

**MILITARY SERVICE AND ELITE PARA ICE HOCKEY: A CASE STUDY OF
AMERICAN PARALYMPIANS' SPORTS PATHS**

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Spring 2020

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ABSTRACT

Master's Thesis, 93 pages

Social Sciences of Sport 2020

This case study explores the influence military service had on American Para ice hockey players' sports paths. The growing number of wounded veterans in America presents challenges and opportunities for elite Para sport talent development and support. Over the past ten years, USA Hockey has been able to establish a very successful Paralympic campaign by incorporating an ever-increasing number of veterans into their squad.

An inductive-deductive research approach was chosen by utilizing the Sports Path Model by Aarresola (2016) as a theoretical framework for this sociological exploration of the factors influencing Para ice hockey players' paths to Paralympic success. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two longest-serving veterans of the U.S. national team. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic-content and frequency analysis. Results indicated that successful rehabilitation and sustainable elite Para sport careers of wounded veterans are closely linked to military support programs and their cooperation with elite Para sport organizations. They were termed institutional support networks. These networks were inextricably dependent on the individuals running and participating in the programs, building the athletes' social capital, and giving them the ability to develop and exercise agency over time. Primarily, this study aims at giving valuable insight into successful talent development within elite Para sport. Secondly, it attempts to outline the unique challenges that arise out of military backgrounds in sporting environments, thus, potentially supporting future talent development efforts.

Keywords: Para ice hockey, social capital, talent development, wounded veterans.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sporting success and athlete development have become increasingly important topics in sport management. Throughout the years, governments have started to put more and more emphasis on the importance of sporting success. The focus here then often lies on cultivating ways to achieve sporting success through different initiatives that are built to ensure a sustainable pool of elite athletes. A lack of sustainable talent identification, as well as talent development were found as key issues in a cross-national comparative study done by Doll-Tepper and Radtke (2014). The term sustainable athletes pool here means that there is a rather constant number of talents being brought up through the development system over the years. Out of this talent pool, the national team officials can then select athletes to represent, for example, the United States on the Paralympic stage. In this Master's thesis, the focus lies on the most popular winter Paralympic sport, namely Para ice hockey, and its athlete development in the United States of America. I will explore two American elite Para Ice hockey players' sports paths that are exemplary for how the U.S. has been able to achieve sustained Paralympic success by integrating wounded veterans into their elite Para athletes pool. Elite Para ice hockey player in this context means someone who has represented the United States of America at high level events such as the World Para ice hockey Championship, the World Sledge Hockey Challenge, or the Paralympics and has experienced sustained success. This definition of an elite Para athlete was derived from Swann, Moran and Piggott (2015). Throughout this paper, the terms adaptive, adapted, disability, and Para sport will be used as synonyms to describe the involvement of individuals with a disability in sports in general. Elite Para sport or Paralympic sport will be used whenever it is necessary to make a distinction between competition levels.

At first glance, the ever-growing number of wounded service members who have returned from conflict zones such as Afghanistan or Iraq (Goff, 2012) is not directly related to sport policy. However, veterans make up a significant number of those potentially entering the pool of elite athletes competing at the Paralympics, at least in the case of the U.S. At the 2018 Paralympic Winter Games in PyeongChang, a grand total of eighteen

veterans competed for Team USA (Molina, 2018), which makes up twenty-four percent of the seventy-four athlete squad. This makes them a very interesting and relevant athlete population to consider and study further in order to implement sustainable athlete development efforts. Over the course of the past ten years, the United States of America has selected a grand total of eight military veterans for their national Para ice hockey team that competed at the Paralympic games (U.S. Paralympics, 2020b). They went from zero veterans on the squad in 2010 to four in 2014 and then six in 2018 (U.S. Paralympics, 2020b). This in addition to their sustained success, demonstrated in three back-to-back gold medals, made the U.S. the ideal research subject.

Interestingly, the origins of the Paralympic movement also lie within the rehabilitation efforts for wounded soldiers after World War II (Legg & Steadward, 2011). Therefore, the increasing number of veterans competing at the Paralympics is essentially a development back to the roots of Para sport, which further encourages a discourse about their influence on the public perception of Para sport as a whole (Bush, Silk, Porter, & Howe, 2013). One of the objectives of sport management is to provide opportunities to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate (Misener & Darcy, 2014). Successful athletes' career pathways are based upon the cooperation of stakeholders as well as the integration and delivery of elite sport policies (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). Wounded military veterans are in the unique position of having access to vastly different support networks and stakeholders involved in their sport participation (e.g. Ferrer & Davis, 2019; Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014) than those of civilian athletes who either acquired their disability or were born with it. Thus, their career paths also differ greatly from those of civilian Para sport participants. Generally, athletic pathways and career development are popular fields of research (e.g. Coté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). In the context of adaptive sport research, three main research areas have been identified by Lastuka and Cottingham (2016). These are 1) athletic performance, 2) spectatorship and support, and 3) the impact of adaptive sports. Athletic performance research studies the physiological as well as psychological performance of Para athletes, sometimes also putting them in relation to their able-bodied counterparts. Adaptive sport spectatorship and support investigates its public perception and support structures. And last but not

least, researchers are interested in the impact that adaptive sport participation has on its participants. (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016) This case study will cover all the research areas by following individual athletes' sports paths to Paralympic success.

My personal interest in the topic stems from almost ten years of personal observation and academic studies of successful personal development programs and career paths within professional rugby and ice hockey. Team USA has reached extraordinary success over the past ten years with its Para ice hockey program, and as part of my sport management studies, I found it imperative to also investigate the impact of tailored support programs within elite Para sport. The impact of specific military programs on sport participation as a whole has been studied before (Hawkins, Cory, & Crowe, 2011). However, no investigation has been conducted into the sport that is not only one of the most popular winter Paralympic sport (International Paralympic Committee, 2018), but also presents the highest number of military veteran participants among all American winter Paralympians (U.S. Paralympics, 2020b). Through the analysis of the exemplary sports paths, this study will, for example, outline the reasons behind wounded veterans' sport choices as well as pinpoint some key differences between military and civilian athletes. The analysis will be done by taking a closer look at the factors influencing their career paths such as their support networks. The emphasis on support networks is derived not only from aforementioned personal experience within mainstream sport, but also from prior research into able-bodied youth athletes in Finland. Different kinds of support structures along a sports career path were found to be crucial within a sociological study conducted by Aarresola (2016), which will also serve as the main theoretical framework of this study. Overall, this case study will provide important insight into successful and sustainable elite Para sport talent development. It will, furthermore, outline how military support programs offer unique career development opportunities to Paralympic athletes, and how civilian team members are crucial for prolonged international success. The latter is imperative when it comes to the development of new sport policies as well as sport managers' and policy makers' potential desire to focus more of their future efforts on the recruitment of wounded veterans.

2. DIFFERENT FACETS OF ADAPTIVE SPORT

In the following chapter the sport of Para ice hockey will initially be described as it is the sole focus sport throughout this thesis, and it gives the reader a better understanding of the sport. This will be followed by the literature review on this study's background of adaptive sport participation, its public perception, career development programs, and information specifically about wounded veterans.

2.1 Introduction to Para Ice Hockey

What is Para Ice Hockey?

Para ice hockey, also known as Sled Hockey or Sledge Hockey, is a Para sport equivalent to ice hockey. It is played by individuals with physical impairments in the lower halves of their bodies. Para ice hockey mostly follows the rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), but there are some obvious adaptations necessary to make them suitable for Para sport. Both participants in this study had a physical disability that affected their lower body, which is also a prerequisite for participation in any international elite Para ice hockey competition (World Para Ice Hockey, 2018). The players of each team use double-bladed sledges that allow the puck to pass freely beneath them. They use two sticks with spikes on one end to propel themselves across the ice and blades on the other to shoot. Games and competitions under the jurisdiction of the International Paralympic Committee are played with a maximum of fifteen players a side, including two goalkeepers. Para ice hockey rinks need to have slight adjustments in order for players to have easy access to the ice as well as a clear view of the game from the bench. Thus, the boards in front of the players benches are made out of clear plexiglass instead of the regular white boards. The player bench area itself is level with the ice, which allows the sleds to glide in and out easily. (USA Hockey, n.d.)

Origins and Organizational Structure

The origins of Para ice hockey can be found in Sweden in the 1960's. It has since developed into a global sport that holds international competitions such as the Pan American Games and World Championships regularly. Furthermore, Para ice hockey is one of the six sports that are part of the Paralympic Winter Games. Its governing body is World Para ice hockey (WPIH), which is a federation under the leadership of the International Paralympic Committee. The United States of America and Canada have been the dominating nations that won all of the past five Paralympic Winter Games and a myriad of World Championship titles between them. USA Hockey is the defending world and Paralympic champion and also the focus team of this case study.

