

**ATHLETIC CAREER TRANSITION: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO EX-
ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF THE SPORTS SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE.**

M. Faisal Suptu

Master Thesis in Sport and
Exercise Psychology
Spring 2012
Department of Sport Sciences
University of Jyväskylä

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been written without the support and advice of a number of distinguished experts, in the field over the last two years. In the course of my research, I received many comments and much encouragement that gave me the opportunity to develop the ideas and redefine them. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Taru Lintunen, with whom I had the pleasure collaborating and received valuable information on the topic which is still under-researched in the field of sports and exercise psychology.

In particular, I would like to thank Leong Wai Kit and Hizammudin for their referrals to the participants. My immense gratitude goes to the participants whom I worked with, in the interview. Their rich and unique narratives of their experiences on the complex background of the sport system gave me many pointers on how to address the intention and research aims. And to my coach, Ngasti Wanto Zakaria, who has been an initial inspiration for me to embark on this topic.

Finally, to my family and friends who continue to stand by me, in my pursuit of betterment in knowledge and self development. Their constant encouragement and prayers give me strength to complete this journey.

M. Faisal Suptu

February 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1. Existing career transition models	7
2.2. Issues with career transition programmes	10
2.3. Sports system in Singapore: A brief overview	11
3. PURPOSE OF STUDY	14
4. METHODS	15
4.1 Participants	15
4.2 Instrument	15
4.3 Procedures	16
4.4 Data Analysis	16
4.5 Establishing Trustworthiness	17
5. RESULTS	18
5.1 Support received	18
5.2 Conflict in identity	23
5.3 Making sense of reality	27
5.4 Recommendations for future	30
6. DISCUSSION	37
REFERENCES	43
APPENDICES	46

ABSTRACT

Faisal Suptu, 2012. Athletic Career Transition: A qualitative inquiry into ex-athletes experiences of the sports system in Singapore. Department of Sports Science, University of Jyväskylä. 49p.

Anecdotally, studies on athletic career development and/ or transition revealed that athletes tend to have difficulty immersing their lifestyle into the societal norm after the termination of their athletic career. Based on a cross-cultural study by Alfermann & Stambulova (2002), the phenomenon of athletes coping with this change is no different whether it is voluntary or involuntary termination, and whether the country's existing sports system does provide assistance in their transitions; within or out of the athletic career. There is a lack of research and empirical evidence to support these claims.

The purpose of the study was to qualitatively explore ex athletes' experiences in their athletic career with the sport system. Four retired athletes (3 males, 1 female) representing individual and team sports participated in semi-structured interviews. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data revealed that their experiences were mainly negative. Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: social support needs, conflict in identity, making sense of reality and recommendations for future. Participants reported lack of support from the system both financially and emotionally as pivotal in their decision to end the athletic career. The continued struggle for direction in their roles as athletes, coupled with recurring disappointment from the system's support, led to early termination. Recommendations were made for future sport system to be more objective in governance to continue attracting talents and promoting the sport.

Keywords: Athletic career, interpretative phenomenological analysis, sport system

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research on athletic career development has received a focal shift from a performance-enhancement perspective to a holistic lifespan perspective (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Instead of being seen as an exclusive entity, the lifespan perspective particularly delves into the athletic and post-athletic career transitions occurring in other domains of the athlete's lives. This view not only promotes athletic career as an integral part of the individual's life-long career but the athlete is also treated as individuals doing sport alongside other things in their lives (Stambulova, 2010). And with this shift in perspective, the concept of sports retirement can be said to have become more of a continuation rather than cessation of an individual life development.

One of the specific foci in athletic career development is to provide support through athletic and non-athletic career transitions (Petitpas, Brewer & Van Raalte, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Often, athletes have experienced crises at one point or another during transitions in and out of sport, especially when their career approaches retirement. Transitions can manifest at various phases of an athlete's sporting career and can potentially lead to consequences that are manifold. Inability to cope with transitions has usually resulted in the athlete experiencing a crisis that is often followed by negative long-term consequences physically and psychologically (Stambulova et. al, 2009). An example of a negative consequence is premature dropout from sport or commonly known as involuntary retirement due to various reasons. When confronted with the sudden decision to retire from sport, athletes usually feel lost and disillusioned (Pearson & Petipas, 1990).

In spite of the shift in perspective on athletic career development, there is still a need for further research towards studying the components and structure of readiness for career retirement (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004). Based on findings by North and Lavallee (2002), career transition programmes have received a relatively high level of usage among elite athletes in the U.K. However, a further investigation in ascertaining the effectiveness of these programmes revealed not so favourable outcomes. Younger athletes and those who perceived themselves to have significant amount of

time prior to retirement were unwilling to develop concrete plans for their future. They felt that the time should be devoted to increase training times and competitions.

Drawing from findings by North and Lavallee (2002), the recent shift in perspective lauded by many in the applied sports psychology field appears to be a one-sided affirmation. This is because most athletes were contented with their balance between sport and non-sporting activities in relation to career development. However, as the demands of performance environment increase, the tendency to pursue sport may also increase. In fact, there may still be a prevalent practice by national sports systems and institutes that is subtly driven by performance. However, little information and limited research is done in this area.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Existing career transition models

Existing career transition models by Schlossberg (1981), Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) and Stambulova (2003) view coping processes and strategies as central in a transition. They emphasized a match between the transition demand and the athlete's resources as key to successful coping. Athlete's resources define as any internal and external factors such as prior experiences, motivation, social and financial support, that can facilitate the coping process. Earlier frameworks had focused mainly on career termination which was either based on social gerontology (i.e. the study of ageing) (Rosenberg, 1981) or thanatology (the study of the process of dying or death) such as the one by Kubler-Ross (1969). In contrast to existing transition models, earlier frameworks received a lot of criticisms and gave very negative notion of career termination. Unlike the social gerontology- and thanatology-based models, researchers characterized retirement more of a process which involves development through life. It is about understanding the phenomenon of athletes transiting in and out of sport.

Schlossberg's (1981) model of athletic transition provides a useful fundamental framework for understanding the phenomenon of athletes' career transitions in and out of sport. It is also known as the model of analyzing human adaptation to transition (Figure 1.). Instead of focusing solely on retirement, the model assists us in examining this phenomenon as a holistic lifespan perspective. The three interacting factors influencing positive adaptation to transition suggested by Schlossberg (1981) are: the characteristics of the individual, the characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments and the individual's perception of the transition. The last factor mentioned is particularly relevant to the context of the present study as it seeks to elicit athletes' perceptions of their relationship with the sports systems and/or governing bodies. These bodies are usually responsible for identifying talents, grooming and seeing them through the various phases of their athletic career transitions until the ultimate transition out of sport.

