Tales from the Future:  
A Narrative Investigation of the Imagined Career Paths of Young Athletes

Janne Mortensen¹ • Kristoffer Henriksen² • Reinhard Stelter¹

Athletes’ paths to international sporting success are unique but always include a number of transitions within sport, as well as outside of it, which hold the potential for crisis or growth. Particularly the transition from talented junior to elite senior athlete plays a critical role in the overall athletic career. The present study is a qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interviews as data. We asked eight young and very talented athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their chosen sport and invited them to describe how they got there. The qualitative interview strategy was narrative in its attempt to elicit how the young athletes made meaning of their endeavours through narratives, and biographical in its attempt to ask the athletes to describe their future career paths. We analysed the interviews as single case studies, subjected them to meaning condensation and then constructed the final narratives. Common features of the tales pertain to the fact that these athletes are still young and have yet to grasp the reality of what they are embarking on, which is clear from the simplicity and lightness that is portrayed in their perspectives. The athletes give little emphasis to the challenges and need of social support inherent in an athletic career. On the one hand, the poor preparation of the athletes for the time to come is worrying; on the other hand, the unworried lightness and optimism of the athletes’ stories could also be seen as a strength.

Keywords: narratives; talent development; social support; intra-individual resources; sport psychology

¹ Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
² Institute of Sport Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark
When young talented athletes dream of future sporting success and set out to reach their sporting goals, they also embark on at least a decade of hard and trying times (Ericsson et al., 1993). Looking back at their careers, elite athletes tell tales of success and failure, hardships and joyful moments (Stambulova, 2009). But how do young, aspiring athletes imagine their future careers? In the present study, we asked eight young talented athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport and asked them to outline and describe their ‘thus far imagined careers,’ or what we have called their ‘tales from the future’.

Athletic pathways are dynamic and complex entities that are often unique to the individual athlete (Storm et al., 2012). The optimal pathway to the elite level in sport is still a subject of debate (Côté et al., 2009, Ericsson et al. 1993), and lately it has been suggested that expert athletes in fact progress through unique and non-linear trajectories towards sport expertise (Phillips et al., 2010a). The acquisition of expertise emerges from a dynamic interaction between constraints related to the individual, task and environment (Phillips et al., 2010b). Despite these discussions, today’s talent development research agrees that without intense nurturing and years of commitment to intensive training, no individual will attain excellence in any area (Abbot & Collins, 2002).

Athletic career research points out that athletes’ careers progress through a number of stages and transitions (Stambulova, 2009). These stages mark specific periods in an athlete’s trajectory in sport, and contain different challenges. The stages co-occur with stages and transitions outside sport, such as on the personal, social and academic vocational level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The transition from junior to elite senior sports is perhaps the most central transition in a sporting career as a whole, and certainly a key challenge for talent development (Wylleman, et al., 2004, Stambulova, 1994). This transition is described by athletes as a very difficult one (Stambulova, 2009), in which the athletes need to become clear about the facts of dedication and the higher amount of training required, and to accept making a number of sacrifices such as having less time for family, friends and oneself (Bloom, 1985, Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). The entry into elite senior sport often coincides with transitions outside sport, and stagnation, irregular performances and drop-out are the rule (Vanden Auweele et al., 2004). In this transition athletes face a number of difficult challenges, such as finding their own path in sport, balancing sport and other life goals, winning prestige in the sport environment, coping with the pressure of selection for prestigious competitions, and coping with possible relationship problems in an increasingly competitive team (Stambulova 1994, 2009). A particularly salient risk during this transition is that of identity foreclosure, or developing a one-sided athletic identity that jeopardizes not only the athlete’s successful sports
career, but also the successful adaptation to life after sport (Lavallee et al., 1997, Lavallee & Robinson, 2007, Pummell et al., 2008). Such characteristic challenges of the transition from junior to senior – and they are not restricted to sporting life – mean that athletes during this transition experience high life stress (Bruner et al., 2008). All in all, this developmental period of the young athlete’s life is a stressful period during which the athlete decides whether or not to make an investment in the sport.