Females Play A Special Role in Para Ice Hockey

A unique factor in Para ice hockey is the inclusion of both genders. If there is at least one female on the roster, the maximum roster size reduces to a total of fourteen players including two goalkeepers (World Para Ice Hockey, 2018). This results in the unique situation that both men and women can compete on the same team at the Paralympic Games, which happened during the 2018 Paralympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea (Rose, 2018). In order to support this further and also attract more players to the game, the Paralympic committee has started a number of development initiatives. They are aimed at increasing the number of participating players, nations, women, and youth while also providing more equal and easier access to the Para ice hockey specific equipment (World Para Ice Hockey, n.d.).

Now that a background of Para ice hockey and for this case study has been established, a general introduction into how adaptive sport is being practiced, portrayed, perceived, and promoted will follow.

2.2 Disability Sport Participation

Benefits of Para Sport Participation

Sport participation rates among individuals with disabilities have been found to be significantly smaller than those of able-bodied people (Kehn & Kroll, 2009; Martin Ginis, Evans, Mortenson, & Noreau, 2017). Senior citizens, people with an illness, or individuals with a disability were found to be less likely to participate in sport, but the latter were also found to be more likely to participate in sport and physical activity on their own (Eakins, 2018). The impact of individual sports on both men and women has been found to include a new body experience. Perceptions of their physical characteristics sharpened, their physical capabilities were re-defined, and confidence about engaging in new physical activities was increased (Blinde & McClung, 1997). The omnipresent risk of obesity and sedentary lifestyle has been found to be even more severe among young people living with a disability (Duquette, Carbonneau, & Jourdan-Ionescu, 2016). Additionally, increased and avoidable cost for the healthcare system due to secondary diseases can be avoided with participation in physical activity (Junker & Carlberg, 2011). A study in Sweden showed that thirty-four percent of people with disabilities state a lack of knowledge of their own body and their disability as a reason for their non-participation in sports (Junker & Carlberg, 2011).

Physical and mental empowerment can also be achieved through sport participation, both for men and women (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, & Hanson, 2001). Gender is a form of moderator that alongside disability onset age, and especially disability type, has been found to play a role in the level of empowerment that is achieved (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002). The effects of disability onset age and gender on life experiences, self-perception and self-esteem differ between disability types, hence the levels of empowerments also differ (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002). Disabled individuals who are physically active are generally more adjusted and show higher levels of life satisfaction (Santiago & Coyle, 2004). Furthermore, they also experience less days of pain, insomnia, anxiety, or low energy and depression (Groff, Lundberg, & Zabriskie, 2009). Strength training in turn

increases stamina and strength (Taylor, Dodd, & Larkin, 2004) while exercise as a whole leads to improved cardiovascular health and fitness (Groff, Lawrence, & Grivna, 2006). The person, and especially the way in which that person introduces an individual with a disability to Para sports as a whole, and to specific Para sports later on, plays a crucial role in an athlete's pathway (Haiachi et al., 2018). This already hints at the special role that coaches play in this setting. Giving participants a sense of control over their lives and autonomy is essential, and through that satisfies participants' basic psychological needs (Banack, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2011).

The Right Environment Fosters Participation

The most important factors in sport participation for individuals with disability are autonomy, belongingness, challenge, engagement, mastery and meaning (Martin Ginis et al., 2010). This roughly translates into acceptance, equality, achievement and competence. For children, the factor of choice was added as it crucially impacts the level of enjoyment and generates all the aforementioned beneficial effects (Kanagasabai, Mulligan, Hale, & Mirfin-Veitch, 2018). Choice was, for example, influenced by individual ability, which became more important the older the children became as their physical abilities played a role in their decision-making (Kanagasabai et al., 2018). It is crucial that the quality and quantity of the sport participation are catered to the individual. The athlete can then participate whenever and to the full extent of their ability without feeling like a barrier to others or like standards are being lowered for them (Allan et al., 2018). That way negative experiences of non-adaptability, non-inclusion, and potentially even injuries that lead to avoidance of activity (Kanagasabai et al., 2018) can be mitigated. In a study of deaf athletes, researchers found that the occasional competition with able-bodied, in this case hearing athletes, can not only increase the number of competitions and therefore skill achievement and challenge, but also facilitates the integration into mainstream society (Kurková, Válková, & Scheetz, 2011).

Costs and Barriers of Para Sport Participation

Disability sport in general is rather expensive due to the need of specialized equipment such as prostheses and special wheelchairs. Different athletes might be even dependent on an interpreter or assistant to be able to participate in the sport (McConkey et al., 2013). In contrast to the costs stand the significantly lower funding levels, which makes self-funding a very prevalent form of how athletes are able to participate in disability sport (Cottingham, Vineyard, Velasco, & Asias, 2017). This prerequisite of a certain level of financial resources poses a significant barrier for participation as not only equipment needs to be paid for, but also transportation costs and competition fees (Cottingham et al., 2017). In a study of wheelchair rugby players, half of the players paid for fifty percent or more of their expenses while almost one third paid for essentially everything (Cottingham et al., 2017). This in turn might lead to low retention rates as players cannot sustain their level of participation and investment over time.

Even when there are specific policies and principles in place that give the right of participation in sport to every young person, as in the example of Finland, there are still vast differences in the infrastructure between different municipalities. This includes their ability to offer and maintain specific opportunities and facilities for individuals with a disability. (Armila, Rannikko, & Torvinen, 2018) Another hurdle many aspiring athletes face is the difference in classification between sport being merely a hobby or being therapy. As the latter, at least in countries with general health care, some expenses, such as special equipment, might be paid by the insurance (Armila et al., 2018). However, if that is not the case, then the athlete needs to pay for all of their equipment which can amass to a substantial amount. This in turn puts individuals with a disability at yet another disadvantage as they become a customer, and their financial means become a defining measurement of accessibility to sport. In the specific context of this study it is important to note, that the United States is not a welfare state by any means. It does not offer general public health care or insurance. This means that there the financial means and private insurance of the individual become decisive for their ability to participate in Para sport. This, in addition to a general lack of state funding for sport, was also criticized by the American participants within the cross-national study done by Doll-Teppert and Radtke

(2014). Overall, special characteristics of disability sport are special forms of social capital, social networks, and social support where the latter includes financial and logistical support, as well as potentially daily care (McConkey et al., 2013).

Elite Para Sport Specific Phenomena

A specific barrier to an elite Para sport career is changes in the classification system of their particular sport (Patatas, De Bosscher, Derom, & De Rycke, 2020; Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011) as that can lead to involuntary de-selection or at least unclear selection criteria which in itself is a big mental barrier (Hutzler & Bergman, 2011). Insufficient coaching skills and knowledge together with vocational and economic conflicts and demands of the sport, such as training volume, have been reported as barriers for elite Para sport careers. Sometimes, secondary health disorders or a decline in health are also reasons to suspend athletic careers. (Hutzler & Bergman, 2011) When the elite level is reached, overuse injuries are also common (McLoughlin et al., 2017) Feelings of being part of an elite group, peer support, and the joy and fun derived from their careers and sporting endeavors stand on the opposite of that (Hutzler & Bergman, 2011).

2.3 Disability Sport Perception

Disability Sport in Media

Disability or adapted sport is far less visible in media than mainstream sport. This was for example outlined by exploring the Canadian print media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games. The featured narratives and athlete achievements were argued to have the power to change the society's perception of disability. (Maika & Danylchuk, 2016) Such an imbalance of coverage and arguably in turn public awareness of Para sport can be considered a significant barrier for policy makers that aim to provide everyone with equal opportunities to participate in sports, because if there is no knowledge there is no interest and no access. The UK and the USA have gone much further in their efforts to professionalize and in turn commercialize their Para sports than for example Germany

(e.g. Scheid, 2003). This is also based on the systemic differences between, for example, the U.S. and Germany. Germany has a state-funded sport system, while the one in the U.S. is mostly private-funded (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014). Thus, in the United States, much of the financial means that can be utilized to participate in Para sport is based on the commercial value of the athlete. In modern sport, some athletes have become ‘media-athletes’ (Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004). Whether it be through traditional media or social media, rising fame results in an objectification of the players, which for them often results in greater identification with their sporting role (Nelson, 2015). The athlete’s self-identity becomes socially and externally reinforced by family, friends and the community because they tend to define the athletes around the sport in which they excel (Petitpas et al., 1997).

