negative effects of stress (Rees & Freeman, 2007). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that it is not only the sporting environment that plays an important role in supporting athletes, but an athlete's non-sport micro-environments (such as school, family and peer groups) and the macro-environment (e.g., federation, educational system, media and national culture). Athletic talent development environments (the dynamic system comprising the athletes' micro- and macro environments) are more successful in supporting their athletes during transitions when the school, club, national team and other micro-environments integrate their efforts; when sporting goals are supported by the wider environment; when focus is on long-term development; and when the environment has a strong and coherent organizational culture (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007).

Athletic career research has mainly adopted a retrospective approach where the young athletes' challenges are seen through the lens of the experienced athlete who either made it to the elite level or did not. We

know little of young athletes' expectations towards the progression, events and transitions of their career path. Knowledge of the degree to which young athletes' expectations match elite athletes' lived experiences and existential concerns may deepen our understanding of the motivations and challenges involved in pursuing an athletic career. In the present study we asked eight elite athletes to look back at their journey to the elite level and provide biographical descriptions of their career paths. We also asked eight *young talented* athletes to imagine they were at the end of successful sport careers and invited them to provide biographical descriptions of their imagined career paths. The objectives of the study are 1) to provide a description of the challenges and resources experienced by eight elite level athletes during their careers; 2) to provide a description of the challenges eight young talented athletes imagine they will face during their careers and the resources and support they expect to need and receive; and 3) in the discussion to compare the lived experiences of the elite athletes with the career expectations of the young talented athletes.

Method

The study was designed as a descriptive, explorative and qualitative in-depth interview study with 16 athletes. We asked eight elite level athletes to tell *retrospective progression narratives*, that is to look back and tell the story of their careers from the introduction into their main sport to the present time. We then asked eight young talented athletes to tell *prospective progression narratives*, i.e. to imagine they had reached their ultimate sporting goals and were now at the end of a sports career as world class athletes, and to tell the story of their careers from the introduction to their main sport via the present time and to that target point in the future.

We took a biographical approach to the study, because "all human phenomena are temporal, historical, and personal" (Giorgi, 1975 p. 101). This allowed us to understand single athletes' way of making sense of the world in which they live and act. The research design was phenomenologically grounded in the sense that we aimed for the athletes' stories to include concrete examples based on experiences of learning situations, dilemmas and decisions that were important for the athletes' self-understanding. We contend that telling tales from a point in the future will be

valuable in eliciting what the young athletes believe their lives as elite athletes will be like and what it will take for them to reach the elite level in their sport.

Participants

The participants in this study were 16 athletes divided into two groups both with equal gender distribution. The first group consisted of eight elite level athletes who were either at the top of their career, at the end of it, or recently retired. These athletes were all included in the top support category by the Danish elite sport organization, Team Denmark, as “world-class athletes” (top eight at world championships or Olympics). Their age varied from 26 to 40 years old. The second group consisted of eight young prospective elite athletes who were recognized as “talented” but who had not yet made it to senior elite level. These athletes were selected in cooperation with the national coach of the specific sport. Their age varied between 15 and 18 years.

Seven of the participating athletes competed in individual sports (swimming, orienteering), and nine athletes competed in team sports (handball, football) (see tables 1 and 2, below).

Procedure and instruments

We sent the athletes an email with an explanation of the nature of the project and an invitation to take part in a qualitative research interview. Soon after, we contacted the athletes by telephone in order to facilitate a trusting relationship (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008), and made an appointment for the time and location of the interview. All the athletes accepted the invitation. The second author conducted all interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that they consisted of an initial open-ended invitation to recount biographical stories followed by more specific questions. In the first part of the interview, the participants were allowed to tell their story without major influence from the interviewer to gain insight into what the participants themselves found important. When the athletes finished their stories, depending on how detailed these stories were, the interviewer would ask for examples and elaborations. In cases where entire themes were missing, the interviewer would ask more specifically, e.g., “You include very few people in your

tale, are there persons who had an impact on your career that you would like to mention?"

