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# Beyond life-skills: talented athletes, existential learning and (Un) learning the life of an athlete

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## ABSTRACT

Following developments in educational discourse more broadly, learning discourses in youth sport have been shaped by outcome-based and instrumental goals of developing useful life-skills for ‘successful’ lives. There is, however, a need to expand such traditional understandings of sport-based youth development, which we undertook by exploring existential learning in sport through encountering discontinuity. We conducted in-depth qualitative research with 16 Finnish athletes (seven men/nine women, aged 19–20), five of whom had recently disengaged from the athlete development pathway. In the interviews, we used creative non-fiction vignettes to invite reflections on learning experiences in sport. Although participants reported having learnt many useful skills commonly associated with positive youth development discourses (e.g. goal setting, time-management), many also provided rich descriptions of other, important ‘life lessons’. These involved developing awareness of their bodily limitations, the nature of social relationships, and what it was like to live the life of an elite athlete. The findings revealed problematic features of (elite) sport cultures but also showed that encountering discontinuity could be beneficial as an important trigger for existential reflection, clarification of values, and a search for alternative ways of living.

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## Introduction

In contemporary societies, the learning that occurs outside of formal learning situations, including leisure-time sports participation, volunteering, and everyday life, is increasingly recognised as vitally important in the formation of active citizenship (Jarvis 2007). Youth sport and physical activity programmes, in particular, have been branded as central contexts for positive youth development (PYD), which is broadly considered as ‘the promotion of any number of desirable competencies or outcomes in young people’ (Gould and Carson 2008, 59). Often, PYD has been studied and implemented more specifically via ‘life-skills’ that Gould and Carson (2008, 60) defined as ‘those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings’. It has been suggested that when youth sport programmes are designed explicitly to teach life-skills, they can function as a ‘passport to success’ for participants (Hemphill, Gordon, and Wright 2019).

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Typical skills in these programmes include goal-setting, time-management, social skills, emotional skills, communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving (Cronin and Allen 2017).

Although the development of life-skills is predominantly studied in recreational and after-school sports programmes, the notion is also increasingly gaining traction in talent development and elite sports (Jørgensen, Lemyre, and Holt 2020; Williams and MacNamara 2020). In some ways, it might be viewed as a response to questions about the ethical sustainability of elite sport systems, where 'talents' are recruited at ever-earlier ages. Several studies have raised concerns about talented athletes' identity foreclosure (Houle and Kluck 2015; Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer 1996), and psychological distress generated by exiting competitive sports that, for most participants, occurs before reaching elite senior sport. Massey and Whitley (2020) reported disillusionment, disengagement, and damage done to former athletes raised in under-resourced communities in the USA, arguing that a focus on talent and winning can compromise the broader development of young people. However, other scholars have argued that involvement in talent pathways can be a positive developmental experience, even for those athletes eventually de-selected, because of the transferable skills learned through sport, and growth following the adverse experience of deselection (Neely et al. 2018; Williams and MacNamara 2020). For example, Williams and MacNamara (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 10 deselected male athletes who had been involved in formal talent pathways in rugby or cricket in the U.K. They identified responsibility, determination to succeed, and social maturity, as assets learned through the talent pathway, which helped these athletes in their post-sport lives.

Although PYD and life skills discourses have featured prominently in recent years, there are also critiques of this work. Whitley et al. (2019) reviewed studies on sport-based youth development interventions in the USA and considered the methodological quality and the evidence of the primary studies to be largely weak. Bruner et al. (2021) evaluated the effect of sport-based PYD interventions on seven outcomes. They found small-to-medium effects on three outcomes (competence, confidence, life skills) but no effects for the remaining four (character, connection, PYD climate, and health). Besides concerns about programme efficacy, critical scholarship has also challenged PYD programmes for their overly positive narrative of sport as a source of 'all good', warning that these programmes often perpetuate neoliberal ideologies, operate with a logic of reducing 'deviance', and might have little to offer in terms of helping youth participants in developing a critical awareness of broader social issues and a questioning attitude (Coakley 2016; Camiré et al. 2021; Rauscher and Cooky 2016). In promoting a hard-work ethic, discipline, goal-setting and time-management, many life-skills initiatives seem focused on the formation of neoliberal subjectivities shaped by obedience, productivity, and self-sufficiency.

In our recent work (Ronkainen et al. 2021), we proposed existential learning as an approach that extends our understanding of learning in youth sports beyond the instrumental life-skills discourse. Existential learning brings attention to other forms of learning that are not exclusively positive or 'marketable' but have the potential to contribute to developing critical awareness and understanding of the self and world. Foundational to this perspective is the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1959, 1987), whose account of existential learning in educational philosophy emphasises the discontinuity of human development and explores *discontinuous forms* of learning. For Bollnow, a young person's development cannot be fully comprehended as a process of accumulation (of skills, competencies, etc.), but rather involves discontinuous processes such as ruptures and leaps.