The Paralympic Bubble

When it comes to the commercialization of elite Para sport, the Paralympics and their associated sports have been criticized for creating a bubble. The portrayed reality within that bubble is criticized to be a far distance from the life reality of the majority of the disabled, where lack of accessible architecture, benefit cuts, economic disparities and the difficult labour market are at the forefront (Bush et al., 2013). Furthermore, media and society are working in conjunction to create a hierarchy that puts certain categories of impairment over others. For example, a returning war veteran is more respected than individuals with congenital disabilities, such as cerebral palsy who are far less visible and often infantilized. (Purdue & Howe, 2013) During the Paralympic Games, Paralympians can also become sexualized in media. This often does not transfer to when they return to life outside of the Paralympic sphere, and they thus experience a very different and sometimes harsh reality. (Bush et al., 2013)

The Concept of The “Supercrip” and Its Effect on Elite Para Sport Perception

A popular term within media coverage of elite Para sport is the term “supercrip”. The term itself and celebration of it through the act of making selected Para athletes seem

almost “superhuman”, are not representative of the vast majority of disabled (Howe, 2011). It, furthermore, symbolizes the inequality between different populations of Para athletes. The most heroic and visible Paralympians in mainstream media are the ones who have the greatest resemblance to the able-bodied population and are thus representatives of overcoming (Bush et al., 2013). Silva and Howe (2012) further explained this phenomenon in which elite (Para) sporting prowess is recognized and widely-portrayed as whichever appears closest to the highly-functioning able-bodied aesthetics that the public is used to seeing. This was termed “Ableism” by Campbell (2008). It refers to cultural favouritism of traits such as being able to walk smoothly or at all, articulating clearly, independent living, and masculinity that are present in social institutions. Overall, the media and public discourse results in a struggle over the image of disability in the public eye and between labelling individuals with disabilities as “superhuman” or “benefit scroungers” (Bush et al., 2013). The supercrip or superhuman athletes, who with the help of modern prostheses are compared to cyborgs, are those who garner the greatest recognition and are commodified (Howe, 2011). Para athletes therefore face the dilemma that they have to appear disabled “enough” to be accepted within the disability community and be subjected to disability policies and politics, and yet demonstrate as much ability as possible in order to be recognised as a proper athlete by the wider society (Purdue & Howe, 2013). This also partially explains what Purdue and Howe (2012) called the Paralympic Paradox. The Paralympic Paradox is the public pressure, as perceived by the Paralympic Committee and Para athletes, to market Para sport and themselves to non-disabled spectators. Public perceptions of skill and ability are generally based on able-bodied athlete images. Thus, the disabled and less “superheroic” Para athletes are often getting left out. (Purdue & Howe, 2012) Technology such as prostheses merely provides the opportunity and means to compete, but achievements are still gained through talent and effort (Purdue & Howe, 2015).

Disability in media is also often accompanied by terms such as “suffers from” or “afflicted by”, which in turn labels people with disability as liabilities to society (Blaska, 1993). Disability is also often portrayed as something to be solved or overcome (Maika & Danylchuk, 2016), which requires heroic efforts of the “supercrip”. Meanwhile, those who display lower or just less traditionally aesthetic performances are automatically

labelled as lacking that character (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). Generally, athletes report perceptions of being seen as somehow less elite athletes because of their disability (McLoughlin et al., 2017; Michaluk, 2011). The norm in sport spectatorship is the Olympic sport ideal, and image and Paralympic athletes tend to deviate from that norm, which makes it less easily consumable for spectators (Purdue, 2013). Adapted cycling courses for example can be perceived as less challenging by the spectators because they have grown accustomed to great technical challenges of mainstream cycling tracks. Moreover, the presence of assistants and coaches where there are none in mainstream sport further sets the two sport worlds apart as some credit will inevitably go to them. (Purdue & Howe, 2013)

2.2 Adaptive Sport Career Development

Paralympic Sports Participation Can Be Developed Into A Career

The modern era of Para sport has seen a focus shift from sport for rehabilitation and participation to high performance sport. In recent years the organisation and delivery of Paralympic sport has therefore, also become more professional. (Misener, Darcy, Legg, & Gilbert, 2013) Additionally, federal funding and in turn expectations for Paralympic success have increased exponentially (Hammond & Jeanes, 2018). This also undermines the attempt to empower its athletes for the sake of the medal count (Hutzler & Bergman, 2011). In order to win medals, there needs to be a sufficient talent detection and development system. In recent years, Talent Development Programs have increasingly been on the forefront of sport policy makers and sport organizations, now that sporting success has become even more of a focus, and so have dual career initiatives (Skrubbeltrang, Karen, Nielsen, & Olesen, 2020). Despite the growing emphasis on success, there have been fairly few investigations of Para athletes' career pathways (Hutzler, Higgs, & Legg, 2016). The most recent research on elite Para athletes' career paths to excellence concluded that the paths identified in mainstream sport research largely apply to both the able-bodied and the disabled athlete population (Patatas et al., 2020). Paths identified there include the phases of attraction, retention, competition, talent

identification and development, as well as elite and retirement phases (Patatas et al., 2020). As aforementioned in chapter 2.3, the state of commercialization of Para sport varies greatly around the world. This makes generalizations regarding motivational factors and career stages more difficult (Kämpfe, Höner, & Willimczik, 2014). In general, progress in science and technology within capitalism has always led to progress in sport (Brohm, 1978). Therefore, nations with greater economic power usually also have more means to invest into Para sport. The United States of America, as the focus country in this study, has high economic power.

The Path to Success Requires Practice

Disability related factors, such as whether the disability was congenital or acquired, have a significant and obvious impact on, for example, an athlete's starting age and the attainment of training and developmental milestones (Dehghansai, Lemez, Wattie, & Baker, 2017). With that being said, neither the disability severity, nor the difference between acquired and congenital disability have been found to have an impact on career development of disability athletes (Dehghansai et al., 2017). Disability severity in general has been found to have no influence on an athlete's ability and potential to reach the elite level of their sport, at least in the sport of wheelchair road racing (Hedrick, Morse, & Figoni, 1988). In order to examine this further, in-depth analyses of training histories in relation with disability severities would have to be conducted as well as comparisons between athletes with congenital and acquired disabilities (Dehghansai et al., 2017). The value of practice is, however, one that both mainstream and disability sport have in common (Dehghansai et al., 2017). Deliberate practice (Côté, 1999), over a long period of time, ideally from a fairly young age, has been found to be the ideal modus operandi in mainstream sport. This is not applicable to disability sport as such, because the variability of injury onset allows for vastly different starting ages. Regardless of their starting age, however, they all eventually compete in the same sport and reach the same competition level (Dehghansai et al., 2017). Furthermore, elite Para athletes remain on the elite level longer. Many elite Para athletes are able to compete in at least three consecutive Paralympic games (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014).

Elite Career Development Programs Support But Also Divide Elite Athletes

In order to facilitate elite sport careers of athletes with and without disabilities, specific support programs have been implemented around the world. Despite growing efforts, the vast majority of support programs is still catered only to the needs to elite able-bodied athletes. This puts elite Para athletes at a disadvantage and efforts are made to rectify that. The Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model proposed and implemented in Canada is an example for how mainstream sports models and programs get adapted to reduce the aforementioned disadvantage. The LTAD has extra parts added to cater to the specific needs of individuals with disability. It is the first step towards creating specific development models that are nuanced enough to be applicable to disability sport development. (Hutzler & Bergman, 2011) Talent development, and the LTAD with its application in Canada, have also been examined by Legg and Higgs (2016). They found that the socioeconomic status of the state translates into their support of persons and athletes with disabilities, which consequently leads to success. The structural change in Canada away from disability sport specific organizations to integrated nations sport organization has led to increased thresholds. The reason for this is the previously perceived safe, supportive and welcoming atmosphere of being surrounded by peers is now gone. The difficulty and often times failure to integrate disability sport into mainstream sporting organizations has also been noted by Kitchin and Howe (2014) in the context of cricket in England and Wales. The LTAD has been extended with two extra stages that have been deemed crucial for individuals with disability, which are Awareness and First Involvement. This is particularly important because there is a difference between chronological and developmental age in athletes with disability. Thus, traditional development models that include or rather focus on age in relation to development stages are not applicable to disability sport. (Legg & Higgs, 2016) Trying to force disability sport into the organizational structure of mainstream sport without adjustments can lead to an unintentional reinforcement of the already prevailing image of incompetence of the disabled (Nixon & Howard, 1989).

Dual Careers Make Elite Sport Careers Sustainable

Elite Para athletes are not only facing disadvantages based on unsuitable programs for their sport, but also for their vocational career progression. For the vast majority of Paralympic athletes, the sporting career is not a viable vocational career in terms of earning. Some personal assistance and development programs have been extended to include disabled athletes, such as ACE (Athlete career and education) in Australia. However, not every country or program is following the inclusion of disabled athletes with the same diligence or vigor (Lockwood, Lockwood, Lewis, & Drenen, 2003). Lockwood et al. (2003) examined the outcomes of the Athletes at Work Program for Paralympians (AWPP) program in Australia and found that those athletes who participated in it were disproportionately more successful at the Paralympics while also gaining employment. They highlighted the need for specifically tailored programs to disabled athletes. Other programs they examined in their study, which were implemented by either the government or private organizations, were often found to be unsuitable to address the specific needs of disabled athletes. This was due to a lack of access to the programs as a whole, no flexibility in program attendance, insufficient funding, or lack of general aim to even include disabled athletes. (Lockwood et al., 2003)

Dual Careers Benefit Para and Able-Bodied Athletes Alike

Dual careers not only have a positive effect on the individual athletes or the sport system, but also on the society as a whole (Tekavc, Wylleman, & Cecić Erpič, 2015). Those effects include a positive public image of the athletes and their sport, the creation of role models for young aspiring athletes, and provision of incentives to parents to get their children involved in the sport (Stambulova, 2012). Generally, the lack of career certainty, both with regards to the present sporting as well as the future vocational career, causes anxiety for elite athletes (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). This is applicable to both able-bodied and disabled sport. Therefore, a dual career becomes crucial to generate income and a post-retirement plan. Circumstances under which a dual career can be pursued vary a lot across the world. The pursuit a dual career is challenging and rewarding for both

elite disabled and non-disabled athletes alike (Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015; Lockwood et al., 2003). Despite all the benefits, athletes typically face challenges of trying to incorporate their studies into the training and competition schedule, coping with the resulting fatigue and the need to make personal sacrifices for their dreams (Lockwood et al., 2003; Petitpas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 2009). This makes dual career generally less attractive to athletes. Disabled athletes also often have an added challenge of needing to put in additional efforts and resources just to access training and competition (Lockwood et al., 2003). Therefore, higher education institutions play a significant role in athletes' careers (Roux, 2012) in order for the benefits to outweigh the costs.