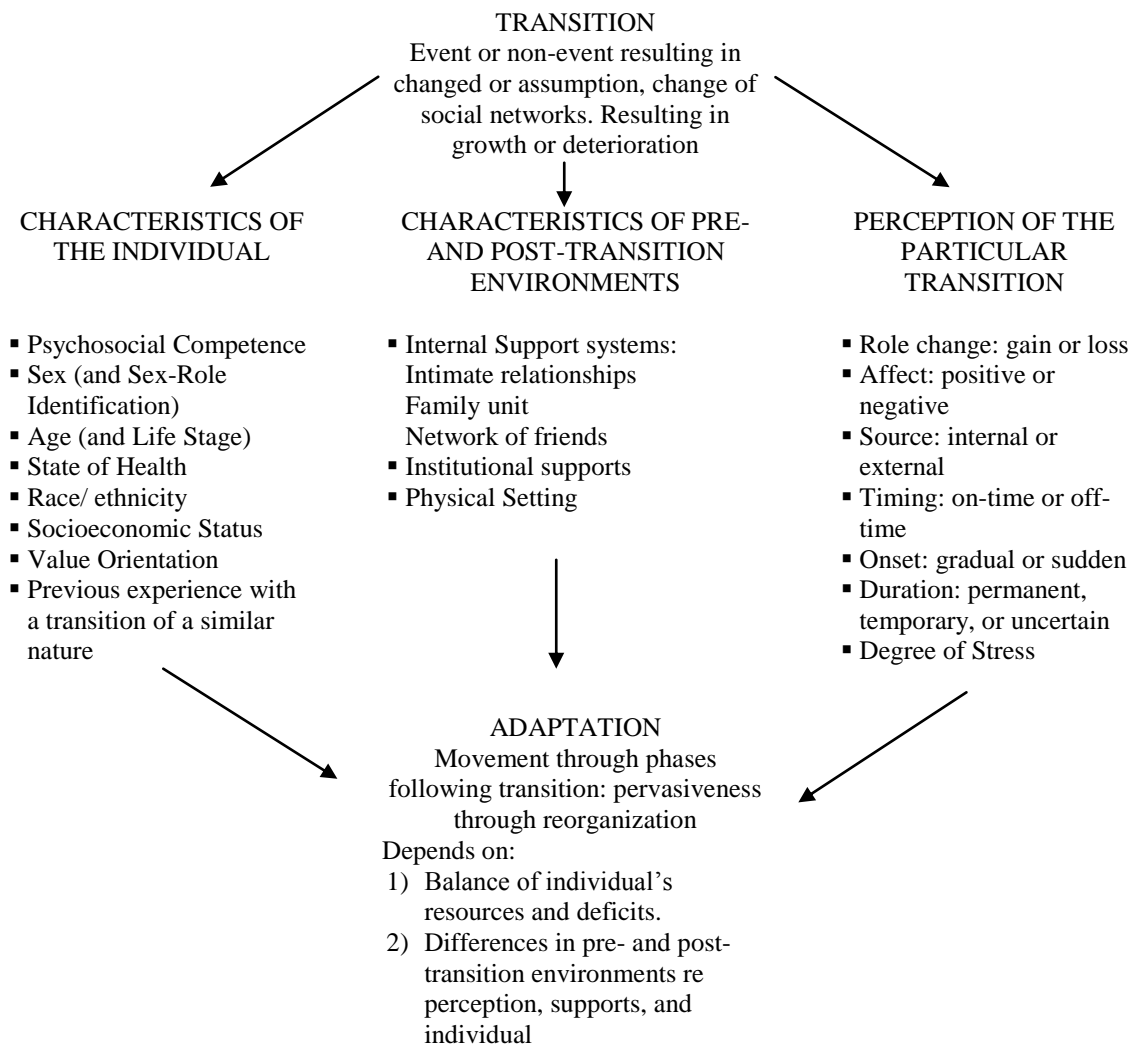


Figure 1. Schlossberg's (1981) model for analyzing human adaptation to transition

According to Schlossberg's (1981) model, the term transition can either be an event or non-event, and has the potential to trigger a change of assumptions about the athlete's worth as a person and the world. This change in assumptions leads to a corresponding change in the athlete's behaviours and relationships in relation to the newly perceived environment. As change is said to be the only constant factor that happens in the environment, an individual will try his or her every means to reduce anxiety that comes with the change. Transition in athletic career is akin to transition in non-sports occupations of a non-sports individual. It carries a strong connotation of negativity. When confronted with transition and change, one's instinct will automatically gather whatever resources he or she has and restore stability back into his or her life. One way is to quickly adapt and assimilate oneself to the new expectations to reduce any

possibility of further disruptions. This has been the reaction of every athlete during the transition that happens throughout the athletic career. McKnight (2007) stated that transition requires a form of coping process which can potentially result in either negative or positive outcomes on the part of the athletes. The ability to adapt depends on the balance of the demands of the transition and personal resources (Schlossberg, 1981).

In the words of Vaillant (1977, p.29), what shaped our future is not the isolated childhood traumas, but rather the quality of sustained relationships with other people. In the context of an athletic career, relationships with coaches, sports managers, counsellors and sports psychologists are crucial in determining the outcomes of transitions. Of course, one would anticipate positive rather than negative outcomes, but this is not necessarily so. In fact, an interview conducted by Schlossberg and Leibowitz (in press) with men whose jobs had been eliminated revealed that the outcome of a transition has both negative and positive aspects for the same individual. The loss of job was initially shocking and a terrifying experience. However, the three-month follow-up interview with the same individual revealed that he felt lucky, 'saleable' and had more options to explore. In the aforementioned example, the transition is not so much a matter of change as the perception of the change by the individual experiencing it.

Transitions often occur with individualised consequences and produce feelings that are either negative or positive. Cook and Robertson (1991) supported this and concluded that adjustment varies depending on the individual. For example, athletes at elite levels experienced more trauma and longer adjustment process after retirement when compared to college athletes. The demands and expectations that come with being elite-level athletes are definitely more and maybe totally different than at college level. Moreover, McKnight (2007, p.12) mentioned that athletes who have placed so much energy into sport at a very young age often develop a lack of interest in other areas. This lack in non-sports interest in particular leads to a restricted vision of themselves and the society.

On the one hand, successful coping with crisis-transitions improves the athlete's chances of having a longer career in sport as well as effectively adjusting to post-athletic career (Stambulova et. al, 2009). It enables the athlete to be more receptive and

well-prepared in re-adjusting his or her life back into the 'societal norms'. This is necessary as the athlete has been leading a rather different lifestyle and routine during the days of training and competing at elite level. For some, they may be having an almost celebrity-like status in their specialised field. Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente and Cruz (2004) in their study of athletes' image of retirement termed these athletes as 'media-athletes' who had achieved some social significance.

In order to reduce occurrence of crisis-transitions issues commonly experienced by retiring athletes, a concerted effort in developing several career transition programmes has been made by governing bodies and sports institutes as recently as the past 20 years (Anderson & Morris, 2000). Countries like Australia, Canada, the United States and recently the United Kingdom (U.K.) have designed specialised career transition programmes to assist their elite-level athletes. Going by different acronyms unique to each national sporting organisation, the main goal of these programmes is to develop the athletes' professional career while achieving their sports-related goals (Olympic Job Opportunities Program, 1996). Athletes are offered services relating to career planning, education, personal development and career transition support. Programmes on personal development for instance, offer athletes courses on personal finance planning and job-seeking skills. Career planning provides advice on job suitability and options, while career transition support offers consultation on coping with sports injury, stress and retirement from sport.

2.2 Issues with career transition programmes.

Career transition programmes that are designed based on performance-reward equity may not benefit the majority of the athletes. Such programmes can result in being available only to an exclusive few. Nevertheless, it may seem justifiable to sports systems as the concept of 'equity' for athletes competing at international level for their country to receive in return, an assurance of a post-sports career. After all, the athletes have invested their youth, energy, time and commitment to pursue their passion for sport and betterment of the national sporting scene. Unfortunately, underlying criteria imposed on athletes and the sort of services available to them may have caused the

continued perception of unimportance to have concrete post-athletic career plans. The aforementioned plausible points can be illustrated in the following scenario:

Athlete A and Athlete B have been competing in the same sport at elite level for the same number of years. Both are equally committed and have invested a large part of their lives to training. Athlete A has been winning more medals and breaking new personal bests vis-a-vis Athlete B. Athlete B has been consistent in performance. Based on the notion of performance-reward equity, who is a more worthy athlete?

Hence, what usually entails in the event of the above scenario would be that Athlete A receives a slightly differentiated programme and career plan in order to acknowledge his or her exemplary contributions. This works as a form of reward or service to athletes who have performed to their potential and showed progress. Transitions in and out of sport for Athlete A will be smoother because a sense of accomplishment is felt by the athlete for having attained personal goals as well as goals set by the sports system (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The athletic experience is viewed as positive, inducing a higher level of trust in the sports system. Contrary to this, Athlete B may feel marginalised and start to see a conflict in the role and relationship with the support environment; in this case the sports system. Athlete B may contest on the grounds of similar commitment and invested time put into training as Athlete A, but may not be as talented or in the case of team sport, may not have had enough opportunity to display potential.

Werthner and Orlick (1986) reported that many athletes feel they are being used (and abused) by the sports systems in terms of funding or being cut off because of their age. Some athletes felt that they have been coerced to retire because of the politics surrounding the system itself. The researchers further elaborated that the sports system looks after the athletes while they compete but often offers little support in the retirement process.

A cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian and Russian athletes on their reactions to sports career termination confirmed that athletes do not have full control over their sports career (Alfermann et. al, 2004). Making a proper professional choice,

or planning retirement in advance is difficult as the athletes are still heavily reliant on the decisions of the sports authorities. In this regard, Alfermann et.al (2004) also suggested further research on the relationship between national sports systems and athletes' reactions to athletic career termination.

2.3 Sports system in Singapore – A brief overview

Singapore Sports Council (SSC) is the main governing body responsible for establishing the sporting scene and culture in Singapore. Under the purview of SSC, are the Singapore Sports Institute (SSI) and National Sports Associations (NSAs). Both organizations collaborate in developing successful frameworks for elite sport. The central role of SSI is assisting NSAs to identify and bridge gaps in their existing system for elite national athletes to pursue international success. It includes providing these athletes with a wide range of programmes and services to support their individualized trainings and competitions. Two such programmes are the Programme for Athletes' Career and Education (PACE) and the Sports Excellence Talented Elite Athletes Management (spexTEAM).