Through the exploration of possibilities and involvement with activities, people, and projects, we inevitably encounter moments of 'negativity'. The negativity of experience describes situations where we are confronted with something that transcends our horizon, something that questions our previous knowledge (Gadamer 2004). These encounters with negativity make us (sometimes painfully) aware that something is not as we expected, requiring us to revise or extend our understanding (of ourselves/others/the world generally). Importantly, this dimension of experience is not negative in the ordinary sense of the word. The negativity of experience should rather be understood

as a productive part of learning processes (Brinkmann 2017; Benner and English 2004) and a prerequisite for developing in sport (Aggerholm 2015). In a sport context, such negativity might be experienced in moments of transition to the 'next' level ('I am no longer the star of the team'), deselection ('I'm not as good as I thought') or overuse injury ('I cannot take as much as I thought I could'), but could equally refer to moments of 'positive' surprise, such as learning a new skill ('I didn't think I could do that') or winning against the odds ('I'm better than I thought'). Furthermore, experiences of negativity could lead us to revise our understandings of our relationships or the world more broadly, as our findings below demonstrate.

Existential learning emphasises the subjectivity of the learner and moments of discontinuity in the life-world and is, therefore, less coach-led than the life-skills approach to youth learning in sport. While life-skills are increasingly taught through programmes designed for this purpose, focused on certain chosen skills, existential learning is often concerned with how we respond to unplanned moments of negativity that we are 'thrown into' as an inevitable part of living. The difference between life-skills and existential learning is well-illustrated through Koskela's (2012, 126) description of Bollnow's educational philosophy as emphasising that discontinuous forms of learning educate not *for* something, but *in* something. Thus, the outcome is a change in the self, rather than tools for achievement. The 'what' that is learned from discontinuity cannot be reduced to sets of skills but could relate to a transformed understanding of one's possibilities, a new way of relating with others, or changed fundamental assumptions about the (sporting) world.

Although philosophical ideas of discontinuity, negativity and existential learning have been explored in conceptual works (e.g. Jarvis 2007; Koskela 2012; Benner and English 2004), importantly, they have not been empirically examined in a youth sport context. The present article extends our theoretical work (Ronkainen et al. 2021) via an examination of forms of existential learning in a sample of Finnish athletes, focusing on two key research questions: (1) what is the content of existential learning experiences? and (2) how does existential learning occur in these participants' journeys through upper-secondary sport schools? Based on our findings, we discuss the novel perspectives offered by focusing on existential learning, and how these can inform practices surrounding talent development and youth sport.

## Methodology

In this qualitative study, our aim was to use the concept of existential learning to uncover forms of discontinuous learning that to date remain understudied in the context of youth sport. We draw inspiration from the phenomenological research tradition in that our attempt was to 'come reflectively to terms with something that is, in some way, "evident"' (Glendinning 2007, 16). In other words, our aim was to elucidate and explicate something that is somewhat already familiar to us (discontinuities as potential learning experiences) by exploring the phenomenon via concepts associated with phenomenological thinking. This said, we do not claim a 'pure' form of a particular phenomenological method and recognise the complex ongoing debates regarding the philosophical grounding and credentials of work claiming to be 'phenomenological' (see, for example, Smith 2018; van Manen 2017; Zahavi 2019). After discussing several ways that phenomenological concepts and methods have been misunderstood in the qualitative research literature, Zahavi (2019: 905) suggested that:

Rather than trying to adhere to Husserl's, Merleau-Ponty's, or Heidegger's recommendations regarding how to apply phenomenology, let alone seeking to adopt their philosophical method, qualitative researchers should rather strive to let their own research be informed by central phenomenological concepts such as lifeworld, intentionality, empathy, pre-reflective experience, horizon, historicity, and the lived body.

In the following sections, we follow this line of reasoning and seek to produce a phenomenologically informed account of existential learning in youth sport.<sup>1</sup>

## Participants

We conducted qualitative interviews with 16 participants (7 men, 9 women) aged 19–20, who were or had been part of the national talent development programmes in Finland. The data were collected as a part of the Finnish Longitudinal Dual Career Study (Ryba et al. 2016), and participants had already been interviewed 4–5 times before the current study, which was approved by a University ethics committee and the participants provided written informed consent.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the interviews for the present study, 11 participants were still pursuing their sport in talent development or elite contexts, and five had either transitioned to recreational sport or discontinued regular participation in sport. Participant details (with pseudonyms) are provided in Table 1.