Furthermore, in a holistic-ecological approach, Henriksen et al. (2010a, 2010b, 2011) point to the role of the environment as a central factor of talent development in sport. Athletes are embedded in an environment that comprises not only the micro-environment and the sport domain, but also a macro-environment and a non-sport domain. The interaction and interplay between key parts of the environment (e.g., communication between the sports club, family and school), the organizational culture of the sports team (e.g. values of openness and focus on long term development), and the athletes’ ability to use the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of the environment, all of which exert great influence on the likelihood of an athlete making a successful transition to elite level.

From an applied perspective this points to a need to help athletes prepare for and manage the transition from talented junior to elite senior athlete. Based on a summary of studies on the transition from junior to senior sport, the International Society of Sport Psychology recommends in a position stand: “that athletes are given assistance in relation to career planning, balancing lifestyle, stress/time/energy management and effective recovery, and that there is continuity in coaching and support from significant others” (Stambulova et al., 2009 p. 408).

Arguably, understanding the many challenges involved in life as an elite athlete and in making the transition from junior to elite senior sport must include an existential perspective. Existential psychology deals with fundamental issues of human existence (Yalom, 1980). In this perspective, four ultimate concerns – the inevitability of death, responsibility for one’s own life, isolation and meaninglessness – are fundamental aspects of human existence and inherently threatening to most individuals. Just like any other human beings, athletes must search for meaning and come to terms with existential issues on their paths. According to Yalom (1980), individuals will often resort to defense mechanisms when confronted with the anxiety that necessarily arises when confronted with existential concerns. Thus a major objective of the therapist is to help clients live a life that is drawn by faith rather than driven by fear. Among the techniques used to reach this objective is the systematic examination of the causes of clients’ fear, by letting them tell stories of specific scenarios based on what-ifs. When
individuals actually contemplate the possibilities of which they are so terrified, usually these concerns lose much of their potency and the fear associated with them becomes manageable (Nesti, 2004).

In sport, the existential-psychological perspective (Nesti, 2004) is valuable in understanding athletes’ aspirations, hopes and fears and how these affect their sporting trajectories. In high level and professional sport environments, athletes are faced with a great number of existential concerns (Nesti, 2011), such as meaninglessness (ultimately, my goals are mine only), anxiety (what if I am deselected, injured or if I just don’t make it? Will I be remembered after my career terminates?), identity loss (I am forced to take on different roles), isolation (I can be bought and sold and must be ready to leave my clubmates), and responsibility (the realization that reaching my goal is ultimately my own responsibility). Nesti (2011) argues that we need to understand these concerns better: what they involve, and how the athletes cope with them in order for us to provide them with an improved service that is more relevant to their experiences.

By taking a narrative approach, we wish to contribute to the field through a different, more existentially founded perspective than the currently most often used method of measurement and prediction. In this sense, we “focus on meaning and investigate the essence of human experience” (Nesti, 2011 p. 285).

People are essentially meaning-making individuals (Bruner, 1990). One fundamental way of giving meaning to experiences is through telling stories (Crossley, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2003, 2007) “When we narrate our lives we engage in ‘acts of meaning,’” is a central statement of Bruner (1990). Smith and Sparkes (2003, 2005, 2007) have demonstrated how athletes create meaning through narratives. The narratives of the present study deal with the young athletes’ way of making sense of their expectations and perceptions of how things will progress. The intention is to have the athletes put into words their future lives, in terms of goals, dreams, aspirations, fears and concerns.

Accordingly, the main objective of the current in-depth interview study is to provide a rich description in the form of narratives, of the expected career paths of eight talented athletes who are on the verge of making a transition into elite senior sport. This will provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of how young athletes view and attach meaning to their future paths in sport.

**Method**

The present study is a qualitative in-depth interview study with eight talented young athletes about their imagined careers paths. We asked the eight
athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport, and asked them to tell the story of their career. In other words we wished to elicit the athletes’ 
tales from the future.

We took a narrative approach based on the idea that stories are means for a better understanding of the individual subject. Although people’s stories do not provide the definitive 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). We thus take the narrative approach to understand individual athletes’ way of making sense of the world in which they live and act (Stelter, 2009). Because meaning can be varied and multiple, this will lead us to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas (Creswell, 2007). We agree with Giorgi (1970) that a research subject is better described as a co-researcher, and with Fawcet (2010) that it is time for sport psychology research to focus on meaning rather than quantification. Our intention was to create a strong sense of the athletes’ voices for the reader, through narrative created from quotations (Sparkes, 2005).