The PACE seeks to assist elite national athletes in balancing sports achievements with their education and career. Athletes in PACE will receive job placement, job preparation workshops, education counseling, career development planning and personal development. However, only existing 'carded' athletes under the spexTEAM programme and ex-national athletes who have retired from sports are eligible for PACE. Hence, elite national athletes who or whose sports are not under the spexTEAM programme will not qualify. The spexTEAM programme is a carding system and follows stringent guidelines when admitting athletes.

There are variations in pathways for aspiring athletes to be recruited into the national-level team and/or the spexTEAM programme. Usually, an individual or group of individuals under the age of 18, who have shown outstanding performance at the annual National Schools Competitions, will be identified to go for selections in the national youth squad. If chosen, they will attend trainings in addition to those by their schools or clubs. Youth athletes in the national youth team will move on to the main (national)

team if they continue to show progress, unless they did not perform to expectations or decided to withdraw from the team due to other reasons. Little is known if athletes who withdrew and ended their career received some form of support from the system especially if they are not in the spexTEAM programme.

The present study aims to fill in the gap between existent research findings on career transition and retirement assistance, and the receiver (i.e. the athlete). To reiterate, the shift in perspective and the various frameworks of career transitions assistance implemented may not have been administered as intended. This study will also add to the existing research on career transitions from the various frameworks of Schlossberg (1981), Taylor & Ogilvie (1994) and Stambulova (2003). For example, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) suggested in their qualitative approach study on career transition the fact that enough work has not been done to uncover other factors and elements in the transition process. Athletes' perception on the relationship between their role and that of the system in regard to career transition may be one of these elements that warrant further investigation.

One of the more recent studies on athlete retirement using the qualitative approach was published by Torregrosa et. al (2004). The authors interviewed 18 active athletes representing nine Olympic sports, asking in-depth questions about their sports career from its initiation to the process of disengaging from elite sport. Instead of using existing models that transition-based; the study adopted a grounded theory approach. The collected data was systematically analysed for meaning and contents before being coded into three thematic stages representing elite athletes' image of retirement. The results showed that the athletes' view of retirement changed from none to a very clear image as they progressed through the stages leading to disengagement from elite sport. Torregrosa et. al (2004) also proved that allowing the athletes to drive the theory development added substantial information to already existing ones.

3. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to inquire how retired elite athletes perceive a relationship between their athletic career and the sports system with regard to transitions in and out of sport. Therefore, the main questions guiding this thesis were:

- (1) How do athletes perceive the role(s) and relationship of the system in assisting their transitions in and out of sports?
- (2) If there is none or little support from the system, what does the athlete perceived as essential to a smoother retirement and adjustment process (in terms of preparation, skills, etc.)?
- (3) According to their perceptions, how important is the role played by institutionalised sport system in athletes' career transitions and development?

4. METHOD

4.1. Participants

The participants of the study were four retired athletes (3 males; 1 female) from individual and team sports. The selection of participants was purposive based on the criteria set according to the aims of the study: they must have left their athletic career, and represented the country (i.e. Singapore) at international-level competitions. Initially, five participants responded to the study. However, during the selection, one participant who had attended national-level training but had not competed at international-level competitions was excluded.

All participants were recruited through referrals from two independent sources that have contacts with athletes. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years. The sports represented were athletics, field hockey, floorball and sepaktakraw. Sepaktakraw, also known as “foot volley” in other parts of the world, is a popular native sport in South-East Asia region played using a rattan ball which allows players to use their foot, knee, chest and head to contact it.

4.2 Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used to elicit an in-depth response from participants. It allowed the researcher and participants to engage in a conversation whereby initial questions were modified in light of participants’ responses. In accordance with the guidelines suggested by Kavale (1996), participants were asked broad questions first, followed by probes and clarification questions to obtain more specific information when needed. The conducting of the interview was sufficiently flexible to allow participants to raise and discuss issues which had personal relevance. Time and place of the interviews were arranged individually according to each participant’s preferences.

4.3 Procedures

Prior to their individual interview, each participant read and signed an informed consent (Appendix 1a, 1b) and completed a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix 2). The information from the questionnaire helped expedite the interview process and directed the questions to focus on their narrative experiences. Each participant was taken through a predetermined set of questions in the same manner varying only in sequence according to the flow of the interview. This enhanced the fluency and richness of the data (Patton, 2002). All interviews were undertaken in person, by the same researcher and lasted between 26 and 40 minutes. At the request of the participants, interviews were conducted at their home, office and/ or location with minimal interruptions. All participants were assured of their confidentiality and the information shared is solely for the purpose of the study.

4.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in their whole content. There were a total of four transcripts. Each transcript was approximately 8 pages long, single-spaced and Arial font 12. Bodily gestures and intonations were included as part of the transcript. They may indicate strength and depth of feelings accompanying verbal statements, which can provide a context for subsequent analysis (Kavale, 1996). Before analysis, each participant received their completed transcript via e-mail and asked to verify content accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). None of the participants returned their transcript with corrections. The transcripts were read a number of times to ensure a sound knowledge and familiarization of the data as a whole before being analyzed according to the procedures of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The aim was to explore in detail the participants' view of the topic under investigation. In this study, it was their interpretations of events that happened with the sport system during their athletic career. According to Smith (1996), IPA can be used to develop an in-depth description of individuals' experience.

Firstly, raw data themes were identified and coded based on participants' quotations that described their subjective experiences. The process of coding raw data themes was repeated until no new themes emerged. Next, raw data themes of similar meanings or having interrelationships were grouped together into sub-themes. Lastly, similar sub-themes were further grouped into an overarching theme and given appropriate headings to represent them.

4.5 Establishing Trustworthiness

In this study, the following measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis. A pilot interview was conducted by the same researcher to estimate the approximate time taken for the interview process, and validate that the questions asked were of relevance to the purpose of the study. Analysis of data from this interview was done in consultation with an independent academician who has experience with qualitative research methodology. The data from this interview was not included with that from the actual four interviews, but acted as a point of reference for internal coherence and presentation of evidence. Smith (1996) posited internal coherence and presentation of evidence as two of the most important criteria in qualitative research.

The pilot interview analysis was essential and allowed the researcher to become more aware of his presuppositions about the phenomenon being studied. At the time of conducting the study, the researcher had experience competing at national youth level and officiating at international youth level competition. His predisposition has been largely influenced by the same societal norms and contexts that he and the participants share. His impression of the topic was indifferent but leaning towards negative.

5. RESULTS

Four overarching themes emerged from the data (Table 1.). These are: social support needs, conflict in identity, making sense of reality and recommendations for future. Selected quotations relating to the themes are interspersed with the researcher's interpretations. Given that the participants were reflecting on past life events, their accounts reflect meanings these experiences hold at the point of interview. All participants discussed their experience as mainly a negative one. However, there were some that could be categorized as positive especially on themes relating to family support and self-initiative in making a new career after sports (*the need to move on*).

Throughout the narratives, the term National Sports Association (NSA) refers to the national governing bodies of sport which comes under the purview of a larger organization known as Singapore Sports Council (SSC). Sports clubs come under the constitution of respective NSAs, whose operation is regulated by SSC. Thus, the use of NSA is analogous to the federation or association, and refers to the sport system.

Table 1. Overarching themes emerging from the analysis of data

Main Themes	Support received	Conflict of identity	Making sense of reality	Recommendations for future
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of support from NSAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Athletic self versus other self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Athletes as dispensable commodities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Objectivity in governance
Sub Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lack of understanding ▪ Family support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The struggle for direction ▪ The struggle to withdraw 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A continued struggle ▪ The need to move on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The need for transparency ▪ Collaboration with potential employers

5.1. Support received

A lack of support by NSAs

The perceived lack of support both financially and emotionally from the National Sporting Association (NSA) was prevalent across all sports. Participants still expressed disappointment and frustration in the lack of funding to cover their training and other

associated costs. The track athlete revealed the amount he had received and what he deemed as insufficient:

“For training, ok there’s this programme called SPEX but then the amount Sports Council is giving us is like, is too little throughout the whole year, it’s just like \$250 per year... This is for my whole year training allowance... Yes, regardless of how many competitions.”

He felt that as a recognized governing body of the sport, NSA should be more informed of the cost involved in the training and development. Other participants did not disclose the amount due to it (the amount) being insignificant: ‘... the federation tried to reimburse like transport and all of that but it wasn’t very much.’ The hockey player rationalized this issue as stemming from a societal level:

“..., the support wasn’t great from the federation. I think at that point in time, I think in general, in Singapore, there was not much support so there wasn’t really much funding.”