## Procedures

While some literature on using phenomenological ideas to inform qualitative research recommends challenging prior beliefs and notions about the studied phenomenon, Zahavi (2019, 906) suggested that researchers instead ‘approach and investigate the phenomenon (or conduct the interview) in light of quite specific prior ideas and notions, namely, notions taken from phenomenological theory’. Since we were interested in what kind of learning might be involved in the encounters with discontinuity, our approach was to invite participants to reflect on those moments in the talent pathway that had been unexpected, disruptive or surprising. To aid this, we invited reflections through the use of ‘creative non-fiction vignettes’ (Barter and Renold 2000), as commenting on the stories of others is often deemed less threatening and encourages participation. Like Barter and Renold (2000), we had previously found that young men in particular in the longitudinal study were sometimes uncomfortable or unable to articulate their feelings. Encouragingly, Barter and Renold (2000, 318) noted that ‘when the vignettes were introduced; however, many boys were freely interjecting and drawing upon personal experiences and events, even beyond the questions that directed responses from the abstract to the personal’.

The vignettes we constructed for the interviews portrayed two different student-athletes’ journeys (with female protagonists for women, and male protagonists for men) of traversing life-paths through upper-secondary sport school. Vignettes involved several discontinuous experiences identified from previous interviews with the participants in the longitudinal research: the transition to upper-secondary school, moments of conflict between sport and school, breaking-up with a romantic partner, gaining unexpected sporting success, a sense of being abandoned by a coach after becoming injured, entry to the senior sport, conflict with parents, and choosing to disengage from the talent pathway. We sent the vignettes to participants a few days before the interview, to

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

	Pseudonym	Gender	Sport	Situation in Sport
1	Riina	F	Gymnastics	Planning for Retirement
2	Vilma	F	Basketball	Student-Athlete (Athlete Scholarship)
3	Topi	M	Football	Disengaged from the Talent Pathway
4	Kimmo	M	Ski Orienteering	Disengaged from the Talent Pathway
5	Nea	F	Combat Sports	Disengaged from the Talent Pathway
6	Anni	F	Combat Sports	Disengaged from the Talent Pathway
7	Pilvi	F	Alpine Skiing	Disengaged from the Talent Pathway
8	Marko	M	Gymnastics	Aspiring to Become Elite/Professional Athlete
9	Hanna	F	Cross-Country Skiing	Aspiring to Become Elite/Professional Athlete
10	Jani	M	Tennis	Aspiring to Become Elite/Professional Athlete
11	Sanna	F	Football	Aspiring to Become Elite/Professional Athlete
12	Katri	F	Swimming	Student-Athlete (obtained an Athlete Scholarship)
13	Unto	M	Combat Sports	Aspiring to Become Elite/Professional Athlete
14	Ulla	F	Athletics	Professional Athlete
15	Timo	M	Ice Hockey	Professional Athlete
16	Taisto	M	Ice Hockey	Professional Athlete

enable familiarisation with the stories and reflection on them before the research encounter. We intentionally kept the vignettes short (approximately 450 words each) to encourage participants to read them fully.

Before the actual data collection, the fourth author interviewed the first author and invited her to share the personal meanings she brought to the study, how she had constructed the vignettes, and what she hoped to achieve with them, what themes she expected the athletes would bring up, and whether and how she had prepared for situations when participants might not engage well or be reflective. This interview acted as a reflective exercise for the first author to anticipate challenges in studying a topic that might not be easy to address for youth participants, and to consider how best to approach the interview situation (e.g. allowing long silences if participants were searching for ways to express themselves). Furthermore, the first author conducted a pilot interview with a university student who had graduated from an upper secondary sport school a few years before the participants. The pilot interview generated confidence that the vignettes triggered conversation, and that the overall structure of the interview was viable.

The interviews started with a conversation around the events and experiences in participants' lives during the previous year and the choices they had made regarding their pathway in sport and education. We then invited participants to discuss the vignettes, using questions such as 'can you freely share what you thought and felt about the vignettes?' and 'did one of them resonate more with you for some reason?'. Most participants started to relate the stories to their own lives without any prompting, exploring how they were attuned to and navigated through the multiple demands encountered in their life-worlds (including sport, school, and relationships). At the end of the interview, we asked participants more direct questions about the different things they had learned in sport, and what advice they would give their 15-year-old selves at the start of upper-secondary sport school. Attuned to the idea that existential learning is not only about positive experiences and entities, we also asked them to consider what they had learned in sport (if anything) that they would have preferred *not* to learn. Many found the question difficult and surprising, but some articulated well their unwanted learning experiences.

We were able to conduct 12 interviews face-to-face and four participants were interviewed online. The interview duration was between 65 and 88 minutes, with an average of 81 minutes. All participants were interviewed in Finnish as their (and the interviewer's) mother tongue. Subsequent translations of the content were made by the first author.