The elite athletes were asked a few days before the interviews by telephone to draw a timeline representing his or her life history in sport and to include important events and significant persons. This ensured that the athletes looked back and refreshed their memory. In the interviews, the timeline served as the opening question, where the athletes were asked to elaborate their biographical tale in a chronological manner.

The young talented athletes were also asked to prepare for the interview. Because we expected that drawing a timeline for an imagined career would be too difficult a task, they were informed that the interviewer would ask them to imagine they were at the end of their sport career, having reached their ultimate sport goals, and ask for an elaborate outline of this imagined career including important events and significant persons. As an opening question, we asked the athletes to tell us about a particularly memorable event from their sporting career. We then asked them to imagine they were at the end of a career as world-class athletes in their sport and asked them to tell the story of their career in a chronological manner. During the interview the young athletes were encouraged to use a pen and paper to draw a timeline in order for them to keep track of their story.

At the interview the athletes signed an informed consent form. The interviews varied from 45 to 120 minutes (average 75 minutes for the elite athletes and 53 minutes for the young athletes). They were tape-recorded with the athletes' permission and transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, all 16 athletes received their own transcripts for approval or modification. All the participants approved the transcriptions.

Data analysis

The analysis of data proceeded in three phases employing three qualitative methodical procedures: field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), meaning condensation, and a thematic content analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). First, and after each interview, the interviewer wrote field notes on the content and situation of the interview. The field notes served as a preliminary analysis of the data (Spradley, 1980). Second, meaning condensation entailed a summarizing of longer sequences of interview text into shorter texts explicating main meaning units (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Through content analysis, these meaning units were

labelled and grouped in nodes. The nodes and corresponding meaning units were discussed among the authors. The final node tree was developed to reflect both meaning units and the previous research that inspired the interview guide. This process was done separately for each group. Only after analyzing each group in its own right did we compare the retrospective career stories of elite athletes with the prospective career tales of young talented athletes.

Findings

In the following we first present the findings based on the elite athletes' biographic stories and proceed to present findings based on the young athletes' imagined career paths. For each participating group we first present results in the form of a table to give the reader an overview. The tables are based on the first parts of the interviews, where the interviewer only asked for examples and elaborations and did not ask any questions that could direct the athlete. Next, we present the results in further depth supported by quotes from the interview material. In the discussion we compare the findings from the two groups.

Elite athletes looking back

Table 1 presents a summary of the eight elite athletes' biographic stories. Based on the analysis of data as well as on the literature that inspired the interview guide, we focus on three main themes: 1) the transitions and other challenges the athletes met on their way to the elite level; 2) the internal resources the athletes emphasized as important in managing the demands they met; and 3) the external resources and social support that they considered to have been necessary for their successful career.

Table 1 *A summary of the biographic stories of eight elite level athletes looking back at their successful careers*

	<i>Challenges and transitions</i>	<i>Internal resources</i>	<i>External resources</i>
<i>Thomas, 25 Orienteering</i>	Dual career in sport and education, entering senior sport, changing clubs, relationship problems, injuries, performance setbacks, traveling too much	Willpower, realistic self-image, critical approach, high self-esteem, awareness to follow his own goals	Family, friends in and outside sport, girlfriend, sport psychologist. Training with different clubs and nations
<i>Sanne, 28 Orienteering</i>	Dual career in sport and education, entering senior sport, moving around, injuries, temporary performance setbacks	Disciplined, a hard worker, time management skills, good structure in daily life	Family, boyfriend, mentor, older elite runners who help out. An open environment with training across age groups and performance levels
<i>Jeppe, 33 Swimming</i>	Moving abroad, winning medals only to feel added pressure, performance setbacks	Disciplined, can handle hard training, courage to follow his dream	Family, girlfriend, coach, teammates. A small tight environment where he knows everybody
<i>Charlotte, 30 Handball</i>	Dual career in sport and education, moving away from home, changing clubs and coaches, relationship issues, injuries, deselections, performance setbacks	Disciplined, resilience, high self-esteem, goal-directed,	Family, friends, boyfriend teammates, helpful older players at the club. The club became a second home
<i>Maja, 31 Handball</i>	Dual career in sport and education, moving away from home, changing clubs, relationship problems, injuries, performance setbacks	Disciplined, resilience, a hard worker, time management and planning skills, high self-esteem	Family, friends, boyfriend, teammates, helpful older players at the club. A welcoming club environment
<i>Rie, 31 Handball</i>	Dual career in sport and education, entering senior sport, changing coaches, injuries, deselections, performance setbacks	Willpower, planning skills, able to bounce back from injuries, goal-directed, faith	Family, boyfriend teammates, coach, sport psychologist, supportive elite players at the club. A welcoming and honest club environment