2.3 Wounded Veterans

Lower Mortality Rates Lead to Higher Numbers of Wounded

When soldiers return from warzones, up to thirty-one percent (Tanielian, 2008) of them experience post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). PTSD is a repeated experience of traumatic events with negative effects on, for example, mood and cognitive ability (Kearney, Martinez, & Simpson, 2018). Additionally, increased levels of aggression and violence have been detected in those returning from warzones (Macmanus et al., 2012). Many others also experience anxiety, depression, or anger. Upon getting medically discharged, disabled veterans then need to carve out a place for themselves in the vastly different civilian world. (Demers, 2011) While modern protective equipment reduces the number of casualties significantly, the number of wounded rises steadily. In the case of the United States, based upon the official number of wounded published by the Department of Defence, for every soldier that dies on the battlefield seven more are wounded (Goff, 2012). These wounded veterans build part of the potential Paralympic athlete pool, mentioned in the introduction.

Sport Participation Has Many Benefits for Wounded Veterans

Participation in adaptive sport is a staple of rehabilitation efforts. The underlying principle behind severely wounded military personnel's involvement in adaptive sport is often to be part of a challenging environment again. These challenging environments should ideally also foster group cohesion and the formation of new individual roles, while still giving participants a sense of independence and choice. (Shirazipour et al., 2017) Brittain and Green (2012) have similarly found participation in physical activity among veterans to be related to feelings of achievement, self-actualization and a new sense of direction in life. Hawkins, Cory and Crowe (2011) also suggest that involvement in Paralympic military sports camps affords injured veterans the chance to build and test new skills with a newly sustained competitive drive. This also allows them to gain a new sense of competence, which is a development very similar to their civilian peers. (Hawkins et al., 2011)

Military personnel who sustain physical injuries, impairment or even disability through combat deployment often times also experience mental health problems (Koren et al., 2005). Overall, their relationships with significant others, such as family, are negatively impacted by the combination of mental health problems, physical injuries and resulting raised aggression levels (Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009). Sport appears to be a way to combat these issues. Vietnam veterans' participation in community exercise rehabilitation programs was found to reduce their anger levels, while simultaneously increasing their energy levels and opportunities for social interaction (Otter & Currie, 2004). Spörner et al (2009) further noted life improvement in the domains of social interaction, acceptance of disability, self-esteem, and general quality of life in their study of adapted winter sports (Spörner et al., 2009). This is particularly interesting, because Para ice hockey is a winter sport based on its inclusion in the Winter Paralympic Games.

Military Support Programs Offer Rehabilitation Through and With Sport

Generally, Military sport programs put emphasis on trying to re-build the lives of military personnel that were irreversibly altered by the effects of war and life-changing trauma (Brittain & Green, 2012). The United States Olympic Committee holds Paralympic Military Summits in different locations, which then get followed-up within communities. The overall goal is to improve the participants rehabilitation experience as well as their overall lifestyle through the means of Paralympic sport ("Stars, Stripes, and Sports," 2006) while also striving to find new sporting talent. Support programs are often times specific to the different branches of the U.S. armed forces supporting their injured veterans. The Army has what is called Warrior Transition Units, the Air Force has the Wounded Warrior Program (AFW2), the Navy has the Wounded Warrior–Safe Harbor Organization, the Marine Corps has the Wounded Warrior Regiment, and the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has the Warrior Care Program. (Ferrer & Davis, 2019) The initial rehabilitation and contact with sport often happens in those Warrior Transition Units, or Transition Units also called WTU (Ferrer & Davis, 2019). The Warrior Games are a sporting competition that was established between these different programs and are organized by the U.S. Olympic Committee and the Department of Defense in conjunction with other sponsors (Goff, 2012). The best-performing athletes potentially also get the chance to compete on higher international levels. However, despite the proven success, transition units are being closed across the United States and the need for private and civilian programs is strengthened (Ferrer & Davis, 2019). These initiatives also extend to Paralympic sports such as shooting, where a specific cooperation between the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Paralyzed veterans of America and USA Shooting has been formed to promote Paralympic success by introducing injured veterans to the sport (Ross, 2010).

3. NETWORKS, CAPITAL AND AGENCY IN (PARA) SPORT CAREERS

A previous case study analysis of Scandinavian talent development environments found them to be a key success factor, as long as they harbor a coherent organizational structure and integrate into the broad environment of the athlete (Henriksen, 2010). Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010) further define this into a description of features that make athletes strive within talent development. The first feature was that athletes are provided an opportunity for inclusion in a supportive training community that includes role models. The wider environment also needs to be supportive of the athlete's goals, while the general focus cannot lay on short-term, but must rather lay on long-term success. A coherent organizational culture is furthermore crucial, while a seamless integration of education, training and family is also essential for an athlete to be able to tap into their full potential.

An Introduction to Operation Comfort and Paralympic Sports Clubs

The overarching program that provides the, aforementioned, coherent organizational structure for the participants of this study is a program called Operation. It is a non-profit organization based in San Antonio, Texas and founded in 2004 by Janis Roznowski with the purpose of helping wounded veterans re-integrate into society. It provides opportunities to become involved in (adaptive) Cycling, Para ice hockey, Yoga, Aquatics, Woodworking and numerous other special events. Their vision is to “promote an inclusive and positive environment” for injured, ill or wounded service personnel and their immediate family. (Operation Comfort, 2020) Operation Comfort is a military support and rehabilitation program. The positive impact of those programs on elite Para sport talent identification and development has also been identified by Doll-Tepper and Radtke (2014). Doll-Tepper and Radtke (2014) also identified Paralympic sports clubs as one of the biggest facilitators of elite Para sport talent identification and development. The San Antonio Rampage are an example of these Paralympic sports clubs. Overall, there are one hundred and twenty adaptive sport clubs and programs in the United states. There are programs in every American federal territory, with the exception of small islands like the

Virgin Islands, Guam and American Samoa. Para ice hockey is only offered by a few programs there, but within the grand total of programs offered per state the majority included programs for military veterans. There is a total of six hundred and five adaptive sport programs available within the U.S. Paralympic Committee's registry. Out of those, one hundred include the possibility to at least try Para ice hockey, while two hundred and seventy-two are listed as military specific programs. The highest number of Para ice hockey programs can be found in the state of Illinois with eight, while California and Texas each have seven. (U.S. Paralympics, 2020a) This gives a brief insight into how different rehabilitation locations in the United States can also have a big impact on the availability of suitable and challenging support programs for wounded veterans. Location specificity is not only limited to their time during rehabilitation, but also expands to when they transition out of the military and find new places to live.

The Sports Path Model

As mentioned in the introduction, this case study utilized the Sports Path Model as a theoretical framework, whose components I will outline in the following sections. An important term used within this study is the term institutional support network, which encompasses all the organizations and institutions that are involved in the sport paths of this study's participants, such as the above-mentioned Operation Comfort. It was adapted from the working model in which Aarresola (2016), among other factors, dissected the socialization into a sport system within the realms of systemic norms of said systems. This was then supplemented by the accumulation and utilization of different kinds of Capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the building and utilization of Agency (Hitlin & Elder, 2006). The analyses and subsequent discussion of the present study's data was therefore framed by those sociological theories comprised into the Sports Path Model.

Aarresola's aim in her dissertation (2016) was a sociological interpretation of athlete development in Finland. Her study was divided into four sub-studies concerning "1) the role and significance of parents, (2) the sports paths of participants in team sport in relation to different sports and the sporting context, (3) types of life-historical sports

paths, and (4) significant experiences in sport” (p.107). It includes the systemic norms of the sports systems, social capital, and agency. These norms all together influence the sports path in terms of socialization into the sport and accumulation of sport capital. They, furthermore, give a timeline of events and states, as well as outline certain experiences as named in the 4th sub-study.

The synthesis of all the findings of the sub-studies is the Sports Path Model, which is shown in Figure 1.