### **Data analysis**

Our data analysis moved between data-driven and theory-driven processes (see Ryba et al. 2012), with the aim of understanding what constituted discontinuous experiences in participants' life-worlds, and how these experiences could be understood through the conceptual lens of existential learning. We first started exploring participants' accounts via a phenomenologically sensitive approach (Allen-Collinson 2011) that draws inspiration from Giorgi's (1997) guidelines for data analysis. This involves: i) adoption of the phenomenological attitude (see below); ii) an initial impressionistic reading of transcripts and other descriptive data (e.g. notes from interviews); iii) more in-depth re-reading and data immersion; iv) identification of salient patterns in the data, to generate initial codes, subsequently grouped into sub-themes and then more general themes. Commensurate with engaging in a phenomenological attitude, the first author constantly asked herself questions such as 'how is this meaningful to him/her?' and 'how did I become aware of it', acknowledging that our pre-understandings, life experiences and theoretical leanings are always important 'stocks of knowledge' used to make sense of data (Papadimitriou 2012). As van Manen (2017) suggested, however, a list of themes should not be viewed as the outcome of phenomenologically oriented research, but rather an intermediate step for reflection and further inquiry. In our theory-driven reading of the data, we used our previous conceptual work (Ronkainen et al. 2021) and phenomenological concepts to explore the *whats* (with a focus on subjectivity, intersubjectivity and lifeworld more broadly, including both positive and negative experiences) and



hows (with a focus on learner-led, discontinuous processes) of existential learning. That is, our analytical focus was on identifying moments of informal learning that were not specifically intended or planned by coaches, parents or others, and from which participants learned something new.

### **Research quality**

Høffding and Martiny (2015) suggested using the concept of ‘phenomenological consistency’ to inform assessment of validity, which can further be divided into ‘internal’ and ‘external’ consistency. First, internal consistency refers to a researcher’s ability to make the descriptions comprehensible under the phenomenological lens being applied. At this step, we were also cognisant of Maxwell’s (1992) notions of descriptive and interpretive validity in that it was important not to try to ‘bend’ the data to fit our concepts. We strove to describe faithfully what participants had shared with us by frequently returning to the transcripts and interview summaries and to capture participants’ own perspectives (intentions, meanings) by using extensive quotes in the results section.

The notion of external consistency refers to ‘the ability of the overall account produced to work with and against already established theories of the phenomena in question’ (Høffding and Martiny 2015, 545). Maxwell’s (1992) notion of theoretical validity captures a similar idea, with the qualification that phenomenologically inspired research does not focus on *causal* validity. In our study, the key focus was on whether the applied concepts helped to elucidate new understandings of the studied phenomenon. Multiple researchers were involved in discussing/contesting interpretations and developing readings of the data through the existential learning framework. Presenting the findings at conferences, symposia, and research group meetings, as well as the formal peer-review process, further challenged us to justify and clarify the methodological integrity of the work as well as the interpretations that we developed.

### **Findings**

From the data analysis, it became clear that it was impossible to distinguish neatly the types of learning from how they occurred, and therefore these two dimensions are intertwined in the representation of the findings. Inevitably, the findings do not span all possible forms of existential learning and should not be taken as any definitive account of its content, but rather provide a situated account of Finnish youth athletes’ learning experiences. All participant quotes are anonymised, with details of gender and sporting domain included in parentheses.

### **Improvements and setbacks: encountering possibilities and limitations**

One dimension of existential learning concerns the processes of how youth athletes become aware of the ways they are attuned to the world and their embodied possibilities. The reality of talent development is that most youth athletes will never enter senior elite sport, and this was becoming apparent to many participants. This was contrasted to the almost naïve optimism expressed by the participants at the start of the longitudinal study.

Reflecting back, Kimmo (M, ski-orienteeing) noted: ‘I believe everyone who enters upper-secondary sport school at 15–16, I believe they have, and I had as well – belief in themselves, that I will become the next World Champion’. Hanna, a cross-country skier, had also changed her perspective during the upper secondary sport school. She had experienced a period of overreaching herself, recalling a particularly ‘catastrophic’ competition. She also had longer-term difficulties with asthma medication. She noted



When I entered here [sport school], I maybe had a kind of stupid idea that everything would go well, and it would just be constant progress. I noticed already during the first year that there will also be setbacks (F, cross-country skiing)

Having obtained an athletic scholarship to a U.S. university, another student, Katri, was on-track with her life plan. Similar to Hanna, however, she had not performed to her expectations in the previous year, suffering considerable disappointments in important competitions. She reported being a diligent athlete, strongly committed to her sport, but increasingly aware that success was not fully under her control:

You can work very hard, a lot harder than someone else, but they might still win and it's not fair by any means. Many people want to get to the Olympics, but not everyone will become an Olympic athlete (F, swimming)

Injury and overtraining are common situations where athletes' sense of agency and 'I can' is put into question. While some participants discussed these experiences as very challenging and a trigger to seeking more sustainable ways of training, not all injuries were necessarily discontinuous experiences. Indeed, injuries and other setbacks were seen by some as a normal, expected part of the talent pathway:

**Marko:** I have been expecting that there will be some setbacks, but I didn't know when.

**Interviewer:** Where did this expectation about setbacks come from?

**Marko:** I don't know ... Almost everyone experiences it at some point ...

**Interviewer:** ... do you have any examples?

**Marko:** Well, I don't know (laughing). Maybe the world's best don't have them, but I don't think I'm as good as them. Those who are at the intermediate level, have some minor injuries. If I'm there, then I will have them, too. If I wasn't expecting them, I wouldn't have been able to overcome them so easily (M, gymnastics)

Interestingly, although Marko does not consider his injuries disruptive experiences, they still seem to involve learning about his embodied possibilities. Through becoming injured, he learns (or his assumption is confirmed) that he is in what he views the 'intermediate' category of athletes and not among the world's best.