<i>Matias, 40 Football</i>	Moving away from home, moving abroad, changing clubs, changing coaches, injuries, illness, performance setbacks	Disciplined, will-power, goal-directed, a hard worker, time management and planning skills, faith in own abilities, focus	Girlfriend, family, supportive elite players at the club. A welcoming club environment
<i>Malthe, 36 Football</i>	Dual career of sport and work, moving away from home, the culture shock of living abroad, changing coach, injuries, performance setbacks	Disciplined, will-power, faith, able to overcome challenges while focusing on the goal, thought control	Family, girlfriend, teammates, sport psychologist, one older player who became a mentor. An open and honest club environment where you can feel at home

When the eight elite athletes looked back at their successful careers, they mentioned a whole range of *transitions and challenges* they have had to cope with during their careers. The athletes described the transitions as filled with hardship and challenges, but also as a natural and inevitable part of an elite sporting career that an athlete has to go through and learn from. The transitions included both normative transitions such as entering sport at the senior level and moving away from home, and non-normative transitions such as injuries, changing club or coach, and de-selections. Further, they mentioned transitions not only in the sporting domain but also in other life spheres, such as in relationships and education. Malthe describes moving away from home and changing club:

It was really tough in the beginning. Sometimes I would call my old teammates and more or less end up crying on the phone. I remember telling them that things did not work out, that I couldn't take it anymore, that the tactics were too tight with no room to breathe.

The elite athletes' stories clearly demonstrate that even success had costs and was something they had to learn how to deal with. Jeppe gives the following account of how success only led to added pressure:

After I won the European championships I felt people expected more from me. And I had a period where things did not work out well. That was really hard, mentally, because I felt I owed it to all the journalists to give an answer as to why I did not perform.

Most of the athletes have experienced periods with injuries and indeed all the athletes emphasize periods of performance setbacks as major chal-

lenges to deal with. These setbacks are described as a natural part of athletic development. Rie recounted how an injury almost made her quit the sport but ended up teaching her how to handle adversity:

I had only just won my place as a starter for the first team and recently been selected for the national team when I suffered a long-term injury. I felt like my life had come to an end. I became jealous and sad. With the help of a sport psychologist I learned to accept and handle such adversity and to fight my way back. Today I think it helped me to a long and successful career.

In their stories, the eight elite athletes place great emphasis on *internal resources*. They all stress that an array of psychosocial characteristics and skills have been important catalysts that have helped them to go through their career successfully.

Life as a talented or elite athlete includes a busy schedule and many hard choices. Indeed all the elite athletes report periods of high life stress. Therefore most of the elite level athletes clearly express that time management and planning skills, the courage to prioritize without being afraid to let people down, and the ability to create and keep a good structure in daily life are important skills. Mathias describes periods of his career like this:

I had to be able to manage all kinds of different demands, because the sport was important but so was school, and at some point I also had to take a driver's license. Those days almost knocked me over. I was pursuing goals from seven in the morning until half past ten in the evening. If you are not truly committed, I think you will quit right there. And this was only one period out of many like it.

Other internal resources that are frequent in the elite athletes' tales relate to their ambitions and desire to become the best. The athletes mention that being disciplined, goal-directed and a hard worker and having will-power are essential characteristics on the path to the elite level. This also includes a realistic self-image and a humble attitude towards your own ability and towards other athletes, as Rie explains:

It is never good enough. Even today I can still have the feeling that I do not reach my full potential as a handballer. There is always something I can improve. And even today I always remind myself that I can learn from other players even if I am better. I guess thinking like this is quite tough but also necessary.