The floorball player echoed similar sentiment and added that ‘the funding from the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) differs for every sport. Some get more and some lesser funding, depending on the merit of sports. Being the only participant in the interview who had represented the country in a few different sports; he also experienced the stark discrepancies between how one sport is perceived as more merited than another:

“Oh yeah, they [hockey] did give us transport and training allowances, but not in floorball. Even up till today, they [the players] are still forking out their money to play in the National Team for floorball tournaments.”

In some instances, athletes were left to seek their training and financial needs by themselves. The track athlete’s narrative expressed this situation as akin to being at the organization’s ‘mercy’:

“...one of my friends is also like he searched [for] his own coach and he also like had to pay with his own money at first until the association helped him. That is also after like few months begging them to help.”

The same participant went on to add that the lack in emotional support reflected the accountability and seriousness of NSA towards athletes' welfare and development. He anticipated more involvement from the system which he considered supposedly to be responsible in looking after and preparing athletes for competitions. He felt fortunate to have saved on training cost but empathised with other team mates who were not in his position:

“I doubt the association helped me a lot in athletic because in terms of training, they are not even aware where I am training, they are not even, they don't even know what I do in training. So every year all I have to do is update who is my coach and the coach is also, luckily the coach is my uncle, so I don't have to pay anything but I'm not sure about other athletes.”

The hockey player summed up the roles and responsibilities played by the NSA throughout her athletic career as: ‘In and all itself, it was very...I would say it wasn't a very supporting environment in that sense.’ She felt the organization should have been active to athletes' constraints as it has always been and still seen as an institution where athletes have come to depend on in terms of being selected and groomed to be a national athlete.

A lack of understanding

There were also evidences in participants' accounts of perceived a lack of understanding of their commitment towards serving the nation and as employees of an organization where they worked. This had some adverse consequences to their career. The floorball player felt marginalized and suggested that the question of his loyalty was short changed due to the number of times he had to be away for trainings and competitions. For example, he mentioned: ‘In general for all national athletes, they are given a 90-day of unrecorded leave in a year.’ However, this was less practiced by many employers and if so, was with consequences. He illustrated:

“I had problems with my promotion because I am a National Player. Sounds weird, but that is the truth. I feel that we have been victimized when it comes to promotion. I am proud to be able to represent my country but at the same time my career is also ruined. I finally decided to leave my job in 2002 and do what I love to do, that is coaching.”

Others were not as fortunate too as the following statement from the hockey player pictured the norm of athletes who struggled to find time for training from their working life:

“So some of them did have difficulty like trying to get leave to come for training or sometimes they have meetings so they have to coming for trainings late and things like that.”

The need for collaboration between NSAs and employers were evident in order to raise awareness of the plight of their employees who are serving as national athletes. Based on the participants’ narratives, being national athletes were seen as a burden to employers.

Family support

Family support was of significance to all participants. They discussed this in terms of moral obligation, feeling of indebtedness and fear of burdening their family further if they were to continue with the athletic career. The track athlete expressed his gratitude and affirmed a few times during the interview how his parents had been supportive throughout his athletic career:

“They are very supportive over athletics, over me choosing athletics. Somehow they are kind of like my sponsor throughout my whole career...Like in 2009 I was like preparing for SEA Games; I kind of took like a year off from study and work. And my parents were the one who sponsored me throughout the whole year... Everything, top to bottom, supplements everything my parents.”

The support from significant others started early for all participants, even before they were being selected to the national squad. They were appreciative for the trust that had been given by family members for them to pursue sport as one of their paths in life. As The floorball player related his initial involvement in sports:

“They actually have never stopped me to play. They told me that “If you love to do this, you just keep doing it as long as you don't get into trouble or something else” I still remember the day when my late father signed my boxing consent form without my Mom’s knowledge; they had a small argument. My late dad actually signed the consent form when she was sleeping you know [laughs], but on the day when I was supposed to fight, she actually made a special breakfast for me. In a way she gave her blessings ah you know. I was only around 14 years old when this happened.”

Being a national level athlete posed some dilemma to most participants especially when they had to travel overseas for trainings and competitions around the same time some crucial events were about to happen in their family. They were faced with very difficult decision to make and torn between going overseas and continue representing the country, or withdraw from the team to be with the family. The below quotes from the floorball player and takraw player respectively recounted their dilemma:

“I think the most difficult part was when my wife gave birth to my second daughter, I wasn't around. That was actually the difficult part. But I actually have told my wife that during this period that I would be away. And she... she accepts that. I think I was in India I think that time when... no, no I was in Hong Kong. I was in Hong Kong when she gave birth to my second daughter on ...I I was having my hockey tournament over there. And I received news that she gave birth to my second daughter. (laughs... mixed reaction) That was the most difficult part.

...when I found my wife that time was pregnant with my first daughter, I supposed to...I request for a rest for that SEA [South East Asia] Games at Jakarta. So they try to hold my request telling me I'm captain of the team so they need my service. So I said “Ok” since you respect me, my duty as a captain and

with a condition they will take care of my wife. And my wife is 7 months, anything can happened to my wife.”

The decision did not seem to come easy for them as they somewhat felt that they had neglected their role and responsibilities as a husband to be around during such crucial moment. The floorball player was and still indebted to his wife and ardently referred the incident as: ‘these are some of the sacrifices and support that my family had given me.’

5.2 Conflict in Identity

Athletic self versus other self

Participants discussed roles and responsibilities entailing their identity. Other than as a national athlete, participants acknowledged their other roles in a family, and a student of a school or an employee working in another organization. There were many instances when the conflict between these roles and responsibilities, and their athletic identity forced them to make crucial decisions. Decisions on which of the roles should take priority given the situation. It proved to be a struggle and daunting with one (of the roles) usually had to be shortchanged and sacrificed. As a student and national youth athlete, the hockey recounted her struggles for a few years:

“I guess I did not have a good time management. I spent too much playing sports when I was in school that I actually neglected my studies, I was not able to focus on my studies....It depends on how good you are at the time of the age to manage. And I think at that age, at least for me to say for myself I wasn’t very good at time management and being able to distinguish and having to study and to you know train, it took a lot from me. So like there were...when I had to do my O-levels, I actually stopped hockey a year.”

In retrospect, she added that her decision to prioritize one over the other was a predicament. She would not have known then and even now if her decisions were the right ones. She continued:

“I think I don’t know whether I would have gone for the junior world cup, then for SEA Games itself. I mean at the end of the day, I think it was like a self choice. You had to make a choice if you had to sacrifice one, would you sacrifice your studies or would you sacrifice your sports given time and space.”

She felt rather overwhelmed by the demands of such situation, and at times had to determine what was best for her. She recalled: ‘A lot of times I do find even for myself when you come out of junior college, you are still very young to decide what you want to do for the rest of your life...’. Her school intervened and helped her and those alike made through their academics by making some exceptions. But it made her wonder if that was to their benefit:

“The federation didn’t have, I think it came more of the school, St Theresa’s [school] and what it was, was those of us who were actually in the team from St Theresa, who were actually exempted from the final year exam for that year so they took our continuous assessment as a grade for that year. Good or bad yeah I don’t know.”

Nevertheless, she was heartened that the school had alleviated some of her concerns especially when the support promised by the sporting organization did not actualize. She reiterated:

“... I think the structure here doesn’t really cater for that at least for when I was playing and I think the support is not fantastic in terms of...I mean there were talks about oh trying to look for tutors for us but that never really fell through.”

Participants who are married also faced the challenges to juggle their time with family, work and trainings. One participant felt that how he performs in each role has an impact on another directly and indirectly. He cited having mutual respect and understanding towards each other’s constraints and responsibilities as cornerstone. His family being there for him in most instances assured his roles and defined a part of his identity:

“I was already married when I was playing for the National Team. So I think my wife has been very supportive and understanding because she herself is a sports

person... She understands what I want but of course as long as I don't neglect my responsibilities being a husband, father, she's fine with it. Yeah just need to balance up. When there's no training and tournament, I would spend time with the family."