We realized that a narrative approach mainly demonstrated its value by asking people to tell stories about experiences that had already occurred. Nevertheless, this approach was chosen based on the idea that telling tales from the future is a possible way of giving meaning to what the 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 (Christensen 2007, Stelter 2009). We also took a biographical approach, because “all human phenomena are temporal, historical, and personal” (Giorgi, 1975, p. 101).

In sum, the qualitative interview strategy was narrative in its attempt to elicit how the young athletes made meaning of their endeavors through narratives (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), and biographical in its attempt to ask the athletes to describe their future career paths (Järvinen, 2000).

Participants. In cooperation with the national coaches of specific sports, we selected eight young prospective elite athletes who were recognized as talented, but who had not yet attained senior elite level. The athletes were 15 - 19 years old (average 16.9 years) and represented four different sports. The sports were selected with a view to represent Danish sports culture; four athletes competed in individual sports (swimming, orienteering), and four athletes competed in team sports (handball, football). The athletes were all Caucasian and from middle-class families.

Research instruments and procedure. The eight athletes received an email with an invitation to take part in a qualitative research interview about
their life as an elite athlete. In order to make the interview situation as authentic and unbiased as possible and to keep their stories first hand and genuine, the participants were not given any further information before the interview.

We conducted the interviews based on an interview guide that started out very loosely structured and with only open-ended questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews took place in the home of the interviewer or at the training facilities. The length of interviews was between 45-90 minutes with an average of 53 minutes. We wished the participants to tell their story without major influence from the interviewer and to follow their spontaneous reflections during the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the athletes were asked to tell the interviewer about a successful situation from their sporting career that was particularly memorable. This episode became the starting point of the biographical account, during which the researcher would only prompt the athletes to encourage them to be more specific, or to elaborate. When the athletes had finished telling the hypothetical stories about their would-be life, the interviewer would (if relevant) ask about important topics that were left out of the athlete’s story.

Analysis and presentation. The interviews were conducted in Danish, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Afterwards, we listened to the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and to become familiar with the material. The transcripts were subjected to meaning condensation during which the authors created shorter versions. Finally we condensed and constructed a final version of the narrative and had it translated into English by a native speaker. The narratives are presented from the first-person perspective and reflect the researchers’ analysis in a coherent form.

In the process of analyzing and condensing the interviews, we used an open coding approach in which meanings were captured and transformed into different categories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). On the basis of these categories and by coordinating different themes, we built up and formed a storyline and the overall plot of each narrative (Stelter, 2009). As such, we regarded content and form as inseparable and analyzed the material throughout the writing process (Richardson, 2000). The narratives were reconstructed into research stories that are presented to the reader as individual and biographical stories, in an orderly and coherent fashion. Therefore the narratives are not the athletes’ stories in raw form, but stories constructed and shaped on the basis of analysis and interpretation of the interviews (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Sparkes 2005).

Trustworthiness. This form of analysis has to be met by different research criteria that fit the narrative analytical approach. Therefore, the coherent narratives of all cases and a subsequent discussion should live up to the following
four criteria presented by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2005) as follows: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity and impact. More specifically, in order to ensure trustworthiness we conducted a member-check, i.e. we sent the transcripts, as well as our constructed stories, to the respective participants for verification and comments; all participants approved the transcripts. The participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this article.

Results

In the following section we present the results of the study. We found that the eight interviews all contained a number of similar themes. Because of this convergence of themes and due to space constraints inherent in academic publications, we will in the following present three narratives that are to be seen as representatives for all eight. The three narratives were selected based on two criteria. First we applied a criterion of quality in choosing stories from athletes who vividly, and with considerable depth and reflexivity, were able to describe their dreams of a future career. Then we chose stories that represented three typical themes in all eight narratives. The narratives should be seen as an invitation to the reader to get a glimpse into the life-world of three talented athletes. Each narrative was given a title that expressed the central plot of the story.

In the following we will present the three narratives as the result of our qualitative analysis, followed by some reflections on how realistically our athletes actually anticipate their career.

The naïve athlete who knows all the right words, but does not fully understand their meaning:

Alex is a 16-year-old football player. He does not at all doubt what his biggest dream is: winning the Champions League as a starter for Manchester United. Today, the year is 2019, and Alex has been asked to tell his story about how he realized his big dream.