The elite athletes also emphasize self-esteem as an important characteristic. In the tales, self-esteem includes faith that you can reach your goals despite setbacks. It also includes finding your own path in sport and believing that you can make the right choices in a world where many people give you (sometimes contrasting) advice. Thomas explains:

I have learned to make my own decisions and trust in my ability to make the right ones, to take responsibility for my own decisions. To make them work. I no longer just follow a coach's program; I examine it critically and adapt it.

Finally, the elite athletes considered resilience, the ability to bounce back from injuries and performance setbacks, to be a key factor in their success. Several athletes mention that they met several talented athletes on their path who did not possess this ability and who therefore never made it to the top.

The elite athletes all agree that *external resources* are important and that social support from significant others helped them deal with difficult times during transitions. Such resources are both inside the sporting domain and outside of it. Outside the sport, most athletes mention the family and partner as key support persons. The athletes state that key support persons outside the sporting domain have supported them regardless of their performances. This provided the athletes with a much-needed personal space.

Inside the sport environment, team members, older players and coaches played important roles in terms of providing support. Rie describes her teammates' dual roles as friends and rivals thus: "All my team members are parts of my development and who I am. We have shared joys and hard times. But they are also rivals, and strong competition at every training has made me stronger."

Older athletes in the environment were important role models and often led the way by example. Several athletes mention a specific older player assuming the role of a mentor towards them. The relationship with the mentor always evolved into a long-term friendship that in most cases continued even in their life after sport. Several athletes also mentioned that a sport psychology consultant played a key role in their career. The athletes who attributed most importance to a sport psychology consultant typically described long-term relationships over several years where consultations often included existential issues, as explained by Malthe:

My sport psychologist taught me to focus on the important things and just accept all the noise. This lesson has followed me throughout my career. Also he has been the person I could talk to about everything, including the stuff that I could never tell my coach and my teammates.

Finally, and beyond specific support persons, the elite athletes highlight a good and supportive club or team atmosphere as key to understanding their long-term motivation and commitment to the sport. More specifically they mention an open training environment in which the athletes would train together across age groups, performance levels and even nationalities; a close environment where everybody knows everybody; and an honest and welcoming environment where the athletes felt at home, as described by Maja: “The club was simply a nice place to hang out and talk and have fun. I remember the club cafeteria as a preferred haunt where I could most often find my friends.”

The eight elite athletes portrayed a career path filled with joy and hardship. Joys, although not the focus of the present paper, included reaching goals, performing at their best, selections and making friends for life. Challenges included setbacks, deselections, handling dual careers, relationships problems etc. The athletes told of challenging transitions and readily emphasized that a number of internal and external resources had been prerequisites for their success in sport.

Young talented athletes looking back from the future

The eight young and talented athletes were asked to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport and to tell the story of how they got there. Table 2 sums up their stories in terms of the challenges and transitions they met along the way and the internal and external resources that helped them overcome these challenges.

The young athletes generally told very linear stories, where one step would follow the next and almost inevitably lead to a glorious career. The young athletes rarely saw any major obstacles or even bumps on the road. In this respect, *transitions and challenges* only played a very small part in the young talented athletes’ stories. When the athletes did talk about difficult transitions, these were most often normative predictable transitions they were currently facing, such as moving away from home and changing clubs. When they talked of these transitions it was often with a high degree of lightness. As an example, Alex was sure his mother would move along with him to support him during the first years of his football career abroad:

My mother moved with me to Holland to support and help me. And when I went to England, it was also important for me to have some family with me, because otherwise it's just about football. ... there are many players who become compulsive gamblers because they have nothing else to do, and they have all this money and nothing to do with it. So my mom has always moved around with me.