The struggle for direction

In relation to the issue of 'lack of support from NSAs', participants often cited immense responsibilities to take charge of their life at that point in time. For the hockey, given her age and capacity of what she was going through as a student, she clearly needed some form of directions. Even though she managed to decipher what path to take eventually, she opined that support from the social environment (and key actors) could have been rendered to assist in the decision making and alleviate her or any athlete's concerns better:

"But I think at the end of the day, it's quite a big decision for anybody to make at a young age. And if a person that young an age has to make that decision like in secondary school for example, I think you know the associations and the adults around that individuals will have to really inform the child quite well to be able to or at least provide support if it goes either way, if it goes well, that's fine. If it doesn't work out, then there's something the individual can fall back on."

The struggle to withdraw

To a certain extent, participants felt pointless to represent and do the country an honour. The latter indirectly affected their identity as national athletes and some questioned their own decision to invest a considerable part of their life in pursuing the sport further. The track athlete highlighted his sentiment:

"I think I should just stepped down because there's no point in continuing when there's no support, there's no everything and I'm doing this with my own money, just want to help Singapore win something. But at the end of the day, they just

put you down so I think it's quite unfair and I think stepping down is a good move."

Participants felt unappreciated considering their commitment and effort that had been invested in trainings. These factors even though subjective, were deemed necessary and worthy when assessing athletes who took on their roles seriously. They were often overlooked by more objective measures such as performance outcome that has always been of utmost concern to the NSAs:

"I think the association should help us develop throughout the whole season, before that they should just see our progress and not just based on competition and to see how fast we run..."

He continued to express dissatisfaction and emphasized: 'After last year I decided to quit athletic because I think that I was treated unfairly. So after much thought I think it's time for me to step down.' The situation had led him to feel that he was treated no different than a non national athlete. There was no exclusivity in treatment of athletes. He related a recent incident that led him to eventually withdraw:

"I was one of the top 6 [fastest timed] to go to the 2011 SEA Games. But then somehow they decide to make another arrangement, another competition so called a private meet whereby there's supposed to be 4 athletes to compete but in the end, it turns out only me and another guy...I was given a last minute notice, say like one week before the meet."

He elaborated that he underperformed for the private meet as it was during his 'off-season' period and that he was not supposed to be competing for any races for 3 months. He attended nevertheless as he felt obligated by the organization's request. His timing for that day was used to determine his place in the team for the upcoming SEA Games. He did not qualify. The participant felt betrayed by the system both by the actual turn out of the meet and the decision to use the result over the best timings he had produced throughout the year during official meets. The two athletes who did not turn up still earned their places in the team. He concluded:

“To be honest throughout the whole year of last year, I went for overseas training and I was consistently doing like top 4. But then, normally top 4 would run the relay but then I’m always like the reserved. Top 4, ok again I’m reserved for it happened 3, 4 times. So I think it’s quite unfair.”

5.3 Making sense of reality

Sports don’t pay

Given the societal norm that prioritized academia over sporting excellence, the participants had to come to terms about ending their athletic involvement sooner or later. The reality of things became more apparent when they felt futile in furthering their pursuit regardless of their commitment and effort. In addition to the less supportive environment, they also recognized the limited opportunities sports may open the door for them to make a life-long career. As quoted by the hockey player:

“I mean some players let’s say they committed themselves and at the end of the day, who’s going to put a roof over your head? Who’s going to feed you, clothe you? Yeah your daddy, mommy would do a good job for awhile but after a while they will tell you “I think you have to do it yourself” so...hmm I think at the end of the day, most of us do realize the reality of it all so we would still play to a certain extent but after awhile we would then kind of stop.”

The same participant who was well informed about the remuneration other players of the same sport in other countries compared the stark differences in opportunities and life after her athletic career:

“And it’s not my...we didn’t really have jobs lined up for us you know after we finished our SEA Games you know not like in Australia, all the players are taken care of like they you know the Commonwealth [Games] players, the Olympic players you know which I had the privilege to play with but they all have jobs lined up and they all had money that was waiting for them and everything like that. Where else, we don’t have that.”

In her account, she was envious of how other countries' system provided support for their athletes. It was not the sheer monetary value or material gains that were of concern to her (and other participants) but the acknowledgement of national athletes who had sacrificed a considerable part of their time and life to play sports for the country.

Athletes as dispensable commodities

The notion of value of an athlete's contribution to the sport was distinct between all participants. Their accounts emphasized that athletes were not acknowledged appropriately for their hard work and contribution. Their welfare and needs were often overlooked. They voiced the need to be remunerated enough for their commitment and time whilst juggling other roles in their lives. Of more concern, they felt insecure and vulnerable to be replaced any time in spite of performing well. And there were no evidences of initiatives on the part of the sport system (NSA) to retain them and improve the situation. This has led to high attrition rate among athletes before they reached the end of their athletic career. A premature dropout not due to age or injuries:

“So I think a lot of times people have made the choice to give up the sport because it is within the local context it would not pay you. I mean soccer is probably one of the very few you know, because they got sponsors, they are semi-pros or pros in that sense. And they do generate certain amount of income revenue but not all sports are like that but if you are looking at you know then representing and sacrificing life, they need to be taken care of.”

The word 'pay' used by the hockey player did not refer to solely monetary remuneration in exchange of time and effort, but goes beyond in terms of intangible benefits such as satisfaction and a sense of belonging. There was less care and concern for athletes throughout and after their involvement during their athletic career. As narrated by the floorball player:

“Sad to say, that there is no proper support from the federation once the career is over or if the players got injured. One of my national players got involved in a serious accident recently, but there was no support given to him. He did come to me and I gave him a job to look after my shop for about 6 months. It's rather sad

to see that nothing much has been done to take care of the athletes' welfare. Perhaps that could also be the reason why some parents do not want their children to play sports at a higher level [National Team]"

The state of a national level athlete from the account reflected unaccountability of NSAs in the welfare of their athletes. The track athlete who recently exited the system exemplified the indifferent response by his NSA committee when he announced his intention to quit:

"None of them came back and ask me 'Oh XXXX, you should come back running'. In fact, when I say I want to step down, they were just 'Ok'. That's all."

A continued struggle

The hockey player mentioned that it was not easy for athletes when they leave their career even it was to their own decision. She explained that since a large part of their time (and life) was spent on training and going for competitions, it had somewhat limited other developments of the athlete such as social interaction skills and academic readiness. It was not only problematic for the athlete when suddenly the organization or system that they thought could depend on failed, but was also left in search to start things from beginning:

"You don't know people, you have no connections and the people you depend on are really the people who are within the federation to help you do that networking...I mean to some extent I think the sport itself has contributed a little bit in terms of you know: the discipline, being able to do what you do but I think in terms of the practicality of it on who's going to hire you when you are done if you don't, we're in Singapore so it's quite realistic you need the paper qualification and if you don't have the minimum, it's hard."

She made this statement based on the general norm for a national level athlete living in Singapore and inferences from other team mates whom she knew had suffered from the limited support from the system. On the one hand, she expressed that athletes should

also be aware of their own potential in the sport in order to gauge if they could make a stable income out of it:

“But I think you know if you realize your potential there’s a limit to it then you can then fall back on. I would say do not give up on your studies but to have something you can fall back on...”

The need to move on

Participants realized that they had to carve out something for their future to sustain themselves and for those who are married; their family. They had foresight of things from the situations they had gone through. This was clearly expressed by the floorball player:

“Ok, I realized that my playing career will end very soon. I still want to impart my knowledge of the game at the same time I also wanted it to have a stable income. So I get involved in coaching and later I managed to become the sole distributor for X3M/ Salming Sports Equipment.”

He resigned from his initial job as it had affected his promotions as previously mentioned. He wanted to continue playing the sport and at the same time having a job that allowed this flexibility. He chose coaching as it allowed him to be directly involved in sports and managed his own business where he could have the flexibility. He started his company dealing with floorball equipment with the help of another friend who was also involved in the sport. He continued:

“Yes, I must say it is through my own hard work and with the support of my family, wife, children and friends that I manage to be where I am now. I also give opportunity to the younger players who want to try coaching.”

5.4 Recommendations for future

The interviews concluded by asking participants what recommendations they have for the system and future of their sport. Participants most often commented being objective in governance, the need for structured programmes, the need for transparency and development of athletes while under the system through collaboration with potential employers.

Objectivity in governance

Participants described instances of lacking in objectivity in the governance of NSAs from athletes welfare to selection criteria, and remuneration of performances that met expectations. The track athlete described how: ‘sometimes the association might treat us differently though we are a team’. And that preferential treatment was given to some and not others depending on their affiliations:

“If you are part of the WINGS Athletics, you will be given somehow a special treatment whereby you get; somehow you get whatever you want, let’s say you want to choose for overseas trip in wherever you want to go, they will give you sanction to go. But for SWIFT, they will still give the same treatment, if you are top 6 and you are from SWIFT, they will still send you for an overseas meet, but then they will try to push their athletes more from WINGS.”