Other embodied disruptions included illness. Anni became seriously ill which forced her to take a break from training and competition. This disruption also triggered a process of deep questioning:

I started to experience serious symptoms. I started to think about what I want from my life and I felt - or at that point, I was thinking whether my sport had caused all this. It is not necessarily the case, but you cannot know (F, combat sports)

Becoming ill, although a highly distressing experience, also accorded Anni space for reflection, to (re) consider how she was living her life. She was uncertain if she *could* return to sport but increasingly began to reflect on whether she *wanted* to be in sport at all. She decided to withdraw from competitive sport while returning to recreational participation when her health permitted. Thinking back, she noted: 'when I was away from these [athletic] circles ... I was thinking about what I have left in life and whether I would like to try again ... But then I thought it's good that I am no longer in that rat race'.

### **'Being' and 'doing' recognitions**

It was evident that, through their sporting experiences, the youth athletes had started becoming aware of how they are recognised as athletes and as people by others. Many participants began to realise that two distinct ways of gaining social recognition operated in their relationships. They could be valued for their 'doings' (athletic achievements, where recognition is conditional); or for their 'being' (who they are, which is relatively unconditional).

The transition to senior sport was a turning point for Ulla (F, athletics), who wanted to base her self-worth on things other than merely athletic success but felt that in the elite sport she was regarded as nothing more than her athletic performance. She deeply questioned the meaning of sport in her life and whether constantly aiming for new records and winning held any purpose for her. She explained that her inner conflict centred on values and recognition:

**Ulla:** I started to experience that, people in sport, they value other people very much based on what they have achieved and how they are doing in sport. And I have a completely different way of thinking, and it influenced – or it brought a lot of tensions.

**Interviewer:** And what are your own values?

**Ulla:** Well, I don't want to put myself at the forefront and, more broadly, I don't think I'm a different person because I run faster. Or, that I would somehow be a better person because of that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, right.

**Ulla:** I feel that people elevate me to a better [person] when I've achieved something, but when I haven't, then I'm nothing. (F, athletics)

In the course of their sporting careers, also other youth athletes learned that their sport life-world operates primarily on 'doing' recognitions. Anni recounts:

Sometimes I feel I got no support from my coaches. We had a small training group and a couple of elite athletes there. It felt that the coaches gave all the support to them. (F, combat sports)

Others, however, became aware that their close relationships within the family operated on 'being' recognitions. After spending a year abroad as an exchange student, Kimmo was at cross-roads of deciding whether to step away from the athlete development pathway and focus on studying. He shared:

[My father] has kept repeating, especially now that I came back from the US and we talked about my sporting future, that it makes no difference to him or mum whether I become an elite athlete. (M, orienteering on skis)

In contrast, Anni, who experienced 'doing' recognitions from coaches, also recalls becoming painfully aware of this in her own family. When asked what she would *not* have wanted to learn in sport, she recounts:

**Anni:** A quality that I would not have wanted to know about my father is about how my sport defines me ...

**Interviewer:** How did you find out about that?

**Anni:** Since I was very young he has expected that I win competitions. But I remember very well this one competition: I lost to a girl who was two years younger than me. I didn't even get to the medal fights. He did not speak a word to me on the way home, he was so disappointed.

### *Being for oneself and others*

When things proceeded well, without discontinuities, many of the youth athletes focused their energies on athletic development and, in different degrees, on studying. In a talented athlete's life-world, significant others (parents, coaches) are often tacitly understood as helpers and supporters of their sporting life project. Many participants discussed in taken-for-granted ways how it was 'natural' that parents invested time and resources to support their children in sport, and how girlfriends/boyfriends needed to understand how important sport was. When moving to the U.S. to play ice hockey professionally, Tero considered it natural that, 'my girlfriend came with me and so I have spent a lot of time with her, too, and it helped that I didn't have to be alone'.

Unfortunately, if pursuing elite sport can be considered a self-centred project, then it might be that others in the team are also primarily pursuing their self-interest. Tommi (M, ice hockey) became aware of how everyone was, ultimately, thinking only of themselves; a painful lesson for him to learn:

**Interviewer:** Can you think of something that you would not have wanted to know about yourself or the world of sport and so forth?