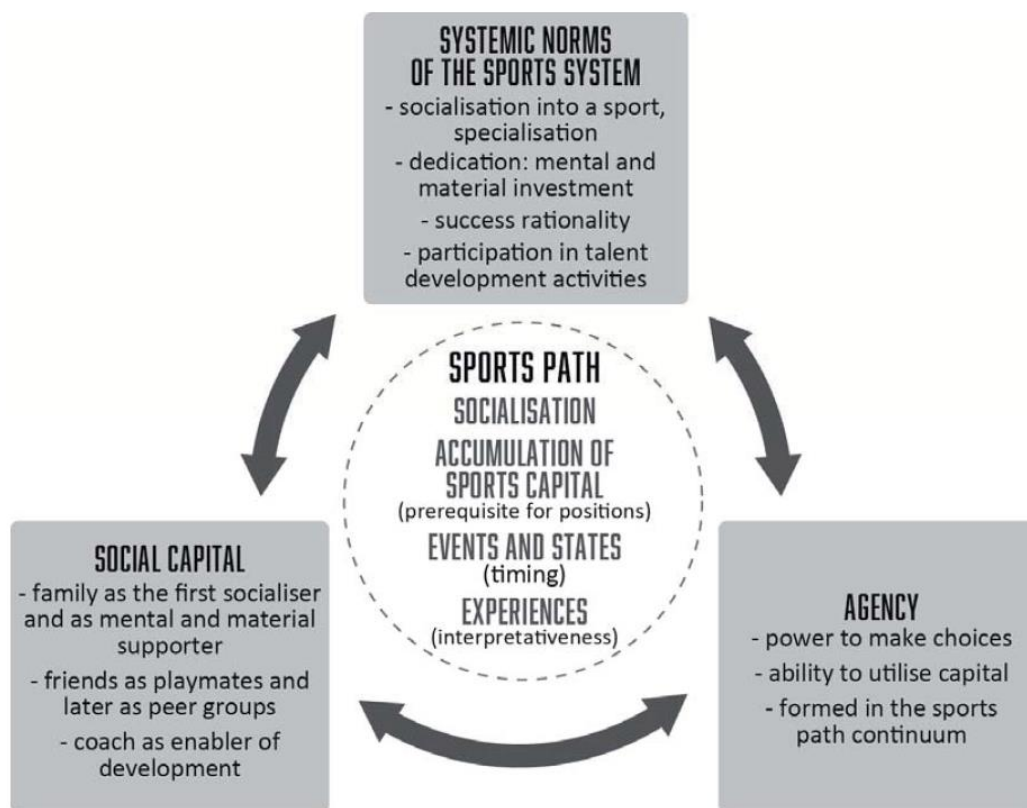


Figure 1. Sports Path Model (adapted from Aarresola, 2016, 110).

For this case study, the framework was widened to include adult participants. This resulted in a wide disregard for the third sub-study of life-historical sports paths. The paths described in the sub-study mostly include transitions within school settings and other typical spheres of life of adolescents. Therefore, the life-history of those participants

is very different to that of the adults who took part in this study. Data analysis also showed that none of the described paths within the Sports Path Model were suitable to adequately categorize the extremely manifold paths into and through elite Para sport.

Social Capital

One of the main concepts in Aarresola's Sports Path Model that requires additional explanation is the concept of social capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Social capital refers to the benefits generated through network membership and relationships, (Duncan, 2018) and includes trust and practical help (Browne-Yung, Ziersch, Baum, & Gallaher, 2015). These aspects are explored in depth within this case study. Social capital does not exist or get developed by its own, but requires other forms of capital such as economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Economic capital is the most important form of capital for individuals throughout the life course as it refers to the financial means generated and available to them. Cultural capital are things such as the level of education, special skills or knowledge which can also be generated over time. Sporting ability is a form of cultural capital. Thus, sports capital can be transformed into cultural capital in the field of competitive sports, which include specific skills and abilities and is in continuous need of acquisition in order for the elite sport career to progress (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996). Symbolic capital is then created by the acceptance of social capital by others, when it becomes recognized and valued. All these forms of capital are pursued and utilized throughout a lifetime and within what Bourdieu called fields. An important tool used to cultivate, demonstrate, and maintain cultural capital, status and social positioning is social media (Holland-Smith, 2017).

Agency

Another integral part of the Sports Path Model is the concept of Agency. Agency is generally understood as one's ability and power to make choices within the constraints of their environment (Hitlin & Elder, 2006). This is formed in the sports path continuum (Aarresola, 2016) and is heavily influenced by social networks and support (Hitlin &

Elder, 2006). What is also important is that the environment is shaped by the individuals as much as the environment shapes them (Hitlin & Elder, 2006). Agency is developed over the sports path continuum and can be utilized in different form at different stages of the career. The concept of agency becomes particularly important for this study when athletes start to exercise their agency in the form of athlete activism.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In the following chapter I will outline the research approach, development of research questions, data collection, and analysis process of this study.

4.1 Research Approach

A significant number, if not the majority of researches within the topic of sport for development and peace, is done as case studies (Bardocz-Bencsik & Doczi, 2019). One of their foci has been sport for people with disabilities, which fits the target group of this study. The decision for a qualitative case study was made because I wanted to be able to explore and include all the unique and differentiating factors of Para sport. A quantitative study through, for example, surveys would have not given me as broad and as deep an insight into the underlying dynamics in elite Para sport. Para sport is under-researched, so I wanted to keep the scope of this study as broad as possible in order to actually find and create the right meaning in the data. A case study based in one particular sport and with a limited number of participants gave me the best opportunity to really get in-depth and valuable information and thus fulfil my research aim. Using athletes' personal experiences as an information base for the research has generally been found to be a fruitful base for data collection and analysis (VanWynsberghe, 2001). Consequently, the main research method selected for this study was a narrative case study, with data collection done through semi-structured interviews. A case is one unit of human activity such as an individual, a group, institution or community that is studied in a specific but not strictly bound context (Gillham, 2000). The reason for this is that real life situations merge with one another and can, therefore, not be strictly divided. Research in a case study should initially pay special attention to carefully describing and investigating phenomena that can be found within the culture that is being studied, in this case adaptive sports and elite Para ice hockey in particular. This was done in the first two chapters by describing the sport itself and then expanding into the different facets of Para sport, alongside the effects of war and its public perception. Then this knowledge was deepened by exploring the participants' narratives more in depth. This was done to better

understand their life experiences and, thus, assist in the production of meaning, as well as in the exploration of athletic identity. This has also been done in numerous other qualitative, narrative studies (e.g. Allan et al., 2018; Bundon, Ashfield, Smith, & Goosey-Tolfrey, 2018; Perrier, Smith, Strachan, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014; Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). Athletic identity is a measure of how much an athlete defines themselves through their sport and sporting successes. There are different stages of athletic identity that can reach all the way to athlete foreclosure. When an athlete is in foreclosure, he or she defines their entire being through sport and shuts out all non-sporting environments, relationships and personal development opportunities. (Anderson, 2012)

My own academic background in career and personal development initiatives in professional rugby and ice hockey led to the desire to investigate those further within the realms of Paralympic sport. Personal experience made in mainstream sport naturally served as a bias, which I was keenly aware of. It simultaneously, however, also served as a useful tool to pinpoint significant phenomena and differences between elite mainstream and adaptive sport careers. Case studies are made valid by collecting and accumulating multiple forms of evidence that are detailed enough to form a sufficient understanding and are supporting the main points of the research's findings (Gillham, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were selected as a means of data collection in order to pick up the specific nuances of elite Para ice hockey career paths. Their subsequent analysis was then supplemented by academic studies covering similar issues.

Overall, an inductive-deductive approach was chosen that allows the participants' stories to fully evolve. It, furthermore, allows for an interpretation of the data and the imbedding of it into the sociological framework used as a working model. This was also done by Henriksen (2010) in his multiple case study investigation of sport environments in Scandinavia. The theory selected as a working model and, therefore, the deductive approach was the aforementioned Sports Path Model by Aarresola (2016). This I found to be most suitable to provide a good framework for data analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Nevertheless, an inductive approach was still used. Such an approach has been found to be crucial for case studies because it is unknown whether pre-existing theories and researches are suitable to explain the answers to the research questions in the

study at hand (Gillham, 2000). In order to avoid pressing the findings into an unsuitable theory, the working model was constantly reviewed through the transcription and analysis process. The emerging codes were checked for suitability to the working model categories or marked as deviant and therefore interesting in the wider scope of this case study. This inductive-deductive approach allowed the potential to differentiate, enrich or at least evolve (Henriksen, 2010) the Sports Path Model to include Para sport. Generally, the findings of case studies are not generalizable. What is prevalent and relevant for one unit, in this case Paralympians with a military background, may not be true or rather relevant at all for the rest of the team, or even other elite sled hockey players in general. Consequently, the theories that were utilized to explain the observed and derived results, namely the Sports Path Model (Aarresola, 2016), the career development model (Coté et al., 2003), and the environment success factors working model (Henriksen et al., 2010), are tools to make the results more generalizable since the data itself remains case specific.