Table 2 *A summary of the imagined biographic stories of eight young talented athletes who were asked to imagine they were at the end of a successful career and to tell the tale of their career.*

	Challenges and transitions	Internal resources	External resources
Mie, 15 Orienteering	Dual career in sport and education, moving away from home, a short down-period only to gain clarity	Goal-directed, able to train a lot, able to find fun and meaning in hard training	Family
Morten, 15 Orienteering	Education	Goal-directed, able to handle fear	Family
Vilhelm, 18 Swimming	Dual career in sport and education, moving away from home, finding a job	Goal-directed, able to train a lot	Training facilities
Jeanne, 17 Swimming	Education, changing clubs, an easy-to-deal-with injury, illness	Disciplined, willing to sacrifice normal life as a teenager, able to train a lot	Family
Eva, 16 Handball	Moving away from home, changing clubs, finding a job, a small injury	Strong, able to train a lot	Family
Sylvia, 16 Handball	Dual career in sport and education, moving away from home,	Disciplined, able to train a lot, faith in own ability	Family, teammates
Alex, 16 Football	Changing clubs, choose freely between clubs, moving abroad	Fast to adapt to a new culture, able to train a lot	Family
Oliver, 16 Football	Dual career in sport and education, changing clubs, moving away from home, competition, being "benched"	Able to train a lot, always setting goals, faith in own abilities	Family, teammates

A similar lightness is demonstrated in the way Morten thinks about combining careers in education and sport with time for fun and socializing:

I always prioritized school and did well in school. And when I lacked motivation a national team trip or a change of club could always motivate me. And sometimes I would take a break from the sport and just do some social stuff. That kept me hungry.

In the athletes' imagined careers, everything comes easy. Alex is mainly concerned about not being corrupted by all the money he is going to make, and Morten will easily manage dual careers, choose freely between different clubs, and take breaks from the sport and still maintain a high level. This easy-going air of lightness is common for all the talented athletes' stories. They rarely talk of adversity and when they do they usually provide very general descriptions and see adversity as a good learning experience. In the words of Mie: "I guess I maybe had a down period or something. You have to go down to learn to get back up. And I came back with more clarity and motivation."

In terms of *internal resources* to overcome the challenges associated with career transitions, the young athletes describe themselves as highly motivated and able to work hard. They all stressed that they always managed to find meaning and fun in training, as described by Mie:

In my view training should be fun most of the time. Of course, a rare once in a while you may have to run early in the morning in rain and cold and that may not be fun, but I still managed to always like it and to see the meaning of it.

Training a lot seems to be a creed all the young athletes live by and they all emphasize this aspect in their stories. Often they even define being able to train more than their competitors as directly linked to their success. Despite the hard training, none of the athletes speak of injuries as sources of hardship. Their tales portray a belief that they are made of special stuff and therefore not subject to the same problems as other athletes. They also mention attributes such as self-confidence, as described by Oliver: "When I changed club it was very important that I kept believing I could become one of the best. I did and it really boosted my self-confidence." No athletes talk of periods of lacking confidence.

In general, the athletes attributed much more importance to personality characteristics and internal resources than to *external resources*. They generally expected to be able to reach the elite level on their own steam.

When they talked of social support, this was most often limited to the family and in a few cases to some supportive teammates. Jeanne gives an example of the unconditional support provided by her family: “My grandparents and parents have supported me all the way and they always will. So that’s just great.” The club and team environment was not attributed much importance except for facilities, as described by Vilhelm: “Transportation always worked well, training facilities were always great and no one around was ever lazy.” Again this quote portrays the lightness and easy-come attitude of many of the young athletes.

Discussion

In the present study we asked eight elite athletes to look back at their career and provide a biographical description of their path to the elite level. We also asked eight young talented athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport and invited them to provide a biographical description of their imagined career path. Although the athletes’ stories do not provide a final and true account of the way of the world, asking people to narrate stories stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). The study showed a significant difference in both the content and structure of the lived and the imagined stories. At first glance, we notice that the stories of the elite athletes looking back at their careers are longer and much more detailed than those of the young athletes. But the differences are more profound than that.