My career started when I played for Brøndby, Copenhagen. At the age of 19, I changed clubs to Dortmund, where I played a couple of years and had great success. At 22, I was bought by Manchester. The phase where I went from youth player to senior player was very hard because I had to compete with several age groups. In that period, it was important for me to be prepared to experience failure during my career. There were many good players at Brøndby, and when you play in a central playing position as I do, you have to get used to starting on the bench. But I always fought my way up again and competed with the other players for the start-
ing positions on the team. It was important to get a lot of match training. And it was great to play with older players, because they automatically play at a higher level, and when you start playing with them, you automatically raise your own level. It was also good for me that I went to school right next to the stadium in Brøndby. That made it easy, and there was no wasted time. It meant that I could do my best at training because I was not stressed out after a long transport time like some of the others.

I've always looked up to my father and the way he is as a person. I am a bit more temperamental than he is, but temperament is also something I think you need to have to be a good footballer. But he always handled things very calmly and with a good outlook, so in that sense he has inspired me greatly to become the person I am today.

I have also worked hard and I have been lucky. And I have been mentally strong. I have seen many players drop out because they were not mentally strong enough. It is important to focus all the time on what you need to do and keep yourself grounded. For example, when you come to a trial practice, it is important even then to know who you are and focus on what you are trying to achieve, instead of thinking that now you're the best in the world, and you can do everything. It was also difficult to go abroad because they're different out there. It's as if it matters a lot more to them than here at home. Here, you could come to a practice where somebody was slacking off, because they can always get an education. It is important to be humble when you come to a new place, but you should not let yourself be suppressed either. It is important not to come roaring out, like 'here I come.' Of course, on the football field, one can show that, but not afterwards when everybody is gathered together. I thought that was very difficult and a big challenge to adapt to.

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 - you don't do anything else, so it was important to have someone along, so I didn't just ... well, 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 mum has always moved around with me.

It took time for me to find my place on the team in Manchester. The English style of play is different from the Dutch style, so it took many matches for me to adjust to the level. But then the Champions League qualifiers started, where we got a good placing and qualified directly and
therefore didn’t have to play all those matches with the smaller clubs. I went all the way and was totally focused on what my goals were. I trained hard and lived the real professional life. I made sure to get lots of sleep, healthy food and plenty of water all the time, and I pretty much always said no if the others asked if I wanted to go out.

Well, you can also be lucky when you hit a perfect day or a perfect week. For example, you are playing at the highest possible level, and the ball lands in front of you so you can just kick it in, or something like that. In the finals, my playing was going really well and the team as a unit was completely on top, everything was just as it should be, and so it ended with victory for us. The dream came true. I won the Champions League with Manchester United.

Alex’s understanding of the professional life is expressed in terms of concepts of what it means to be goal oriented, to live healthily, to work hard, and to be mentally strong. But what do these concepts really mean to Alex? What does it mean to live professionally, to work hard, and be mentally strong? Alex does not express a deeper understanding of what is required of him. He has a simple approach to the family ‘just’ moving around with him and thereby living his life. This is not elaborated further, and thereby this is a glimpse into a superficial world where things ‘just’ happen. In his story, Alex is very focused on ‘what’ he will accomplish rather than ‘how and why’. Alex has an agent that handles his career and helps Alex prepare for the next steps. This agent has talked a lot to Alex about relevant future career steps mainly, in terms of which clubs could be relevant stepping-stones. Indeed, at times during the interview, the first author wondered if she heard Alex or his agent speaking.

The uncorrupted athlete motivated by the sport itself

Morten is a 15-year-old orienteering runner. If he has to come up with a goal for his running, it would perhaps be to become among the top ten in the world in relay or medium distance. However, Morten clearly explains that he doesn’t know and won’t spend time thinking about it. Yet he throws himself into the story of how he reached his goal.

Yes, I have probably struggled a lot with setting goals. I never really had a dream, and had trouble thinking about the future. I was very much living from season to season. Anyway, I started running when I was 10 years old. There was great feeling in the club, which I loved being a part of. I was just crazy about training and running and getting better and better. I was also able to bite the bullet and train even when I didn’t want
to. So I was actually quite disciplined. But there were quite a few years when my training was a little sloppy. It took some time before I realised that not only enjoyment was needed, but that I also had to plan and be structured. So I started getting into special training plans, and I started going to a lot of competitions. I went to the Junior World Championships where I sometimes did well, and then later went to the senior World Championships, which I little by little had got ready for. I participated in a couple of World Championships before I entered the top 10.

