



A lifespan perspective on the dual career of elite male athletes



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The first aim of this study was to explore how elite male athletes having had a long duration as well as successful sport career perceived the transitional challenges occurring during as well as after their sport career. The second aim was to identify the factors that facilitated or constrained their development at different domains of development (i.e., athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational).

Design and method: Participants took part to retrospective semi-structured interviews yielding transcripts that were analyzed using both deductive and inductive analysis.

Results: Qualitative analysis revealed a non-linear path to excellence with many normative as well as non normative transitions from the beginning of the athletic career to the post-career stage. Elements most frequently evoked to describe the course of life during athletic career referred mainly to the athletic domain, but also in a concurrent way to family life, psychosocial relationships as well as educative/vocational domains. These various elements were experienced in turn as factors facilitating as well as constraining the course of life of athletes depending the stage of the career.

Conclusion: This study highlights the importance to adopt a developmental (i.e., from the beginning of the career to the post-career stage) as well as holistic (i.e., athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational) perspective when considering the development of talented athletes. It suggests that understanding how elite athletes may experience as well as cope with ups and downs punctuating their athletic career is indivisible from other concurrent domains of life development.

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Introduction

Research on career development in elite sport has received wide attention in recent years (e.g., Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalée, 2004). Whereas initial research focused mainly on stages of talent development (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002), crisis transitions (e.g., Bar-Eli, 1997; Stambulova, 2000) and sport career termination (e.g., Alfermann, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), recent studies have shown an increased focus on within-career transitions using a holistic lifespan perspective (e.g., Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004).

Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) define sport career as a multiyear sport activity in which a person engages in order to achieve his or her peak in athletic performance. In his seminal work

on talent development, Bloom (1985) was among the first to describe the sport career as a succession of three critical stages, namely the 'early years' characterized by a process-oriented as well as playful practising and support from parents, the 'middle years' with a more performance achievement orientation and demand of an increasing commitment to sport and the 'late years' when athletes become experts and dedicate most of their lives to sport. These three stages were later coined as the initiation stage, the development stage, and the mastery or perfection stage (e.g., Salmela, 1994; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, & Cummings, 2000). Furthermore, in line with research describing retirement from sport as a transitional process (e.g., Lavalée, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001), Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) elaborated a developmental model whereby a fourth stage (i.e., the discontinuation stage) was added.

Continued research into athletes' careers (e.g., Stambulova, 2000) also revealed that the sport career could also be described in terms of transitions, that is, moments or events that can be viewed as a turning points and which "results in a change in assumption about oneself and the world and thus requires a

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corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Furthermore, within these transitions a distinction could be made between normative transitions that are predictable and that can be anticipated (e.g., transition from junior to senior, sport career retirement) and non normative transitions which are involuntary and result from unplanned important events that take place in an individual's life (e.g., injury, unexpected failure to participate in a major competition) (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). For example, Samuel and Tenenbaum (2011) found that most transitions from the route of elite performers were normative and that most significant events within the career were transitions to a higher level, achieving a major accomplishment, or even severe injuries. Whereas the sport career can thus be described in terms of (a mix of) normative and non normative transitions, most studies actually looked into one specific transition (e.g., the junior–senior transition, the sport career retirement) with only a few examining the whole sport career from the initiation stage to the discontinuation stage (e.g., Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). As athletic success will strongly depend on athletes' ability to cope with these transitional challenges (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Wylleman & Reints, 2010) a clear need remains to gather empirical data on how athletes perceive and are able to cope with these transitions. Furthermore, examining successful sport careers as well as the post-career experience may contribute to a better appreciation of the factors most influential on both sport career success as well as athletic and post-sport career wellbeing.