I utilized the career development model developed by Coté, Baker and Abernethy (2003) to try and follow the different career steps of the participants in my study. This was done because the model with its three career stages of initiation, development and mastery has previously been successfully utilized in a study by Kämpfe et. al (2014) and found to be applicable to Para sport. The study by Kämpfe et. al (2014) compared motivational levels and factors of disabled and non-disabled athletes, but it also described career progression of Para athletes. It, therefore, gave me very valuable insight and ideas during the analysis process to make sense of what my participants had answered and how they progressed through their career. The other theoretical model I found to be very insight and helpful was the environmental success factors working model by Henriksen, Roessler, and Stambulova (2010). It has been developed based on a case study of successful talent development programs in Track and Field in Scandinavia. The researchers of this study gave an interesting and helpful description of what successful and sustainable talent development programs need in order to foster elite talent. In my study, I could utilize their results to categorize and validate my findings.

To supplement the results and to satisfy the criteria of a multi-method approach further evidence was collected through a web search regarding news articles and reports made of Para ice hockey and elite adaptive sport in general. Examples of those articles can be found in the bibliography. In order not to study irrelevant or unsuitable material beforehand or to narrow the research's scope too much, no extensive literature review was conducted beforehand. A parallel investigation of existing literature regarding elite (adaptive) sport career paths, adaptive sport participation and its perception, as well as wounded veterans was conducted to find the broad aims for this study. Those aims were then later re-defined into the more specific research questions listed in the next chapter.

4.2 Research Questions

Initially, the broad aim and research question of this study was to find out “what shapes, guides and influences an elite Para ice hockey player’s career”. Subtopics covered were related to the societal support networks, potential influences of the type of disability, personal background and career aspirations, as well as their general sporting career path. My assumption prior to analyzing the data and refining the research aim was that elite Para sport career paths differ significantly to those of able-bodied athletes particularly in terms of their timing and support infrastructure. Nevertheless, I also assumed that they would still be similar enough to those of mainstream athletes that certain aspects of career models, built initially for able-bodied athletes, could still be applied, or at least adapted to Para sport careers. Furthermore, development programs are useful, not only for able-bodied athletes, because they might grant athletes access to sustained personal and sporting success, which is also in the broad interest of policy makers. The inductive-deductive approach also served to find out if it is possible to fit elite Para ice hockey careers into existing career path models with help of the working model.

My person of contact in the USA Hockey organization already highlighted the importance of the military and its veterans for the squad when I initially approached them with my

support request. This was then supported by the results and participants of this study. The overlaying aim of this study remained in finding and describing factors that influence successful elite Para sport careers. It just so happened that both participants of this study were military veterans, which allowed a unique opportunity to conduct more research into this particular career path in elite Para ice hockey. The research focus gradually changed from a case study of general factors influencing any elite Para ice hockey player's career to more of a focus on military service-related aspects. Those included attitude towards the sports, training, national team membership, public perceptions, and career support. Emerging subtopics were then covered by four additional research questions. A list of all research questions can be found below. Questions three through five were derived from the Sports Path Model and covered the areas of systemic norms of the sports system, agency and social capital. Question number two I found relevant to define and understand the environment I was investigating.

Main research question:

1. "To what extent are the sports paths of elite Para ice hockey players in the United States influenced by prior military service?"

Additional research questions:

2. What are the unique features of the support opportunities available to wounded veterans? Are they specific to Para ice hockey?
3. What effect did the systemic norms of the sports system have on the participants' career?
4. What forms of social capital were experienced and found most relevant within the participants' sports paths?
5. In which way did the athletes develop and exercise a sense of agency?

4.3 Data Collection

Subjects of this case study were the two longest-serving wounded veterans on Team USA and their paths to elite Para ice hockey players and Paralympic champions. The participants were above the knee amputees who had served in a branch of the United States armed forces. Their age ranged from thirty-three to thirty-nine with respective elite Para ice hockey career lengths of ten years. One participant acquired his injury while in a war zone, while the other was injured stateside. Both subsequently left the military, one was medically discharged after rehabilitation, while the other was able to remain on active duty for five more years. A tentative selection of potentially suitable athletes was done by me prior to contacting USA Hockey. Those selections were re-affirmed when those players were also the ones suggested by the USA Hockey organization and whose contact information was given to me. This happened without any prompting by me and every player was equally accessible in the initial stages because contact was made through the national team management. They were particularly suitable for this case study because their experiences span the timeframe of the rising number of wounded and their subsequent inclusion in U.S. Paralympic sports in the early teens of this century till the present day. They were among the first veterans to be selected to represent Team USA in Para ice hockey and have seen the sport grow and develop till the present. Therefore, their personal narratives are ideal to attempt an in-depth and differentiated view on individual career paths of military veterans over time and to present a glimpse into the diversity of elite adaptive sports paths, particularly for those with a military background. This case study is concerned with the process of how the subjects became Paralympians and what brought them there, in this case their unique military status, and not too much about the significance of the specific results (Gillham, 2000). However, it was still relevant to consider the societal implications of former or even active duty soldier representing their country on the international sporting stage and its impact not only on the players themselves, but also on societal perception.

Contact was made through the USA Sled Hockey organization, which after a brief phone call explaining the aims and methods of the study, forwarded a total of four players' contact information thought to be most suitable to participate. The phone conversation

could also to some extent be considered an “élite” interview since it occurred with a person of authority within USA Hockey, which later on led to me contacting players upon his recommendation and shaping the interview questions around his suggestions. (Gillham, 2000). All of the players were initially contacted via email. Out of those players contacted two responded positively to participating in the study so that Skype and WhatsApp audio call interviews could be arranged. Thus, this study explored the career paths of two male American Paralympians who competed in the 2014 and 2018 Paralympic Games, winning the gold medal in each. As a collective they have won four Paralympic and seven World Para Ice Hockey Championship medals.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English via Skype and WhatsApp audio calls, which were tape recorded with the participants’ verbal consent. Beforehand, an informed consent form that outlined the aims and objectives of this study was signed by both of the participants. Special attention was paid to being conscious of the fact that issues related to politically emotive concepts, which in this case are military service, social inequality, nationalism, and political responsibility were being approached sensitively. These issues were identified as potentially difficult by Bardocz-Bencsik and Doczi (2019). This was done not only during the interviews, but also throughout the entire data analysis process and subsequent interpretations regarding disabled athletes’ roles and their social legacy. Trustworthiness was sought by using open questions with a varying degree of specificity from broad to specific so the participants could state their opinions clearly. Both interviews lasted between fifty and ninety minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The interview questions’ themes were derived from Aaresola’s Sports Path Model (2016), the initial web search, and the literature review on sporting career paths in general. While the general question phrasing was derived from the Sports Path Model, some questions were also adapted from questions introduced by Shirazipour et al. (2017), that were adapted by Allen et al. (2018). The interviews included disability specific questions such as what kind of disability they had as well as when and where they had acquired it. Furthermore, the chronological timeline of their sporting career was discussed and why they chose to specialize in Para ice hockey. Another theme was the support network and its role in each player’s career development. Support networks here included familial, societal as well as institutional support along the way. Within the Para ice hockey

specific context, the infrastructure and current individual career situation, including training schedule, monetary compensation, dual career initiatives as well as post-playing career plans were discussed. National team membership was discussed in terms of significance to them, also in light of their military background. Other significant experiences and important influences were covered in the last section of the interview, where the subjects were asked to reflect upon their career, its path, and their own goals and aspirations. The study is retrospective as the actual path into elite sport has already been walked by all the athletes participating in this study. An analysis of similarities and differences along their paths from soldier to elite athlete was conducted. This analysis was based on their experience within the same support program and how they fit into pre-existing sports path models, or rather how aspects mentioned by the athletes had also been found by the working model and other career development models.

By conducting an extensive web search on the subject of Para ice hockey and its shapes and forms in the United States but also world-wide, I attempted to gain an understanding of the sport. Moreover, I tried to keep an open mind about what the research topic may entail and what research areas could be of importance. My unfamiliarity with the topic of adaptive sport in general was utilized to let the web search results guide not only my academic research itself, but also to stay conscious of the fact that a high degree of familiarity with the subject can lead to closure of the mind and blindness to certain phenomena. Therefore, I attempted to not make assumptions and conduct research based on personal experience in familiar fields, but rather act upon personal interest in a completely new field of study.

4.4 Data Analysis

In order to be able to systematically analyze as well as interpret and understand meaning in all the data (Gillham, 2000) collected in this study, a case study database was built in EndNoteX9. All the web pages and academic resources were filed away in this database. Different categories emerged over time and were then re-visited within the personal interviews. These were utilized to conduct a thematic content analysis. All data collected

was categorized in the database and so were the categories found within the analysis of the interview transcripts. Systematic coding of the transcripts was conducted to find overlapping themes and narratives. The process of coding was adapted from the iterative thematic analysis applied in Bunden et. al (2018) and included six steps. The first step was a familiarization with the general data. The second step was to generate preliminary codes utilizing the initial research question “What shapes, guides and influences an elite Para ice hockey player’s career?” Initial ideas, also called inductive codes, were noted down as well as deductive codes, which mark notable or interesting passages of the data. The third step was to sort and organize those initial codes into themes, which were then later adapted to the Endnote group labels. Fourthly, those themes were constantly challenged and reviewed by more data input and the subsequent check if there were alternative understandings or negative instances to be found within. The fifth step was then to finally define and name all the categories and themes. Lastly, those final themes were then ranked and categorized based on their frequency, importance and suitability to explain phenomena identified in the data. The importance was determined not only based on the frequency of the codes, but also on a repeated analysis of the tapes. I attempted to determine differences in intonation and emphases to identify the most important factors in the participants’ eyes. Due to the relatively small number of participants the coding was done by hand without the use of specific analytical tool, but rather using the highlighter and comment functions of Microsoft Word.