Then I went to an elite school, and that made it was easier to have time to train a lot. And I decided to go to continuation school away from home for a year, though this was probably not the smartest choice in relation to my career, because you eat and drink too much and do not train so much during that year, but it was important for me to try something else. I kept my spirits up and came through the year in a good way. I also learned to take responsibility for myself and matured a lot that year.

After this year at continuation school, I went to high school, where I had to pull myself together because it was hard to get everything to fit together. Anyway, I took the Team Denmark offer with 4 years of high school instead of 3, because it made things a bit easier. But there were many times where I was afraid I would drop out because I did not train enough because of poor planning. There were so many other things. But I got myself together and became a little stricter in relation to training. For me, it has always been important that I enjoyed running and was able to participate in some championships.

After high school, I changed to a club in Sweden. It was a good choice, because the club was much larger than the one I came from, and I was allocated a specific coach. It helped me a lot having a close relationship with one coach who really got to know me. And it was also great to train with others at the same level. It has always been important for me to feel accepted, and I have always felt that in the orienteering world. I have been able to feel this by being part of a group. It is things like going on a trip together and working together as a team. Such a feeling of nationality has meant a lot to me.

I also realised early that you could not become a world champion if you partied too much, so I did not do this. I kept it to small doses. In relation to education, I started at university because I wanted to have an education so that I had something to do besides racing.
In my career, my parents meant a lot because they have driven me to training and have always supported me. The whole family actually runs, so we all know what it takes. It has just made it easier. I feel as though we’re in this together. It has just always been important for me to have joy in running. I always held on to the idea that it has to be fun to run, no matter what.

Morten expresses great joy with his sport, and is driven by the desire to run and the community he experiences in connection with running. He does not give much thought to his career, and he finds it difficult to put into words what might happen. He lives from day to day and does not think about the future as something he needs to deal with yet. He approaches life in an “everything will be OK” manner. His story contains all the obvious elements such progressing through the school system and making a transition from junior to senior national team. But it contains very little thought regarding to the personal characteristics and social support he will need to reach his goals. In fact you can say that Morten – despite being selected as a very talented athlete – has still not come to terms with his role as an athlete.

The “want-to-do-it-all” dreamer

Sylvia plays handball, and is 17 years old. Sylvia has many dreams, and would like to achieve a lot, but when she is asked what her ultimate dream within handball is, it’s to win an Olympic gold medal as an established player on the A National Team. In the following, Sylvia tells the story of how she reached that goal. The year is the 2021.

Well first of all, I have mentally been through a really great development. I have gone from taking things easy and living on my talent in my youth to becoming aware of how much hard work it takes to achieve one’s goals. You really have to work for it. I had many early successes. We won a lot as youth players, and I think that all the recognition we received when we were out playing championships – and I was selected for the all-stars team and we got prizes and such things – have been really important for me to keep my motivation up. I’ve always been very influenced by what others think of what I’m doing and whether they think I’m okay. It’s important for me to feel recognized.

I’ve also been lucky with respect to injuries – I made it through them. I started strength training when I was 17 years, and as a junior made a decision that I would not stop after 10 years with the feeling that I could have
done it differently. So I made an effort and began to take strength training seriously, although I think it’s terribly boring. It has also been important to make some good decisions about the clubs I’ve chosen to play for. I did not let myself be deceived by offers from league clubs. I sat down and thought about what was most important for me: to play for a famous club or to get playing time. I chose to focus on playing time and therefore found a club where I was a starter from the beginning. Actually, it has always been important for me to play and to get approval from my coach, my parents and friends. I think that is the hardest part of being on and off a team, because then you don’t get the confirmation that you are the best right now. That has been hard for me to handle, and I often become very angry and disappointed when it happens.

The important thing for me has always been that I have something else to concentrate on, such as school. This is also why I applied to the design school, to meet some others and to get some new challenges. I’ve also always wanted to be a designer, and I’ve never had anything against going to school, so I thought it was a good idea to challenge myself a little. It has always been important for me to say that I am also good at school, that I can do more than just play handball. It is important for me to have something to be involved in.