The need for structured programmes

The participants echoed the need for a formal structure to assist in transitioning into, within and eventually out of the athletic career. The structure that they had gone through from the time they were selected as national level athlete to the end of their career was deemed as not systematic as quoted by the hockey player:

“I think at that point when I was still playing, it kind of like it wasn’t that organized, it’s just more of whoever stayed in the sport kind of then you kind of

moved on. And if you are of reasonable fitness, or of play ability then you know you just... it's a natural move yeah

...After that, yeah then that seems like the junior team kind of stopped for a while then you just went on to the national team. So it's kind of like a progression, kind of like they picked you from here and went on. And if you're still playing at that point in time, then you just went on..."

Both the floorball and takraw player who are still involved indirectly with his sport observed that the situation had not changed since when they were playing. Especially for the takraw player who saw the stagnation for two decades:

"At the moment, I noticed that at the school scene is very active in promoting the game, with more tournaments and teams taking part in the game. But when players reach the age of 16-17 years, there is no follow up action on the players thus the standard of the game will drop. (floorball player)"

He continued that even with a recent addition to the existing structure that he got to know, he questioned the decision and purpose for it. He saw no prospect for athletes to progress from one stage to another within the athletic career and the issue of athletes' constraints was still not addressed:

"Recently they have a combined school team but where is the direction? Where do these players go after playing for Combined School Team? I'm sure these players will improve gradually, maybe from the school to club and to National Feeder Team and so on... As to what I know even the recent Men's World Floorball Championship [WFC] 2010 tournament was not well prepared. The main players are not able to play because some of them are representing Singapore in a hockey tournament, in the end another set of players went for the WFC, and they did not do well."

Objectivity in governance should also concern with the athletes' welfare given the commitment invested by them per se. Inefficiency and/ or incompetency within the governing committee should not involve the athletes. The hockey player expressed it as:

‘...it would take a really major overhaul on really putting systems in place and really there must be a lot of checks and balances.’ She continued:

“And the governing body cannot have, must be very, very objective. It cannot be a governing body whereby it’s either baggages or you know I think we all know that like you know that certain associations with baggages or with biasness. I think it must be because at the end of the day, it’s the interest of the athletes at heart regardless of the sport he or she plays. If he or she is going to sacrifice time and or studies, for a particular sport, and if it is something that the country wants to endorse or wants to support; they then have to come in and really give full support.”

In relation to performance outcome, appropriate remuneration for performances that met expectations should consider developing athletes further than just being good for a one-off event. The track athlete emphasized:

“..., there should have a career path for the athletes. Let’s say when you start your career as an athlete and when you finish, when you end, when you retire from athletic where you should go and carry on with your other life.”

The need for transparency

Participants discussed the need for transparency in terms of the selection criteria and progress within the athletic career. The track athlete felt that the committee deciding on the make out of the team should comprised of members from various clubs under the NSAs charge:

“I think it should be a mixture of all the clubs should be in the committee. I think it should be a mixture of all the clubs should be in the committee.... Athletic clubs, all of them should be in SAA so that each and everyone could voice out and I think to select the national team if everyone voiced out, there should be fairness in whatever decision they make.

It was much easier at that point of time because we based on top 6 and doesn't matter from which club you come in as long you're a top 6, you'll be sent and you'll be treated quite equally."

Since his inception into the national team, the track athlete perceived unfairness in the decisions made by higher authority. For example, favouring an athlete over another based on affiliations of the clubs with NSAs. The floorball player was more critical on the intention of such decision made by NSAs:

There must be a proper planning to develop players. Today, students started playing as young as 8 years old. That's how big the base is and more schools are playing the game now. Sporting bodies or the NSA's must be transparent and honest with their goals and objectives. Whoever is leading the NSA's, they must not have personal agenda or having other motives. I think Singapore can be one of the top teams in the world ranking if the NSA plays an active role in promoting the game.

His thoughts merely expressed his concern for promoting the sport and developing talents which he felt should have been of priority. According to him, the lack in engagement from NSAs, who were more concern with 'personal agendas' can possibly have a negative effect on society: 'Perhaps that could also be the reason why some parents do not want their children to play sports at a higher level (National Team)'. The takraw player added and elaborated how NSAs had invited him to contribute ideas on how to develop the sport (and athletes) further. However, his ideas were either deemed as not feasible or the management was unreceptive. He related the incident:

"...he approached me to share with all the committee and coaches what I know about Sepaktakraw, what should do with these training and so on. Then I come down to the meeting, and Encik Yatiman gives me an honour to speak on my side. I don't think anything about being attacking on the left or attacking on the right. I just say what I find out is basically right or what I found out is good for me to tell... I just started with the welfare of the players. ... now the new batch of players is coming from those working like despatch rider, company jobs so they need support from PERSES, from the main body to [unclear] their welfare. Why

not put them in government jobs like we have right now and you get the time off? Then, between the training, the love of the takraw will be the same level with our time. When our head coach woah I didn't expect he is going to burst. "Ok, we give them \$5000 each. Can they bring back the gold?" And I looked at him, woah he is my instructor when I was taking my first course! ... I don't know where to put my face already [long pause]. Because he straight away yell and shouting in a meeting. I don't expect meeting like that... it's the first time and woah they do a meeting like this? ... "I just tell what I know because to me it comes from my heart, I don't shoot [verbal attack] anybody. Please don't get me wrong."

"Then you said welfare of the players?" [Encik Mahmud].

"Is it wrong or not by telling, because from what I see our welfare that time was given by the department that I work. Now the players come 7.20pm, 8.00pm after work. They didn't get time off, that's the difference".

Then he said "I want to give \$5000 for the players."

Then I said "No, no don't give \$5000...I already burst, don't give them \$5000, give them 1 gun each, so when go to the court, they shoot the opponent, they win." Straight away I go off. Then Encik Yatiman rushed up "XXX, I'm sorry." "Encik Yatiman, I come here just wasting my time. Be honest, I don't want to talk about takraw and sport, I don't want to talk about all these. ...He [Mahmud] is my own instructor, my lecturer when I sat for my first course as a coach. Where am I going to put my face? From there I learnt about PERSES. They are maybe, they are crazy of power, they didn't want my opinion because of power because of ...they didn't want to receive any idea from the start to [unclear]."

Interviewer: From what you said, the point was to give time for...

"Better that means can be a lot of things; time off, good job. If not good job but simple job that even the company or the body that can support to release the players [for training] that's all only. That's what I get, that's what I want them

to get because why, when I get that, I trained 3 days with the National team, another 3 days I trained with the club. 6 days and Sunday I worked with my family. My family no problem already off day as long 1 day...”

The takraw player felt betrayed by the organization whereby to his knowledge and experience had taught him about principles and fairness in sport. The system had come across as an institutionalized body to be relied upon when athletes faced difficulties. The invitation to share his ideas to assist in developing the sport was dashed. The sport of sepaktakraw at that point of time, was not attracting interest from new players. The incident made him lost trust in the system especially about its willingness to care for the athletes and promote the sport.

Collaborations with potential employers

Closely related to the need for transparency, the hockey player illustrated how information may not have been divulged to athletes that could be of benefit to their after career planning:

“But I think it could be the support is there but the athletes have never asked, so the door was never opened or maybe it should not have to be asked because sometimes if playing hockey is all I know what to do, I wouldn't know what question for me to ask to begin with. So I think it would then be the responsibility of the federation or whoever is looking after the athletes, should then maybe say ‘Ok, pave the way for the individual’ in that sense.”

She related that such information should be informed and made known to all athletes and not when being asked. There is a limit to what athletes know about their NSAs and its roles. Such services on career after athletic life would not have come across to them as they yet to see the connection. It could be possibly they were more involved with training. She added:

“And if the federation has connections, then definitely the recommendations coming down from the federation would make a big difference whether or not your athletes would be able to get a job.”

6. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative exploration of a select sample of ex-national level athletes with the aim of inquiring into their lived experiences in their athletic career, in particular the institutionalized sport system in Singapore. The second purpose of this study was to therefore extend Alfermann (2004) recommendation to research on the perceived relationship between the sport system and athletes' reaction to termination. Surprisingly, no study has explored elite athletes' experiences with the sport system. Thus, this study is distinctive, being the first to investigate the phenomenon of athletic experiences in the field of career transition and in the region of South East Asia. Results revealed that athletes in this study overwhelmingly described their experiences in negative terms.