In addition to the transcript and recording analyses, a research on the number of programs and initiatives that introduce individuals with disabilities to adaptive sports and particularly Para ice hockey was conducted. This was then extended into a further investigation of military specific programs within the U.S. that include Para ice hockey. The differences in how their programs are structured and how their support might differ to that of the non-military programs were noted down. It has been found that what research subjects say and what they actually do might not always be congruent (Gillham, 2000). This can include athlete activism, which is a term quite prevalent in academic research both in mainstream and disabled sports. Therefore, an analysis of public appearances and initiatives of the study subjects was conducted through, for example, social media channels and sponsor websites. Furthermore, the initial literature review was

extended on the topic of how militarism and nationalism influence the world of elite sport, which has also been found as a popular research topic within sport sociology research in general (Tomlinson, 2007). Another type of evidence used in this study are documents published by the International Paralympic Committee, World Para Ice Hockey, which is the governing body for Para ice hockey and by USA Hockey such as rule books and mission statements. By triangulation of all these findings and results an overall picture of the case and world of elite Para ice hockey was formed.

Throughout the process of analyses and coding, what Henriksen (2010) called communicative validity, was sought by checking back with both participants when things were unclear to ensure the final analysis accurately reflected the participants' perspectives. This was particularly relevant as the analysis of the data involved a high degree of interpretation on my part. By combining a web search with the semi-structured interviews, I was able to gain a better understanding of the world of Para ice hockey in general and reduce the degree of interpretation. Gaining a broader understanding also aided me when re-checking facts through targeted Google searches later on in the analysis to validate my interpretations and to assure accuracy.

5. RESULTS

During the initial stage of contact with the USA Hockey organization and when explaining the research aim, I was already given very valuable advice how to approach the topic and what angles to look at. The significant role of military veterans within the team was mentioned along with the importance of approaching this study individually rather than as “cookie cutter approach” of one fits all. As outlined in chapter 4, the collected data was categorized and grouped into different themes. These were later on utilized to answer the overlaying research question regarding the extent of the influence of military service on the sports path with its sub questions covering unique features, systemic norms, social capital, and agency. The results of the thematic content analysis will be individually discussed in order of their importance and in relation to their research question in the following section.

5.1 Institutional Support Networks

“What are the unique features of the support opportunities available to wounded veterans? Are they specific to Para ice hockey?”

Institutional support networks with their different actors, namely organizations that support and enable them to pursue their sport careers were the most prevalent during the thematic content analysis and mentioned most frequently. The most important factors within their careers were somehow related to institutions and organizations. Therefore, institutional support networks were one theme found within this study and ranked the most important. The theme encompassed the participants’ introduction to the military support program called Operation Comfort, which was already introduced earlier, and their subsequent involvement in the San Antonio Rampage, the World Class Athlete Program and the U.S. national Para ice hockey team. All of these organizations play crucial roles in their sports paths as they not only provide material and physical but also psychological support. Each of these organizations and their specific contribution and

role during different stages of their careers and sports paths will be discussed in-depth later on in this thesis.

Military support programs and institutions, namely Operation Comfort, were crucial for the participants' initiation and continued participation in the sport, especially in terms of monetary support and infrastructure. This has also been found by Doll-Tepper and Ratzke (2014) where one of their participants called the competition among U.S. disabled a competition between "haves" and "have nots" (p.94), referring to the veterans' superior support. All of the above-mentioned organizations with the exception of the U.S. national team are exclusive to current or former military members and their families (Operation Comfort, 2020; San Antonio Rampage, 2020). Overall, this outlines why institutional support is the most important factor in the sport socialization process and therefore deserving of special attention in this case study. Nevertheless, I chose not to go into too much depth on them in this chapter. Both participants put a lot of emphasis on the fact that the institutions may build the necessary and imperative framework for their career pursuit, but it is the people within the programs that make the actual difference. Each institution and their role in the participant's career will be covered in chapters 5.2 and 5.3. In those chapters, I will focus on outlining how personal impact is key to making a good program actually successful. In regard to the Para ice hockey specificity of the institutional support it can be said that only their club team and naturally the national team were Para ice hockey specific. The other programs offered support for sports besides Para ice hockey as well.

5.2 Forms of Social Capital in Elite Para Ice Hockey Careers

"What forms of social capital were experienced and found most relevant within the participants' sports paths?"

The second most frequently noted theme within the analysis was social capital. This ties in with the previous chapter on institutional support networks and how the social and personal components of a sports path are imperative to successful sport career

development. Fellow veterans and coaches played a substantial role during the career initiation and adaptation to life with a disability, while the support of significant others, children and family became significant during the development and mastery phases of their careers. Fellow civilian teammates were crucial for their development as an athlete which was one of the most unexpected findings.

When asked about the importance of support networks Player 2 said the following:

“I think it’s the people that got you here, the people that were there when you were down. Who was the one who made your prosthetic leg if you take that first step? Who was the one that challenged you, you know you need to walk better? Who’s the one who gives you the mentality and different mindset of adapt and overcome instead of complaining that there’s no handicap ramp or something? It’s all these in a way that kind of build up to get you to play and then to have that freedom to play on the ice.” (Player 2)

This, furthermore, illustrates the crucial importance of support networks which are provided through those institutions listed earlier. Support networks are social capital, which are most often made up of human relations in combination with financial possibilities. Throughout a sporting career, the support networks and family become the athletes’ symbolic and material capital and make up a major part of an athlete’s ability to continuously accumulate sports capital. The details of those support networks and family relations are discussed in the following three sub-chapters.

5.2.1 The Role of Parents and Family in Elite Para Sport Is Dynamic

Generally, parents play an extraordinary role in their children’s ability to be involved in Para sport. This is particularly the case for children between the ages of 6 and 12. Parents can grant their children access to a variety of sports that enables the development and fostering of social and physical skills. (Allan et al., 2018). Parents’ and siblings’ interest in a certain sport also manifests the family’s interest and might even reinforce traditional role models (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009). Parental role was in fact, an entire sub study in the model theory (Aarresola, 2012) and was therefore also included in this case study

despite the participants being adults. Family's role in an athlete's career is even more important for athletes with disabilities because they are often times dependent on them for transportation, financial support with competition fees and equipment, and overall involvement opportunities (Adamo, Langlois, Brett, & Colley, 2012; Buttimer & Tierney, 2005; Scholl, McAvoy, Rynders, & Smith, 2003). Supporting a disabled child also puts families at a notable disadvantage when it comes to socio-economic factors (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). Now, the role of the parents of athletes with acquired disabilities in adult age is vastly different. While both players reported strong ties to their parents, including taking them to the Paralympic Games with them, their involvement in the decision to become a Paralympic athlete remained minor. However, they were still cited as important sources of support throughout the career.

An interesting aspect mentioned by both participants was the role socio-economic status and cultural stereotypes play in sports participation as a whole. Both participants had extensive backgrounds in mainstream sport prior to their injury, which was, as aforementioned, vital for their success and motivation in Para sport later on. Their multi-sport background also played an important role in their decision and eagerness to participate in multiple Para sports post-injury. This highlights another area of overlapping between Para sport and mainstream sport, as Para athletes with injuries acquired later on in life are significantly impacted by their past sport experiences. Mainstream sport research has found that talent transfer from other sports has allowed athletes to enter the senior competition pathway at a later age, but at higher competition levels overall. Prerequisites here were rather extensive competitive and athletic experience and success in other sports. (Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenzel, & Gagné, 2013) Thus, the parents' role is still vital in the competitive athletic careers of Para athletes with acquired disabilities despite the lack of traditional mainstream career development. However, as aforementioned, the career development of mainstream athletes also is not linear or unified (Gulbin et al., 2013).

“They definitely have the athletic background of it [competitive sports] but just never had the resources to continue pursuing their athletic career.” (Player 2)

Research by Bullock et al (2009) has found participation in elite mainstream sports to be strongly related to a parental background in competitive sport and siblings' participation. This was not as prevalent in the present study because it was inhibited by another area found to be strongly impacting sport participation as a whole, socio-economic background. Both players within this study were part of an ethnic minority, which heavily influenced their ability to participate financially, but also their perception of whether sport was even a viable career option.