I cannot give everything else up to play handball; that would kill me. I have always also gone out on the town once in a while and partied and suchlike, because I need to have other things in my life than handball. I need to relax once in a while; although my big dream has always been to become a professional handball player, there must also be other things in my life. There has to be time for both fun and seriousness both inside and outside the handball court. I therefore make sure to be happy when I go to training, to be open and to express myself to people around me that they can say anything to me. I have always thought that it’s important that you can say things straightforwardly.

In my development as a handball player, my family means a lot. I’ve always been able to come home and discuss things with them, and they have given me feedback on what I did right, and what I did wrong. My family has always supported me very much and have been to all my games no matter where they had to drive to. It’s been a good sense of safety for me to know that they were always there, even when I was older and I wanted to do things myself, and perhaps was not always attentive to what they said.
As time went on, I also needed to get some stability in the rest of my life, so I got a boyfriend and a permanent place to live. I’ve always been in need of some form of stability, so it was nice to settle down. And then it happened that I got on both the national team and a league team. And in the course of a few seasons, I was a bigger and bigger profile, and it went really well. I began to have the confidence that I would always be chosen for the team, and then I played a great Olympic match, and we won.

Sylvia really wants a lot in her life. It does not seem as if she knows what all of this requires of her. She dreams of both a professional career in handball and design, and thinks it’s important to have many things in her life. Sylvia is concerned about achieving recognition, so the many dreams and the absent focus may be a manifestation that what really matters is to gain recognition from the world around her, whether it’s handball or design. In her story about life as an elite athlete, everything comes easily to her: when she decides to, she finds the right boyfriend; finding a place to live is not an issue; she expects that she can choose freely between different clubs; she is able to go out on the town for diversion and amusement and to study on the side and so forth, and all this in the context of being a highly profiled elite handball player. She gives little thought as to how she will get these things to fit into a professional life.

Discussion

A narrative approach to research in sport psychology provides a setting for understanding how athletes develop subjective meaning from their experiences. The present study asked young and talented athletes to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport. As such we attempted to employ a narrative approach to describing events that had not yet taken place. As such, the athletes’ imagined career paths or tales from the future provide a unique insight into what young athletes expect to meet on their paths towards elite level sport. By taking a narrative approach, we acknowledged and looked for the complex views and ideas these athletes had, rather than aiming to simplify and categorize their stories into preselected categories (Creswell, 2007).

Although Alex, Morten and Sylvia - along with the other five athletes - tell very different tales, there are also common features that perhaps pertain to the very fact that these athletes are still young and have yet to grasp the reality of what they are embarking on. Perhaps the most conspicuous result of the study is the simplicity and lightness that is portrayed in the tales of their perspectives as elite athletes. It seems these young athletes expect that good things will happen to them almost regardless of their own efforts. The harsh realities of elite sport have yet to dawn on them. For example, Alex expects
that his mother will leave her family and country behind to support her sons’ dream of becoming a professional footballer. In a similar manner, Sylvia expects to become a brilliant “top-of-the-class” designer while simultaneously having a career as a top-level elite handball player. And Morten has no doubt he will enjoy every second of life as an elite runner and manage to take a university degree while he is at it. In general, the narratives portray a very simple approach to talent development. The athletes showed little awareness of the complexity of talent development and of all the factors that need to fall into place in order to succeed. And they showed equally little concern for the hardships involved in succeeding at elite level. Some athletes did mention injuries, moving away from home, changes of club or training environment, and sacrifices in terms of not being able to party and see friends and families as much as desired. They also emphasized that mental qualities such as being mentally tough and disciplined were important factors on their way to elite level. However, there was a distinct air of superficiality to this part of the tales, as if the athletes repeated things they had been told, but which had not yet sunk in.

A second common feature was an individualization of the careers. When elite athletes look back at their career, they emphasize the importance of different types of support (e.g. tangible, financial and emotional) and from different people in the environment (e.g. parents, coaches, peers and others) (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). The young athletes’ narratives are almost void of support persons. Although the athletes in some cases mention parents or a coach, the importance attributed to these persons’ support is highly underrated in comparison with the importance attributed to intra-individual characteristics.