In terms of support received, participants reported negatively perceived lack of support from NSAs from their initiation to post-athletic career. Other emerging sub-themes were lack of support from NSAs, lack of understanding and family support. According to a study by Andersen (2002), coaches needed to take greater responsibility for the athletes' total transitions, including school, since that could make the transition smoother. In this interview, the role of coaches was not explicitly asked and in fact, did not surface in participants' narratives except for two participants: the track athlete who mentioned that the coach was his uncle and the takraw player who had a verbal exchange with his coach on athletes' welfare. The others did not hint any part of their experiences either positive or negative that involved their coaches. It is without doubt coaches form an integral part of the sport system in ensuring a smoother transition as they may be considered as role models to athletes under their charge.

Financial incapacity of sport system has also emerged as a pivotal issue that inhibited athletes' training progress. This has a demoralizing consequence for athletes' pursuit of their athletic career. Bennie and O'Connor's (2004) investigation of track and field athletes showed that the main facilitating factor on a successful transition was a supportive environment regarding the psychological, social and economic situation. The findings were analogous to this study whereby it was evident that at most stages of their athletic career, athletes are dependent on their families for financial related reasons.

Contrary to a study by Carlsson (1998) that stated players who did not make a successful transition to the senior level, reported a greater demand for success from their parents. Parents and significant others were not the cause for less successful transition for this study. In fact, they have been supportive from initiation till termination of the participants' athletic career. The results suggested differences in socio-cultural contexts and norms of athletes in this study compared to the participants of Carlsson's (1998) study. The contexts of Carlsson's (1998) findings of Swedish elite tennis players were from predominantly individualist culture.

In Wurth's study (2001), athletes that perceived they had a successful transition from one stage to another stated that their parents provided more sport related advice and emotional support than athletes that did not succeed in their transition. Lack of support from parents and coaches was the second biggest reason for dropping out of sport. Contrary to Wurth's (2001) study, parents and coaches were not the one of the main reasons for dropping out of sport. Instead, the findings in this study supported the claim that parents and significant others were extremely influential in shaping the emotional responses of youth athletes in their sport involvement (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). Voluntary termination by participants was also based on their own rationalization of the situation and they are not considered underachievers in their sport. Their decisions were supported by their parents and significant others thus, providing a new insight and contrary to Wolfenden and Holt's study (2005) that termination occurs when athletes did not receive as much support from parents.

When athletes transit into higher-level competitive sports, the parents provide the role of a possible refuge for athletes from excessive pressure stemming from high-level competitions (Wylleman, De Knopp, Ewing & Cumming, 2000). Even though, participants in this study did not explicitly recount this phenomenon, they implied a number of incidences that reflected this notion. Participants related how parental and significant others' support enable them to continue at elite level, despite recurring disappointment from the sport system. The uncertainty of the situation they faced was alleviated by the trust given by this same group of individuals especially in terms of making informed decision to either progress with their sport or other roles in life. For example, the hockey player decided to take a year off from hockey to concentrate on her

exams and again during her undergraduate studies. The floorball player also chose to leave the sport at the age where he was at his 'peak' and embarked on his business venture.

The conflict between the roles of an athlete with other roles in their lives is prevalent and experienced by all participants. In line with Pearson and Petipas (1990) study, participants did feel lost and disillusioned when confronted with sudden decision to retire. One difference however, the disillusion was not to the extent of being debilitating. In fact, they kept their persistence to stay in the career until they have 'had enough'. At the same time, they had considered possible post-athletic careers that they could make out given their academic ability and related skills. Some had plans even before they left their athletic career as evident in their narratives. They took full control of planning their career path.

Werthner and Orlick (1986) reported that many athletes feel that they are being abused by the system in terms of fundings and cut off because of their age. The findings in this study extent this area to include not necessarily age but the authority asserted to make decisions based on their interest instead of the athletes' (interest and welfare). In spite of recurring disappointment from the sport system, participants continue to persist and pursue their passion for excellence in their sport.

The participants were forthcoming of the end of their athletic career. Even without assistance in crisis coping, they generated their own form of coping strategies to handle the situation. With regards to post career plans, it was more of a decision that they had to make sooner or later. It does not constitute as a failure per se as they had an informed understanding of how 'stable' their life would be if they were to continue to stay in the sport. The societal and cultural norm is such that the athletes are rooted to their values and obligations to the significant others. They hold themselves responsible to care and provide support for the family which staying longer in sport would not allow them. Even relocating as a coach does not warrant a future, in this term, of having a stable flow of income.

In a knowledge-based economy such as Singapore, sport excellence is not yet a priority as compared to academia. Athletic career is, according to Schlossberg (1981) 'an event',

whether pleasant or unpleasant. The more unpleasant the experience of the event had been, the faster the exit. It is one that athletes have to move on from to their other spheres of life. The preconceived mindset of having an athletic career alone is not one that lasts and guarantees a paid job. Nevertheless, 'if you are in it, you give it all' sort of attitude exist in all the participants. Successful transition in the context of this study does not centre on the athlete alone. They knew what was necessary for the next phase of their life (after athletic career) and made plans for it. Hence, they were not affected if they are going to make it long in sports. Furthermore, treatment of athletes as illustrated in the narratives was not exclusive. The absence of exclusivity made it easier for them to be detached from having high athletic identity. Broadening of identities through alternative endeavour like academia and entrepreneurship became second nature.

The inequality of treatment towards some athletes drove them to voluntarily leave the career. Albeit the athletes themselves did it involuntary, the environment and condition was such that it made the athletes felt not conducive to continue with their pursuit of having an athletic career and representing the country. This led them to question the system's selection criteria which lack transparency. Some criteria had been perceived as biased and suggested that decisions (to be selected for the nationals) were ultimately based on the athletes' networks and connections with 'an insider' of the sport system.

Interestingly, the participants' thoughts and feelings were still not positive after they had left their athletic career. For instance, all of them expressed disappointment on the management of sport system during their time with the system and at the point of interview. The latter is based on information they received from people who are still in the system as well as media reporting about their sports. However, the feeling of perceived distrust with the system likewise from the system towards the athletes was evident in their narratives. Such perception may have resulted from the participants developing multiple coping strategies to deal with the stress of transitioning during their athletic career. The ever changing strategies reported may have influenced their interpretations of the sports system, and affecting the relationship.

While all of the participants expressed disappointment with the support they received from their individual NSA, they did report positive responses from the experience. It is possible that the positive responses could have been attributed by same form of coping

strategies that had developed throughout their career while faced with constant disappointment.

Limitations

Although the findings of this study are critical, they are limited in several ways. The qualitative interview method and the small number of participants do not allow the researcher to determine if the views expressed by them reflect the sentiments of most ex-athletes. The recruitment of participants led to a heterogeneous sample that did not include athletes from merit sports who would probably had another perspectives and experiences of the sport system especially if they were under the PACE and/ or spexTEAM programme. It gave the impression that the negative responses reported as biased, and leaning towards researcher's initial predisposition. However, the consensus across the views expressed would be similar with saturation evident at six interviews. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that a sample size of three is extremely useful enough to allow sufficient in-depth engagement with each individual case with IPA as it allows a detailed examination of similarity and difference in experiences.

Future Research

In the context of this study, sport system has yet to develop a structured programme to assist athletes' transition within and out of their sports career. Athletes' denial and trauma that stemmed from career termination are multi-factor, and probably involved more on the incompetence of the system. More effort should be invested to develop a transitional system for athletes' progress from their athletic career to other spheres of life rather than rendering the need for a separate transition programme. The root of the problem stemmed from subjective management of the existing system.

What we are still oblivious to culturally specific transition studies are the complex reasons and factors for termination of athletic career. Based on results of this study and the given context, termination is not easily identified as explicitly voluntary or involuntary on the part of the athlete. In addition, it may not lie with the athletes' performance itself but ineffective management of the system that impede progress. The

notion of objectivity in governance was also mentioned particularly in this study which reinforces the phenomenon of premature termination.

Networking should be formed on the part of the system to offer opportunities to grow the sport through committed athletes. Sport becomes merely a passion to pursue knowing that it does not guarantee a living. Nevertheless, support is still needed to harness on the hopes of the athletes to promote the sport and healthy lifestyle as a society. The findings of the study revealed that athletes continued to contribute in developing their sport through other alternatives or paths they have created for themselves either as coaches, academicians or consultants. Participants bore little resentment towards the managing of athletes by sport system. They adopted a sanguine approach to their situation and were also cognizant of their future being a consequence of the societal norms that prioritize academia and job stability outside sport sphere.