The stories of the elite athletes generally confirm research on athletic careers. When asked to draw a timeline and to chronologically describe their sporting career, the elite athletes portray a whole career and whole person perspective (Stambulova et al., 2009) by emphasizing the link between development and events inside and outside of sport and the importance of social support throughout their career, even in the parts of their career where they are most focused on their sport (Debois et al., 2012). They further mention a number of normative and non-normative transitions both inside and outside of sport, such as entering senior elite sport, moving away from home, changing clubs and coaches, going abroad, injuries and performance setbacks. These transitions are described as turning phases that are associated with stress and uncertainty. This finding corresponds well with previous studies of athletic careers

(e.g., Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008; Stambulova, 2000, Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The elite athletes portray their path to the elite level as very challenging and filled with existential concerns such as finding meaning and finding your own path in sport. The elite athletes also struggle to combine careers in sport and education or sport and work, which confirms previous findings that dual careers are stressful (e.g., Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Henriksen & Christensen, 2013). Finally it is clear from the diversity of the athletes' stories that athletic careers are unique and non-linear (Phillips et al., 2010)

When describing their imagined career, the young talented athletes portrayed paths that were much less troublesome. Their stories were linear in the sense that one step followed the next without major obstacles in a straight trajectory towards a glorious career in sport. The young athletes focused on their sport careers and rarely emphasized the link between the sport and non-sport development as important. Transitions and challenges were given only little attention in the stories. The transitions mentioned were most often either 1) past transitions they had already faced or ones with which they were currently preoccupied (e.g., a change of clubs they were in the middle of), or b) wishes for the future including predictable transitions (e.g., a debut for the national team). These athletes are still young and have yet to grasp the reality of the journeys they are embarking on, which is clearly visible in the simplicity and lightness of their perspective. As examples, Alex expects his mother to leave her life in Denmark only to follow him abroad while he pursues his dream of becoming a professional footballer, and Mie says she might have a small down period, only to learn to get back up.

The tales of the elite athletes clearly demonstrate that a number of resources are necessary for coping with transitional and other challenges, which lends support to accepted career transition models (Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In terms of internal resources, the athletes mention a range of psychosocial characteristics and skills such as time management skills, willpower, realistic self-evaluations, self-esteem, discipline, willingness to work hard, and resilience. This finding supports the notion that a holistic skills package is associated with making a successful transition into elite sport (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen et al., 2012; MacNamara et al., 2010; Martindale & Mortimer, 2011). The skills emphasized by the elite athletes are a mix of what MacNamara and colleagues (2010) have termed psychological skills of excellence (PCE) and those of developing excellence (PCDE).

Again, the young talented athletes use fewer words to describe the internal resources that helped them manage a successful transition to the elite level. While the elite athletes talk of dedication, prioritizing and planning, the young athletes talk about having fun, motivation and drive to reach their dream goals. They also talk about being able to train a lot, which they see as a gift, as something given, which will separate them from their competitors.

External resources and social support is described as a *sine qua non* (i.e., without it, no career) in the elite athletes' tales, which supports the general notion that social support plays a significant role in an athlete's career path (e.g., Kay, 2000; Rees & Freeman, 2007; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004; Wylleman, De Knop, Verdet & Cecic-Erpic, 2007). Again and again they underscore the importance of experiencing support and understanding from the immediate non-sporting environment, particularly from families, partners and friends, even in the periods where sport is the all-dominating focus for the athletes (Debois et al., 2012). In terms of the sporting environment, all of the elite athletes on their own behalf stress the importance of specific persons (coach, a mentor, teammates) but also of the club atmosphere. The elite athletes describe welcoming, honest and open environments in which athletes support each other and share their knowledge, environments that invited them to train across boundaries, for example with athletes who are older or younger or even with athletes from different clubs or nations. They described how feeling at home in a supportive club environment became a significant reason for their sustained engagement in sport. These findings support the holistic ecological approach to talent development in sport, which underscores the role of an athlete's entire environment (sport and non-sport, micro and macro) in supporting athletic development (Henriksen et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Martindale et al., 2007). More specifically the stories of the elite athletes lend support to recently suggested features of successful environments, such as proximal role models; training groups with supportive relationships; support of sporting goals by the wider environment; focus on long-term development; and a strong organizational culture dominated by values of openness (Henriksen, 2010).

Whereas the elite athletes describe their careers as a highly social affair, the young talented athletes expect their career to be an individual accomplishment. The young talented athletes give less attention in their tales to social support and the role of the environment. They briefly mention the importance of support from the family, perhaps because this support

is important to them in their current developmental phase. Whereas the elite athletes describe a good athletic environment in terms of the atmosphere and the people in it, the young talented athletes tend to describe a good environment primarily in terms of good facilities.