Just as the tales have common features they are also different. We realize that the study of eight athletes in a Danish sport setting is nowhere near enough to develop a typology of talented athletes. However, we still found three distinct types of athletes in the material. Alex was very goal-oriented and focused on becoming a professional footballer, thus making a living from his sport. He accepts that ability and proficiency can be developed and that outcomes are contingent with the effort he expends, which can be seen in the way he engages in goal-striving behaviour such as planning and structuring his life to optimize training (Payne et al. 2007). Alex is focused only on sport and hardly mentions school or other activities outside football. Indeed he seems more concerned about becoming a compulsive gambler from all the money he is going to make, than not getting an education. When he says it is important to have something outside football, he refers only to his mother moving to England to support him. Besides family, Alex attributes little importance to the potential support of people around him. To understand Alex we need to understand the world
of football. Football is the largest sport in the world, and talent development in football is characterized by an intensified professionalization (Roderick, 2006) and globalization (Maguire & Stead, 1998). The price of skilled players is ever-rising and clubs aim to sign professional contracts with talented soccer players at an ever-earlier age. This means that most talented players have agents who from very early on assist them in preparing for the future. With the money involved and an agent who hopes to sell Alex to a professional club, Alex is less worried about school and knows all the right responses, even if he does not seem to grasp the realities fully. From a sport psychology perspective, Alex is seems to be in the process of developing a one-sided athletic identity (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) which can be seen as a resource in his sport development, but also as a risk for a successful transition out of sport, should he not make at elite level.

On the other hand, Morten is uncorrupted by professional sport. He has been training on his own and with his family for most of his life. To him, his sport is a hobby, not a profession. He gives little thought to his future in sport and has a hard time talking about his goals. He takes one day at a time, determined to enjoy all the experiences that running provides him with, including going abroad to live and train in a country where the sport of orienteering is bigger and more prestigious. Morten knows he will experience pulls from other areas than sport, such as parties and friends. He knows it demands a personal and hard decision to continue in sport, but he also seems to accept that there must be room for some normal teenage life. Morten is from an orienteering family, and he emphasizes the feeling of “being in this together” as a positive feature, as previously described by Côté (1999). To understand Morten as a type of talent, we need to also understand his sport. Although Danish orienteering has proud traditions, it is a small sport in Denmark. Orienteering athletes cannot make a living out of the sport, and even at a reasonably high level (at the edge of the national team) they will at times have to pay part of the costs involved in going to a competition out of their own pockets. For these reasons, orienteers are often motivated from within and driven by the enjoyment and experiences that the sport offers.

Sylvia is a dreamer, who truly believes the sky has no limit. She has already enjoyed a lot of sporting success during her young life, and she expects her positive and upward spiral will continue throughout her career in her sport as well as outside of it. She is very driven by the recognition she gets from doing well, winning games and being selected for national teams. She expects no hardship and no setbacks. She has no doubt that she will manage to reach world class in her sport while simultaneously becoming a recognized designer and enjoying life as a “normal” teenager. Getting an education, however, is not something she believes she has to do to make sure she has a fullback career. It is purely out of
interest. Women’s handball in Denmark enjoys much attention from the media and the sport is professionalized to a degree where the best players can make a living from playing handball. In that respect and with her past performances in mind, Sylvia’s dream seems reasonable. From a sport psychology perspective, however, we cannot help but notice her strong ego-orientation (Duda & Hall, 2000). She is motivated by results, selection for national teams, getting playing time and recognition, which are all external factors. Literature as well as practical experience would suggest highly ego-oriented athletes like Sylvia are in danger of dropping out in the transition from talented junior to elite senior athlete, because she is likely to experience more adversity, have less playing time, receive less recognition, and be given a less crucial role on the team (Duda & Hall, 2000).

In sum, we need to recognize that these athletes are situated in specific environments and specific cultural contexts (Henriksen et al. 2010a, Ryba et al. 2010) and that this environment affects the psycho-social development of each athlete, because the culture accounts for important variations pertaining to values and basic assumptions.

Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to focus on some applied perspectives that can be the basis for further reflections.