Further studies of this nature using the IPA would benefit from having cross-cultural comparison in perceptions of the sport systems. Other than the different coping strategies adopted by the athletes, it is essential to instigate the need for sport system to be more refined in their programme design and management. The findings of this study are grounded in the participants' own reality and as such have provided an insight into the lived experiences of the athletic career in Singapore's context. This study adds to the limited qualitative research in particular IPA, on exploring athletes' experience of their career transitions and development with the sport system where their voices are brought forth to inform policy makers and researchers of the issues relating to this topic.

However, these suggestions require further investigation; therefore the researcher hopes this study will stimulate subsequent research to explore the issues raised here, and thus increase our understanding of this under-researched topic in sports psychology field.

REFERENCES

- Alfermann, D., & Stambulova, N. (2007). Career transitions and career termination. In G. Tenenbaum and R. C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 712-736). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Alfermann, D., Stambulova, N. & Zemaityte, A. (2004). Reactions to sports career termination: A cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian and Russian athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 61-75.
- Anderson, D., & Morris, T. (2000). Athlete lifestyle programs. In D. Lavalley, & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp.59-80). Morgantown, WY: Fitness Information Technology.
- Carlsson, R. C. (1998). The socialization of elite tennis player in Sweden: an analysis of the players' backgrounds and development. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, 241-256.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. In M. Torregrosa, M. Boixadós, L. Valiente, & J. Cruz. *Elite athletes' image of retirement: the way to relocation in sport* (p.36). *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 33-43.
- Crook, J. M., & Robertson, S. E. (1991). Transition out of elite sport. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 22, 115-127.
- Kavale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kerr, G., & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). The retirement experience of elite, female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychologist*, 12, 115-133.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McKnight, K. (2007). Athletic career transition and transferable skills (Masters dissertation). University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). Case study research in education. In Thomas, J. R. & Nelson, J. K. (4th ed.), *Research methods in physical activity* (pp. 273-274). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- North, J., & Lavalley, D. (2004). An investigation of potential users of career transition services in the United Kingdom. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 77-84.
- Olympic Job Opportunities Program. (1996 March). In J. North, & D. Lavalley, An investigation of potential users of career transition services in the United Kingdom. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 77-84.

- Patton, M. Q., (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pearson, R. E., & Petitpas, A. J. (1990). Transitions of athletes: Developmental and preventive perspectives. *Journal of Counseling And Development*, 69, 7-11.
- Petitpas, A. J., Brewer, B. W., & Van Raalte, J. L. (2009). Transitions of the student-athlete: Theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. In E. F. Etzel (Ed.), *Counseling and psychological services for college student-athletes* (pp. 283-302). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology
- Rosenberg, E. (1981). Gerontology theory and athletic retirement. In S. L., Greendorfer & A. Yiannakis (Eds.), *sociology of sport: Diverse perspectives* (pp. 119-126). West point, NY: Leisure Press.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9, 2-18.
- Sclossberg, N.K., & Leibowitz, Z. Organizational support systems as buffers to job loss. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, in press
- Sinclair, D. A., & Orlick, T. (1993). Positive transitions from high-performance sport. *Sport Psychologist*, 7, 138-150.
- Smith, J. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology & Health*, 11, 261-271.
- Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In JA Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Methods*. London: Sage. (2nd ed)
- Stambulova, N. (2003). Symptoms of a crisis-transition: A grounded theory study. In N. Hassmen (Ed.), *SIPF Yearbook 2003* (pp. 97-109). Orebro: Orebro University Press.
- Stambulova, N., Alfermann, D., Statler, T., & Côté, J. (2009). ISSP Position Stand: Career development and transitions of athletes. *International Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 7(4), 395-412.
- Stambulova, N. (2010). Counseling athletes in career transitions: The five-step career planning strategy. *Journal of sport psychology in action*, 1, 95-105.
- Stambulova, N. (2010). Professional culture of career assistance to athletes: A look through contrasting lenses of career metaphors. In. T. V. Ryba, R. J. Schinke, and G. Tenenbaum (Eds.), *Cultural turn in sport psychology* (pp. 285-312). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

- Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. C. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 6, 1-20.
- Torregrosa, M., Boixadós, M., Valiente, L., & Cruz, J. (2004). Elite athletes' image of retirement: the way to relocation in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 33-43.
- Werthner, P., & Orlick, T. (1981). Transition from sport: Coping with the end. In K. McKnight (2007). *Athletic career transition and transferable skills* (Masters dissertation). University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada
- Wolfenden, L. E., & Holt, N. L. (2005). Talent development in elite junior tennis: Perceptions of players, parents and coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17, 108-126.
- Wurth, S. (2001). Parental influences on career development. In A. Papaioannou, M. Goudas, & Y. Theodorakis (Eds.), *Proceedings 10th World Congress of Sport Psychology* (Vol. 3, P 21-23). Thessaloniki, Greece: Christodoulidi Publ.
- Wylleman, P., & Lavalley, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. In M. Weiss (Ed.), *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective* (pp. 507-527). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Wylleman, P., DeKnopp, P., Ewing, M. E., & Cumming, S. P. (2000). Transitions in youth sport: A developmental perspective on parental involvement. In D. Lavalley & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp143-160). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Vaillant, G. E. (1977). Adaptation to life. In N. K. Schlossberg. A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9, 2-18. Available at <http://tcp.sagepub.com/content/9/2/2.2> [Feb 25, 2010]



UNIVERSITÄT LEIPZIG

Information Sheet for Participants

Invitation to participate in a research study: Perception of athletes on the roles of the sports system in their transition.

What is the study about?

The main aim of this study is to look into the perception of athletes on sports organizations' roles in assisting them transit within and out of sports.

What will your participation involve?

If you agree to volunteer for the study, you will be interviewed on some questions with regards to the aims of the study. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes and at a location agreed by the researcher and you. All of your responses will be kept confidential.

You may choose not to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. By participating in this study, you are also agreeing that your results may be used for scientific purposes, including publication in scientific journals, so long as your anonymity is maintained. There are no known risks associated with participation in this research.

If you would like to have any more information concerning this study, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you.

Researcher:

Faisal Suptu
University of Jyväskylä
Finland
Tel: (358) 465 964587
e-mail: faisal.m.suptu@jyu.fi

Internal Supervisor:

Dr. Taru Lintunen
University of Jyväskylä
Finland
Tel: (358) 407 532158
e-mail: taru.lintunen@jyu.fi

External Supervisor:

Dr. Dorothee Alfermann
University of Leipzig
Germany
Tel: (49) 341 9731633
e-mail: alfermann@uni-leipzig.de

This letter is yours to keep



Education and Culture DG

ERASMUS MUNDUS



Consent Form

Perception of athletes on the roles of the sports system in their transition

I, _____, have read and understood the accompanying information sheet and discussed the investigation with the researcher, Faisal Suptu. I agree to take part in the investigation with the knowledge that I can withdraw at any time without giving reason and doing so will not affect the treatment I receive. All questions have been answered to my best knowledge.

Signature

Date

Witnessed by



Pre- Interview Letter

Dear XXXXX,

Prior to our scheduled interview on the XX.XX.201X, it would be greatly welcomed if you could complete the following questions. This would serve to enable the interview session to be shorter as well as provide essential data for the research study.

The completed questions can be returned through e-mail, or printed out and completed prior to arrival for me to collect when we first meet. Should you have any queries or comments regarding the questions, please to not hesitate to contact me at (358) 465 964 587 or (65) 8424 6901

1. **Age or date of birth**
2. **Country of origin**
3. **Ethnic group**
4. **Sport**
5. **Affiliations and/ or members to sporting association (year, club name)**
6. **Period of involvement in the chosen sport (at what age did you start to train actively in the sport)**
7. **Education background (year, course name or field of study)**
8. **List of previous international competitions and experiences (e.g. SEA Games, Asian Games, Olympics etc)**

Thank you for your time.

Warm regards,

Faisal Suptu

Interview questions

1. What inspired you to take up this sport?
2. What about the sport that had driven you to pursue to national level and international level?
3. Did you get any satisfaction from the sport? What kind?
4. What do you like best being an athlete? What do you like least?
5. Did your family ever worry about you for choosing this sport or play sport?
6. Has your family been supportive in your involvement? How?
7. Have there been times where trainings have taken a toll over your life (work/ study)?
8. How do you deal with them?
9. How about the sporting associations which you were with? Did they assist you in any way?
10. Did they assist you in your exit from the sport? Why or why not?
11. In your opinion, what does sports bodies/ associations represent?
12. What sort of support would have made the transition better?