In sum, when the eight elite athletes tell the tale of their sporting career, they portray a path that is paved with success and failure, joy and hardship, and tough transitions; a path they could not have travelled without a number of internal resources, a high degree of social support and an accommodating athletic environment. When the young athletes tell the tales of their imagined careers, on the other hand, they portray an easy and simple path with few hardships and little need of support. Although some of the young athletes did mention injuries, transitions and sacrifices, there was a distinct air of lightheartedness to this part of the tales and they often used tales of such challenges mainly to illustrate that they were able to handle adversity.

The young athletes' low awareness of the forthcoming career challenges is an important finding. The lightness of the young athletes' tales can perhaps be understood in terms of general human heuristics and biases. Kahneman (2011) has aptly demonstrated a number of basic flaws in human rationality. While most of these cognitive biases in human thinking are less relevant to the present study, Kahneman provides an account of two basic biases in human thinking that is helpful to our understanding. The first is *overconfidence*. Humans, and particularly experts, are prone to overestimate how well they understand the world and their control over it. This may explain the young athletes' self-centered career descriptions. The second is a *pervasive optimistic bias* that includes "the planning fallacy" (a tendency to overestimate the benefits and underestimate the costs of projects). No doubt the young athletes are unrealistic, optimistic and underestimate the potential costs of pursuing a career in elite sport. According to career research, this overoptimism is fundamentally problematic, since athletes who are well prepared for a transition are more likely to succeed in managing that transition (Stambulova et al., 2009). On the other hand, positive psychology research has demonstrated that optimists are more psychologically resilient, have stronger immune systems, and are more prone to happiness and well-being than their more realistic counterparts (Kahneman, 2011; Mruk, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this way we could consider the naïve optimism of the young athletes as a gift and ask ourselves if they would ever embark on an elite athletic career if they knew the whole truth in advance.

The present paper represents an attempt at a novel approach in career research, but one that is not without methodological problems. It is important to be cautious and aware of these issues when interpreting the results. First, it is reasonable to expect a fundamental difference in perspective and level of reflection between a group of experienced athletes and a group of young athletes. Second, the elite and prospective elite athletes were not given the same task before the interview and thus prepared differently. Third, it is reasonable to expect that it is easier for athletes to talk about their past and present than about their future (Stambulova, 2010). For these reasons there is a chance that the findings may be influenced by a fundamental attributional bias (i.e., overacting on personal assets and underreacting on the situational factors; Nussbaum, Trope & Liberman, 2003). We encourage future researchers to develop ways to overcome such methodological issues and continue to investigate the nature and consequences of young athletes' dreams and expectations towards their future career. One such future research direction would be a longitudinal study of the same young athletes to compare their lived careers with their imagined "dream" careers. This might help us determine whether the young athletes' naïve and pervasive optimism is a cause for concern or an important internal resource for their further career development.

In conclusion, we would like to point to some applied perspectives. It remains beyond any doubt that young athletes traveling the hard road to the elite level in their sport benefit from support during their journeys. Such support may take many forms and shapes and have many purposes. In the present study it became particularly evident that developing athletes struggle with a number of existential concerns linked to their choice of career path, such as fame (immortality), balancing sport and education (finding their identity), bouncing back from injuries and setbacks (responsibility), and others.

On the one hand, it would be tempting to follow established guidelines from career assistance programs and conclude that the young talented athletes are in dire need of better preparation for the career transitions and challenges that lie ahead. Without doubt, the young athletes seem poorly prepared, and such poor preparation has been linked to crisis transitions. On the other hand, we also need to appreciate the advantages of the unworried and naïve optimism that these young athletes demonstrate.

This dominance of existential concerns in combination with the young athletes' optimism suggests to us that an important part of career

support services could be an existentially guided long-term mentorship with a sport psychology consultant. This would allow the athlete and mentor to address the existential issues that arise along the way without diminishing the athlete's optimism by dealing with hardship in advance. As a second strategy the present study points to the value of creating athletic talent development environments with proximal role models and a supportive atmosphere. Whether such initiatives will positively influence young athletes' long term commitment to their sport and success in managing career transitions remains to be determined.

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