Nesti (2011 p. 294) argues that “the use of phenomenology in sport psychology applied work could mean that practice could provide a lead to research, rather than researchers already have identified concepts and constructs in advance of any phenomenological analysis which they subsequently apply and measure in the field”. In this approach, coaches, parents and sport psychologist should help athletes to find their own answers in their search for identity (see e.g., Stelter, Nielsen & Wikmann, 2011), and help them to explore the conditions of their lives and careers in an effort to capture and explore their specific challenges (Spinelli, 2010). Although we do not claim that the present study is phenomenological in nature, asking athletes to tell stories from the future may be a step towards this aim.

Beyond doubt, the poor preparation of the athletes for the time to come is a conspicuous result. As could be expected, none of the athletes seem to truly grasp the complex and hard nature of the life they are about to embark on. Career transition research and assistance literature emphasizes the importance of athletes being well prepared for the transitions in their sporting career (Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavalle, 2004). However, our aim here is not to present a finger-wagging. On the contrary, our intention is to show, by means of the pre-
sented narratives, that these young athletes struggle with a number of existential issues such as fame (immortality), balancing sport and education (finding their identity), and team selection.

At the same time the unworried lightness of the athletes’ stories could also be seen as a strength (Grove & Heard, 1997). Indeed, we could ask ourselves if an athlete would ever embark on an elite athletic career if he or she fully understood what this implied. In this sense the athletes’ optimism is a gift that may help them overcome challenges. Positive psychology has demonstrated that positive expectations are linked to motivation, happiness and success (Seligman et al., 2000), and that maintaining a positive state of mind will influence an outcome in a positive way (Mruk 2006). Recently, in Team Denmark’s sport psychology courses for young athletes, this perspective has been included as an experiment. At the beginning of the course, the athletes were told to imagine they were at the end of a successful career in their sport and that a journalist had asked them “why were you the one in a million who succeeded in your sport?” They were then instructed to write their own “tale from the future”. Some athletes read their stories out. After this, the teacher read one or two condensed narratives from established elite athletes, and the group discussed similarities and differences in the perspectives of the young and the older athletes. The sport psychology practitioners who taught the course appreciated this exercise and emphasized that through telling their tales, the athletes reflected on the journey they were about to embark on, and that the subsequent discussion opened up a forum for discussing basic existential issues with the athletes. Perhaps telling tales about their future helps the athletes deal with their basic existential fears in a positive manner (Yalom 1980; Nesti 2004).

References


of sport participation from a cultural perspective. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 43*, 199-222.


Janne Reffstrup MORTENSEN holds a master degree in sport science and a European master degree in Sport and Exercise Psychology. She currently works part time as an external lecturer at the Metropolitan University College in Copenhagen and part time as a privately working sport psychology consultant in her own company, “Mental Motion”. She is a part of an external network of sport psychology consultants in the Danish Elite Sport Organization, Team Denmark. Janne has contributed in two chapters of the upcoming book: ‘Becoming a Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology Professional: International Perspectives’ (Routledge).

**Corresponding address:**

Janne Mortensen  
Nørre Allé 51, Street  
DK-2200 Copenhagen N  
Denmark  
Phone (0045) 61330467  
E-mail: janne@mentalmotion.dk

Kristoffer HENRIKSEN, PhD is currently an associate professor at the Institute of Sport Science and Clinical Biomechanics at the University of Southern Denmark. Trained as a psychologist, he earned his PhD in sport science at the University of Southern
Denmark. His research has mainly revolved around the role of the social environment in talent development in sport. Kristoffer also works as a sport psychology practitioner for Team Denmark, the Danish Elite Sport Organization. As a sport psychology practitioner, he advises international top-level athletes in e.g., sailing, orienteering, and track and field. He publishes regularly in international sport psychology journals on his research as well as on his applied work. In 2013, Kristoffer received the Developing Scholar Award of the International Society of Sport Psychology. He can be contacted at: khenriksen@health.sdu.dk

Reinhard STELTER holds a PhD in psychology and is professor of sport and coaching psychology and head of section, Human and Social Sciences, at the Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports at the University of Copenhagen. He is accredited member and honorary vice-president of the International Society for Coaching Psychology. For the last 25 years he has done research and applied work in the field of sport and coaching psychology with special focus on identity and learning. He has led the world’s first larger study on coaching as a narrative collaborative practice where he worked with young talents in sports. He is author of the book “A Guide to Third Generation Coaching – Narrative-collaborative Theory and Practice”, published by Springer this year. He can be contacted at rstelter@ifi.ku.dk