Important to note is that research revealed that these transitional challenges are perceived by athletes not only to occur in the development of their sport career but also in other domains of development such as at psychological, psychosocial or vocational level. Wylleman and Reints (2010) detailed specific transitional challenges during each stage of athletic development (i.e., initiation, development, mastery, discontinuation) and brought to the fore the interactive relationship between athletes' development at athletic as well as other domains of development (i.e., psychological, psychosocial, academic, vocational and financial) (Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). The relevance of these interacting phases occurring at different domains of development were confirmed in a case study on an elite female fencer in which the transitions faced by this athlete all along her sport career were examined (Debois et al., 2012) and which revealed a non-linear path to excellence with ups and downs not only related to athletic development but also to personal, social and academic/vocational development which interacted with her sport career and may have impaired her athletic achievement. These results illustrate the concept of dual career in sport as retained by the scientific community (e.g., Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004) as well as by the European Commission (2012) who define a dual career as encapsulating:

the requirement for athletes to successfully initiate, develop and finalise an elite sporting career as part of a lifelong career, in combination with the pursuit of education and/or work as well as other domains which are of importance at different stages of life, such as taking up a role in society, ensuring a satisfactory income, developing an identity and a partner relationship (p. 6).

This holistic or "whole person" approach appears particularly suited for examining long duration elite sports career (i.e., athletes retired from sport over 30 years old) to better understand how these athletes succeeded to cope with numerous transitions and events they faced in the different domains of their life all along their sport career. As to date only a few studies have adopted a holistic approach for examining the progress of elite athletes'

development during their sport career, a clear need exists to examine successful careers through an efficient model of sport expertise development (e.g., Côté, Baker, & Abernety, 2007) from a holistic perspective (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004).

In line with the continued need to identify the transitional challenges athletes face at different levels of development during as well as after their sport career, a need also exists to examine athletes' ability to cope with such transitions (Lavalée & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova, 2000). Sinclair and Orlick (1993) distinguished positive transitions whereby athletes did not have any need for specific assistance and crisis transitions where athletes required psychological support. Stambulova (2000) not only described three types of crisis transitions (i.e. age-related, athletic-career related, situation-related) but also specified that the possibility for a crisis transition is higher when athletes change from one sport career stage to next as this transition generally occurs concurrently with other transitions in other domains of life (e.g., biological maturity, academic career). For example, the transition from secondary school to higher education among talented athletes may go hand in hand with increased expectations from parents in the academic domain, increasing training intensity, and significant changes related to puberty in the biological, psychological and psychosocial domains (e.g., Cosh & Tully, 2014; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Newman, Lohman, Myers, & Newman, 2000; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). Comparing elite and sub-elite swimmers at different periods of their sport career, Johnson, Tenenbaum, Edmonds, and Castillo (2008) emphasized that "the development of elite athletic performance appears to be highly idiosyncratic and multidimensional" (p. 472) influenced by primary (i.e., training and psychological factors) as well as secondary factors (i.e., socio-cultural factors and context). MacNamara, Button, and Collins (2010a, 2010b) also found that although the pathway to excellence of elite performers was dynamic, non-linear, and individualized (i.e., different routes to reach elite status) it broadly followed the career stages identified by earlier researchers. Finally, also Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002) identified a set of multidimensional factors facilitating the development and maintenance of elite athletic performance including factors related to social environment (i.e., parents, coaches, support staff members), personal factors (i.e., personal characteristics, choice for a dual career) and factors related to athletic commitment (i.e., deliberate practice, mental and organizational skill development strategies). Although providing more insight into athletes' ability to cope with transitional challenges, most studies generally limited their focus to those transitions occurring in the athletic development during the actual sport career (e.g., Johnson et al., 2008; MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b) thus excluding gaining insight into athletes' perceptions of transitions at other levels of development or occurring in view of the post-sport career.

In view of these findings, a clear need was identified for further research on elite athletes' development using a developmental and holistic perspective. The current study therefore aimed at identifying elite athletes' perceptions of:

- the transitional challenges occurring during as well as after their sport career,
- the factors that facilitated or constrained their development at different domains of development.

Method

Participants

Using the method of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), nine former world-class male athletes were contacted on the basis of

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