[Silence]

**Tommi:** Well, maybe, in an ice hockey team you can have good guys, really nice guys, but in certain situations, it can become evident, or it becomes evident, that everyone is only thinking of what is best for them. Everyone is extremely selfish in certain situations.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of a situation when it became clear?

**Tommi:** In training quite often you have some young talents and they start playing some games, someone tackles you and we start shouting ... I'm just trying [my best], and someone starts shouting ... It is difficult to explain but I just feel it's very selfish.

**Interviewer:** Yes. And do you think athletes are selfish, in general?

**Tommi:** Yes, and I have to say that it's certainly the only way you can succeed. How to become a top athlete, you always have to be very selfish.

However, some participants who disengaged from the talent development pathway were articulate about a qualitative change in their relatedness to others after 'moving on' from high-performance sports. In thinking about her past athletic life, Pilvi (F, alpine skiing), for example, articulated an important shift in her relationships and her other-relatedness:

**Pilvi:** [As an athlete] sometimes you just think too much about yourself. It was an individual sport and everything was centred on you; the coach is focused on you, parents are focused on you, everything depends on you. Now I have tried to be more considerate of other people and started to think about how I can help other people. I have tried to help my boyfriend and kinds of small things, keeping the door open to old ladies at shops (...) I'm longing for a sense of community, giving back to other people feels more important. I feel like I want to give back.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Did you experience that the sport-time was kind of self ...

**Pilvi:** me-time.

Similarly, Kimmo (M, ski orienteering), who had decided, at least temporarily, to prioritise other areas of life and self, recognised the need for making choices based not only on the needs of himself-as-athlete but also on those of others:

Now my life is freer, and I can keep an eye on what other people are doing. For example, if my sister needs a ride to the airport, it's easier for me to think that I'll take her. I don't need to ski for two hours today, one hour is enough. Or something like that. So I can adjust to other [things], I don't need to be selfish any more like an elite athlete sometimes has to be.

However, a reverse way of relating to others in sport also emerged, where doing sport was portrayed as a way of putting others' desires before one's own. Two young women, who had both chosen to disengage from the talent pathway, were articulate about how their sporting life projects had been partly *for* others and not for self. Anni noted:

I feel that I haven't been selfish at all. I've gone along with what my father wants, or what my parents and coaches want. So, I don't think I've been selfish; maybe I should have been more selfish and not go along with their desires!

Anni and Nea (both F, combat sports) described a sense of losing ownership over their sporting life project and ending up doing sport for others. Deciding to withdraw from competitive sport released this tension, but at the same time, at least temporality ruptured the relationships with those around them who had invested in their athletic careers.

### *Living the life of an elite athlete*

The youth athletes who had continued their careers and started transitioning to senior sport were also learning about the everyday life of an elite athlete, which, for some, was a discontinuous experience. As student-athletes, they had full days of sport and school, with school constituting a venue for social contact with friends. As full-time athletes, they suddenly had much more time and fewer people around them. For some, the 'new life', where sport is the first (and for some, the only) thing, can feel narrow, constricted, or even boring at times. Some had been unprepared for this and were then faced with learning to find meaning in this life or to reconsider their life plan.

Topi (M, football) was offered a contract in the top national football league, which was at first 'a dream come true'. However, when living an athlete's life alone in a different city from his family, girlfriend, and friends, he realised it was not quite as fulfilling as expected:

It's so different, the professional athlete's life. You do sport a couple of hours per day and everything else focuses on you being better tomorrow than yesterday. Eating, sleeping . . . It takes so much time that only rarely can you choose what you do. It started to feel annoying. Like, I was such a perfectionist with all of it, eating well, sleeping well. It started to feel like a burden, whereas earlier it was what I wanted to do.

Match days were especially hard for him when he would wait all day 'twiddling his thumbs' and constantly checking the time. Feeling he had to prioritise sport to be 'fresh' in the game and at the next practice, he also felt he was wasting his time: 'and when it wasn't nice anymore, I started to miss my friends, my girlfriend, and my parents'.

Tommi (M, ice hockey) had obtained a professional contract, ceased attending school, and found it difficult to adjust to the life of a professional athlete. On one hand, he welcomed the new lifestyle and not having to rush from training to school and back to training. On the other hand, in the men's team he was training just once a day and the remaining time, as for Topi, sometimes felt constricted, narrowly focused around sport:

It's been difficult sometimes. When you're not playing well - and having a lot of free time - when I go home, I stress a lot about not playing well. I don't have a family at home, so I'm stressing out about all these things alone. It's difficult to separate ice hockey and other things in life. When it's going well, life is easy, but when it isn't, it's not too great.

