



Elite athletic career as a context for life design



Tatiana V. Ryba^{a,*}, Noora J. Ronkainen^b, Harri Selänne^c

^a KIHU – Research Institute for Olympic Sports, Jyväskylä, Finland

^b Department of Sport and Physical Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China

^c LIKES – Research Centre for Sport and Health Sciences, Jyväskylä, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Against a theoretical backdrop of narrative career construction, this article argues for the cultural constitution of life-designing processes in and through sport. A narrative case study approach is used to explore the culturally infused, gendered construction of elite athletic careers from the life story perspective. One Finnish, male, professional hockey player (age 29) and one Baltic, female, amateur orienteer (age 27) participated in a series of three individual interviews, generating approximately five interview hours per athlete. Both participants drew upon the performance narrative plot of an exemplary athletic career to make sense of their sporting experiences, life choices, and career behaviors. Further analysis of gendered career narrations in the context of participants' lives extended contextualized understandings of career practices, discursive resources and cultural constraints of the life design at a particular socio-historical juncture. The present study elucidates the complex social, cultural, and gendered underpinnings of athletic career, as well as the ways in which agentic individuals create novel meanings in bringing authenticity to their life through the athletic pursuit.

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades, there has been a substantial growth in the psychological research on athletes' career development, within-career transitions, and athletic retirement, as well as career counseling for athletes. The extant studies examined, for example, the developmental pathways of an athletic career (e.g., Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010); challenges faced by athletes transitioning from junior to senior sports (e.g., Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008; Stambulova, Franck, & Weibull, 2012); transition experiences of retiring/retired athletes and the quality of adaptation to life after sport (for review see Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013); and the provision of athletic and post-athletic career support services (e.g., North & Lavallee, 2004; Stambulova, 2012). Moreover, while a body of literature on life skills development in sport is also expansive (for review see Gould & Carson, 2008), very few researchers have examined how elite athletes narrate their sporting careers and how those narrations may or may not relate to their lives outside the world of sport. There is a lack of understanding, therefore, of how the elite athletic career serves as a context for mobilizing the life course.

This paper is developed against the theoretical backdrop of career construction and the recent rethinking of vocational development as a subjectively meaningful path of designing one's life (e.g., Guichard, Pouyaud, De Calan, & Dumora, 2012; Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009). Central to our discussion is the notion of a subjective career, which emphasizes individual experiences of the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sport_psych@hotmail.com (T.V. Ryba).

career unfolding (Ellig & Thatchenkery, 1996; Savickas, 2005) and provides the means to think about living authentically in complex ways. It is particularly interesting to examine an athletic career from this perspective as amateur athletes begin to carve out a life trajectory within a sporting context at a young age, regardless of whether this does or does not later converge with their occupational pathways.

In the career transitions literature, an athletic career is viewed as a developmental process, which includes career stages and transitions underpinned by the modernist logic of competitive sports (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). As athletes progress along the athletic developmental continuum, the demands of training, competitions, traveling, resting periods, to name a few, become more intensive and time-consuming. Adolescent years are the period when athletes transition into elite sport, known as the mastery/investment stage, which can begin from 15 years of age in some sports, although 18–19 years of age is the average (Wylleman et al., 2004). This transition has been reported to be highly stressful for athletes as they adjust to the increased demands associated with training and performance outcomes, as well as new psychological and psychosocial challenges encountered at an elite level, while simultaneously balancing education and social life (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009, 2012). At the mastery stage, which continues until individuals are 28–30 years of age, athletes participate at the highest competitive level, committing a full-time weekly workload to training and competitions.

Many amateur athletes consider sport to be a part of their life project, devoting a considerable amount of time and effort in pursuit of an elite athletic career comparable to a professional career. However, very few will reach the professional level required to make a living out of sport, and those who do, rarely accumulate sufficient funds to sustain themselves and their families after retirement from sport (Aquilina, 2013). Because elite careers in sport are relatively short (most elite and professional athletes retire by age 30 to 35) and require persistent, intensive and deliberate investment in developing sport-specific skills, elite athletes tend to prioritize sport over other areas of life. International research findings are comparably consistent in that elite athletes who continue into vocational training and higher education find it extremely challenging to realize their potential in two areas of achievement. They often dedicate their time to developing sporting careers—much to the detriment of their academic pursuits, which would have better prepared them for a post-athletic career (Brandão & Vieira, 2013; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Cosh & Tully, 2014). To safeguard the educational and vocational development of athletes, the promotion of athlete “dual careers” in elite sport and education or work begun to receive increased attention in various national and international systems and has been on policy agenda in the European Commission (Henry, 2013). The recent EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes: Recommended policy actions in support of dual careers in high-performance sport (2012) emphasized the importance of mobilizing various policy areas (namely, sport, education, health, employment and finance) to support the provision of dual career training for athletes.

A particularly salient risk associated with adolescent athletes' transitioning into high achievement sport is that of identity foreclosure, that is developing a one-dimensional athletic identity due to lack of role experimentation and life experiences outside the sporting contexts. Numerous research studies indeed suggest that athletes' social relationships tend to be enclosed within sport-related events and people (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002, 2003; Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2013; Verkooijen, van Hove, & Dik, 2012; Vuolle, 1978). From a developmental cultural psychology perspective that views interaction of an individual with experience as the basis for developmental change (Sameroff, 2009), it is important to consider seriously the effects of athletes' limited opportunities to engage meaningfully in the exploration of social life outside of their sport. In what ways do young people's athletic pursuits shape the field of possibilities in which they design their future?

This article examines sporting narratives and practices that create a discursive field of athletic career from which athletes derive the subjective experience. Our specific interest was to analyze how athletic career forms a (sub)cultural context for linking the cognitive with the social in the life-designing process as individuals mobilize their lives through sport. The article is based on two life stories gathered for the research of transnational athletes' career development and transitions in the Nordic region. For the purpose of the current study, both narrative inquiry and a case study approach were used to understand the life-designing process of a Finnish, male, professional hockey player and a Baltic, female, amateur orienteer as they conveyed the relationship between their athletic careers and lives outside of sport. The in-depth case approach was important to avoid suppressing the uniqueness of autobiographical life themes, which were integral to our understanding of participants' meanings and values that were “actively lived and felt” (Williams, 1977, p. 132) in and through the athletic career. While our focus was on examining the meanings ascribed to career events and identity—that is, on the subjective career—we treat them as constructed within the dynamics of social interactions and woven into the historically contingent cultural scripts available in a society. In so doing, we make relational bridges between the psychological and the sociocultural to emphasize that “sociocultural influences hardly stand apart from psychological processes, but instead, are enmeshed in ongoing environment–person relations as *constitutive* influences at the level of individual experience” (Heft, 2013, p. 14; original emphasis). Consequently, we consider athletes as agentic individuals in their reflexive capacity to navigate social structures and negotiate their life options, without assuming a constructivist location of agency and identity within the autonomous individual (c.f., Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Cohen, 2006; LaPointe, 2010). The following research questions guided this study: (1) what sporting career narratives and discourse practices were invoked by the athletes to make sense of the athletic career?; and (2) how did gender and (national) culture meanings permeate and direct their career behavior and life choices?

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