Even if having more time and fewer social contacts were recognised by others who have channelled their energies into elite sport, some also welcomed the simple life of an athlete and admitted not enjoying 'hassles' or partying and socialising all the time. Jarkko (M, tennis) noted how:

I like to take it easy. Maybe that is why I rarely go anywhere. In our team we have those who like to go somewhere after training, driving around or something. But I prefer to do something like watch Netflix at home and recover.

Similarly, even though Ulla described an athlete's life as sometimes boring and dull, and that it 'could feel constricting for some people', most of the time she enjoyed her everyday life of spending a lot of time at home and living 'a normal and even boring' life. After having a gap year from education, however, she applied for university, aiming to restart a dual-career to add more content to her days.

While Tommi, Jarkko and Ulla continued to pursue an elite athletic career, Topi (M, football) rejected this life path and began to explore options offering more personal fulfilment. He noted: 'My agent studied law, and a few of my friends are now studying it, and so I started asking questions about what it's like. It felt that it could be my thing and what I want to do'. Unsatisfied with his life as a professional athlete, he withdrew from football abruptly in the middle of the season and started

working towards his new life plan. In the interview, which took place a few days after he had taken entrance exams for law school, he indicated: 'It feels very good that I've found my own thing, and I have to say that I'm much happier now than I was one year ago'.

## Discussion

This study aimed to extend understandings of learning in youth sport and talent development beyond life-skill development. Drawing on an existential account of discontinuous forms of learning, we show above how disjunctures in young athletes' paths can trigger profound questioning of embodied possibilities and limitations, the basis of relationships, and whether an elite athlete's life is what they truly aspire to pursue. Our findings show that many youth athletes do not uncritically accept cultural narratives of sport as a source of all good, and that 'becoming' in the talent pathway involves encounters with existential dilemmas about how we relate to others around us, and what constitutes a 'good life'.

Our findings also demonstrate how 'becoming' on the talent pathway involves learning to inhabit a changing intersubjective space, adapting to an evolving understanding of one's potential, and lessons about how human relationships 'work'; that is, whether they are based on conditional or unconditional regard. Elite sport is structured around conditional regard: only limited numbers of athletes can enter a national team and gaining scholarships and professional contracts depends on reaching certain performance levels. Often, youth athletes learned about the limitations of 'doing recognitions' when encountering discontinuity, due to, for example, becoming injured and not receiving attention from their coaches during this injury time. These findings align with Massey and Whitley (2020), who found that once talented athletes stopped winning, the social capital and resources afforded to them were reduced. As we also showed, in discontinuities, athletes also became aware of how others regarded them, some feeling reassured that parents would support them whatever life path they chose, whereas others encountered strong expectations to continue and excel in sport. Previous research has demonstrated that conditional regard from parents may foster a fragile sense of self-worth and perfectionist tendencies in youth athletes, which is a source of concern (Curran 2018).

Talent-identified athletes often become aware that they are 'special' (Elliott, Drummond, and Knight 2018), which can also shape the ways they are 'with' and 'for' others. Many participants recited a form of 'performance narrative' (Douglas 2014), which perpetuates assumptions that to 'make it', athletes need to put their own needs ahead of those of others. As Phoenix and Sparkes (2008, 215) described: 'the sporting self exists for itself; its responsibility is primarily to itself, limited to the sphere of its own self-interest'. It is salient how youth athletes spoke about learning a more relational way of being, after disengaging from the talent pathway, recognising that their sporting engagements had been characterised by the prioritisation of their own needs and interests. When leaving the talent pathway, some consciously started to prioritise relationships and helping others, in contrast to their previous sport-centred lives.

An intriguing discontinuity revealed by the study was how becoming an elite athlete was deemed less exciting and rewarding than the athletes had expected. Talented athletes, both in our research and other studies, often describe the prospect of 'making it' to elite sport as a 'lifelong dream' (Elliott, Drummond, and Knight 2018), but for some of our participants, the reality was far less glamorous. Descriptions of elite and professional athletes' everyday lives as dull, simple, boring and lonely, do not often feature in 'official' media narratives, which might partly explain why some participants felt unprepared and disoriented when entering this new phase of their lives. On average, athletes in Finland also receive low financial compensation from sport (Kärmeniemi, Lämsä, and Savolainen 2013) and our participants, who were at the start of their elite and professional athletic careers, were certainly not enjoying the fame (which can also bring unanticipated challenges; see Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020), prestige or financial rewards of international star athletes or those playing in top leagues in the USA. Despite the low chances of making a comfortable living from sport (except

for the ice hockey players, if they 'made it' to NHL), most of our participants who 'made it' to senior sport were influenced by the performance narrative plot where: 'performance-related concerns infuse all areas of an athlete's life to the extent that he or she will have no interest or time to develop other dimensions of their identity' (Douglas 2014, 237). Many participants reported feeling it necessary to limit many other aspects of life, to be 'at their best' in sport, whilst others started questioning whether it was worth it.

Our work has contributed to the literature emphasising the need to understand developmental outcomes in youth sport that might not fall within traditional PYD and life-skills discourses (Massey and Whitley 2020, Camiré 2021). It is noteworthy that many of our participants could also identify useful skills they had learned (see Ronkainen et al. 2021), but as demonstrated in the above analysis, many other types of learning could be identified through approaching the study via the concept of existential learning. As such, the existential approach can help identify the situational and complex learning experiences that are generally unaccounted for in life-skills literature, and thus expand our understanding of the diverse forms of informal learning that might occur in youth sport. Methodologically, we found it greatly beneficial to pose an interview question regarding what youth athletes had learned that they wished they had not learned. This 'discontinuous' question disrupted dominant discourses about learning in sport (e.g. life-skills), so familiar to the athletes. Some of the powerful existential learning experiences (e.g. about selfishness and 'doing recognitions' in relationships) were shared in response to this question, which challenged the athletes to think differently about their learning.

Our findings also demonstrate how often used terms 'dropout' or 'not making it' can in some cases be misleading and undermine youth athletes' agency to choose life paths *other* than elite sport, even if they have possibilities to excel in sport. Persson et al. (2020) suggested using the term 'opting-out' instead of dropout to highlight young peoples' agency and the variety of reasons they have for leaving sport. However, as our earlier work (Ronkainen and Ryba 2020) shows, for a long time, many participants engaged in intense identity work to maintain their talented athlete identities, before choosing to disengage from the athlete development pathway. The cultural narratives which construct 'making it' to elite sport as success and other pathways as failure could hinder youth athletes from considering opting out as a meaningful pathway for them. For sport psychology practitioners and others working with youth athletes it is therefore important to consider how they frame leaving the talent pathway, as this can have consequences for how youth athletes engage in meaning-making about their situation and the possibilities open to them.

From a practical perspective, it is important to note that the existentialist view does not promote intentionally producing discontinuity in youth athletes' lives. Bollnow (1959, 1987) suggested that discontinuities are an inevitable part of human life, and the role of the educator (or in our case, a sport coach or sport psychologist) is to try to recognise when these 'existential moments' arise and to support the young person in handling the situation and finding meaning from it. Moreover, existential learning should not be considered an either-or alternative to life-skills, but a different form of learning that is participant-led and never fully under the coach's or sport psychologist's control. For coaches and sport psychologists to be able to support youth participants in their existential learning experiences, they need to be able to build trusting relationships with their athletes and a general understanding of their life-world and the meaning and value they find in sport.

As limitations of the study, we recognise that not all athletes might have been reflective, articulate or comfortable enough to share sporting experiences relevant to our research question. In future work, it might be valuable to use ethnography and other field methods where the researcher has the opportunity to spend time in the research setting, getting to know participants and their life-world in more depth. Additionally, whilst this study focused on discontinuity, it is also important to acknowledge that existentialist thought would not deny other forms of more continuous learning, which could be explored through Merleau-Ponty's work on habit, for example (see Standal and Aggerholm 2016). Our analysis focused on discontinuity because it represents an under-explored and under-theorised 'how' of learning, which can complement understanding of how youth athletes learn through experiences of

inhabiting the sporting life-world. Finally, it is important to recognise that the Finnish context, where few athletes are able to practise sport professionally and earn a comfortable living from it, shapes the stories that were shared and how the athletes oriented to their futures in and outside of sport.

## Concluding thoughts

Our research sought to extend understandings of sport-based youth development by exploring how youth athletes learned new aspects of themselves and their relationships through encountering discontinuity in sport. Examining these forms of learning, which were neither planned nor always positive, provides a reminder that informal learning plays a vital part in human self-development, regardless of the formal learning content introduced in youth-sport settings. Our findings link with oft-addressed problems in talent development and elite sport cultures, such as uncaring coaching (Cronin, Knowles, and Enright 2020) and the cultural narratives that portray total dedication to sport as the only way to succeed (Douglas 2014). However, it is also worth noting that negative experiences, even if unsought and undesired, can also have value in human lives in that they often trigger processes of reflection and can therefore contribute to meaningful lives (Vohs, Aaker, and Catapano 2019). Future research might usefully shed light on various forms of informal learning currently underexplored in sports-related literature, as well as explore how coaches, sport psychologists and others involved in youth athletes' lives might recognise and work with the discontinuous experiences inevitably encountered in sport.

## Notes

1. There are many debates on the ontological and epistemological foundations of different phenomenological perspectives. We draw inspiration primarily from the existential-phenomenological tradition which, at least in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, has been considered to be based on 'robust' realism (as conceptualised by Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). In qualitative research literature, a Heideggerian perspective has been also described as a 'hermeneutic' realism (Yanchar 2015). While drawing on these lines of thinking, we acknowledge that readings of existential phenomenology as anti-realist also exist (see Zahavi 2016).
2. Informed consent from the parents of young people over 15 is not required in Finland.

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