“If you’re in a low-income family you’re not playing hockey because it costs too much money. Equipment is too much, the ice time is too much. So, you don’t see a lot of minorities playing hockey because it’s too expensive.” (Player 1)

What Player 1 touched upon here is two-fold: it is the general expense of sport participation as a barrier to sport participation and the added impact of cultural background. Social capital is a combination of different forms of capital and this also includes the most important form of capital, namely the economic capital. Sport and participation in certain sports therefore also becomes a status symbol and one of racial segregation (James, 1963) as it demonstrates financial resources.

“A lot of minority students are pressured into [certain career paths] besides what they’re happy with. . . . sports is such a dream and it’s a wild thing to chase, a wild goose to chase. I would say they made an impact as far as leaving me the freedom to choose what I want to be or who I want to be.” (Player 2)

In terms of support of an athletic career a parental background in competitive sport appeared to be beneficial. What was definitely found to be crucial was the parents' willingness and ability to let their children participate in sport as a whole to, as aforementioned, set the foundation for their later career pursuit despite or maybe because of their ethnicity. Ernest Cashmore (1982) found in a study of black sportsmen that parents within ethnic minorities have to provide stimulating home environments in order for their children to pursue sport, which is an area of creativity and expression. Scott Fleming (1994) went on to describe that society often tends to treat minorities as collectives and subject them to stereotypical treatment and generalizations which then become internalized by the athletes themselves. He utilized the example of Asian students

being perceived as likely to under-perform in P.E. and sport and instead reach outstanding academic achievements. This phenomenon was also reiterated by one of the participants.

“Oh, for sure. I’m Asian. So, (...) the decision for them is always said no you gotta become a doctor or engineer right.” (Player 2)

Sport and leisure activities are aspects of traditional culture that has sustained despite migration to very different social systems (Fleming, 1994). Sport is often times also one of the very few ways of upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 1978), for those of less socio-economic status. This is a concept very well documented among academics as well as in media through popular “rags to riches” narratives. Such a phenomenon is completely missing within this study’s context of Para athletes with acquired disabilities simply due to their complete lack of career planning beforehand. They naturally could not have foreseen their future career as Para athletes. Therefore, their mindset regarding Para sport as a viable career developed very late in their career, almost incidental, and was not prompted by their socio-economic status growing up.

“I wanted to be an athlete when I was a little kid, I wanted to be a basketball player. And never in a million year would I think that this would be career. I get to travel the world and play disabled hockey for team USA. And that’s my profession, I mean that’s a dream come true.” (Player 1)

With this lack of career planning also comes a shift from the parents’ role as the main facilitator and supporter of adaptive sport participation away to the athletes’ significant others and children. Generally, significant others are especially important as important social support providers to both able-bodied and disabled athletes alike (Kämpfe et al., 2014). Athletic careers require an immense level of commitment of time and effort. This comes at an obvious cost to family and social life. For the athlete populations with acquired disabilities, the start of their elite sport careers often happens at a time where they already have families of their own or are at least starting them while playing.

“Since the second and maybe the third year I’ve been more conscious of the kids. I miss stuff. They have basketball, dance recitals, things they want me to go to,

birthdays, whatever it is, and I have to miss that because I'm either engaged with work or I'm on the ice. And that's kind of tough and that's why I really wanted to make sure that they're all on board with me doing this." (Player 1)

Involving their family in the career planning is an important differentiating factor to note. Career transition research within able-bodied athlete population has found a shifting focus to family and life outside of sport is often related to retirement-planning (e.g. Debois et al., 2015; North & Lavallee, 2004) rather than career initiation (Coté et al., 2003). For the participants of this study, having a family was cited as the main reason for their involvement and level of commitment in opposition to the actual sporting reward in form of medals or even money.

"The medals are a reminder but sharing that moment, seeing my kids' faces like that is just the best thing. Them in the stands, when they bring that medal and I'm on the ice and I look up to the stands and I see those smiles. That's my favorite thing." (Player 1)

The experience described here is once again underlines the importance of social capital within an athletic career. The already previously cited study in Germany by Kämpfe et al. (2014) revealed that the achievement motivators among disabled athletes can be rather different to those in able-bodied mainstream sports. This was also demonstrated in this study. Enjoying sport and improving one's personal performance level have been found to be much more important than career opportunities and earning money (Kämpfe et al., 2014). In the Mastery phase, as based on the career development model by Coté, Baker and Abernethy (2003), they found athletes with disabilities on one hand to be much more focused on leading an active lifestyle, and increasing self-consciousness. Their mainstream sports counterparts, on the other hand, were much more driven by monetary incentives and career advancement. (Kämpfe et al., 2014) Those findings resemble the findings of this case study as well as the study findings of a study conducted in Norway by Pensgaard, Roberts and Ursin (1999). The general aim of many studies is to find out what motivates current elite Para athletes in order to be able to adequately promote high performance Para sport to those not participating, or on the recreational level (McLoughlin et al., 2017). Another Norwegian study, furthermore, found that Olympic and Paralympic athletes had similar motivational profiles. However, Paralympic athletes

were significantly more satisfied with effort and results. (Pensgaard et al., 1999) In light of those studies and the findings of this present study it can be concluded that the family's role within a Para athlete's career is just as significant as the role of parents among able-bodied athletes. This in turn also seconds Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler's (2010) claim that the wider environment including family needs to tie in together in order for an athlete to have a positive experience.

5.2.2 Military Structure Affects Team Dynamics

Social support networks are key for any athlete, but the special significance these players associated with their rehabilitation, getting used to living life with a disability and playing a competitive elite sport alongside other wounded veterans, was remarkable. A change was noted throughout Sports Path Model (Aarresola, 2016) that the role of friends would change from playmates to teammates. This was not applicable in this study simply because it was not concerning youth participants. What could be noticed instead, which was also recognized in the Sports Path Model, is the importance of peers as part of the athletic career. This will also be briefly touched upon in chapter 5.3.1 concerning the socialization into the sport and how fellow veterans helped both participants adapt on and off the ice. The participants' description of the team dynamics both in the San Antonio Rampage team, as well as the U.S. national team will be the focus of this chapter.

“Half or ¾ of our [national] team is military guys.” (Player 1)

The presence of such a high number of military veterans on a national team is unique in the world of sports, and also comes with its own set of challenges. In the past, there have been up to seven players on the U.S. national team who have served in the military (Scifo, 2017). Given the obvious success achieved by the U.S. national team, a closer look into their team dynamics appeared relevant. Team dynamics in general are very important for success and in the world of Para sports that also means combining athletes with congenital disabilities with those that acquired theirs at different stages in life.

This came with a different set of challenges as the military mindset and identity, which will be topic of further discussion later on, is still prevalent among the veterans. The civilians on the team bring a different mind and skill set to the team.

“You don’t want to have too much military structure. Because that will kind of take the fun away.” (Player 2)

In this study the participants first and foremost expressed a deep appreciation for their teammates and how much they learn from each other. For those with congenital disabilities, participating in some sports activities with able-bodied peers has been deemed helpful on their way to elite disability sports (McLoughlin et al., 2017). This was not checked in this study due to the lack of participants with congenital disabilities. However, it can be hypothesized that the mix of military veterans and civilians helps either athlete population to bring their game to the next level. A crucial role here is also played by coaches, that play a dual role as coach and important role model and which will be the focus of sub-chapter 5.2.3.

Henriksen et al. (2010) emphasized the need for role models within a sport program and this was definitely reiterated in this study.

“Whether they are civilians or military, we got some really outstanding guys on our team on and off the ice. Great leaders, great role models and I truly am honored to be a part of this team.” (Player 1)

In adaptive sport a general lack of role models has been identified (Bardocz-Bencsik & Doczi, 2019). This was not the case in this study. Thus, it can be argued that a lack of role models might be most applicable to individual sports. In team sports, such as Para ice hockey, it might be infinitely easier to promote teamwork and recognize the demonstration of it and other beneficial attributes. Furthermore, the new level of commercialization within Para sport (Kämpfe et al., 2014) has given athletes a much broader platform to also showcase their achievements and to inspire the next generation. This was also mentioned many times by both of the players, in how they aspire to achieve

and mentor the next generation of players, but also help sharpen the profile of Paralympic sport in society.

5.2.3 Coaches (Need To) Do More Than Just Teach Skills

The demands on coaches and administrators of Para sport are very high. They have to facilitate perfect conditions within a very heterogenous group of athletes (Pensgaard et al., 1999) that range from being in their early 20s to late 30s with very different disabilities. Adequate coaching, or rather a lack of it, is often considered a big barrier or in turn facilitators of Para sport participation. This was also the reason why it was included as its own pillar in the model theory and was also found to be true for Para sport. Just providing the facilities for Para sport participation is not sufficient. Knowledgeable and qualified instructors are indispensable to bridge the prevalent knowledge gap among individual with disabilities of how to activate and utilize their bodies, as well as providing them with valuable experiences (Junker & Carlberg, 2011).

Recruitment through coaches and fellow athletes early on was found to be significant for sport participation. It creates awareness and thus overcomes the barriers resulting from a general lack of awareness and communication. Both participants of this study attributed their career progression to the Paralympic level to former national team player and coach Lonnie Hannah. Lonnie Hannah is a former U.S. Para ice hockey team member and coach of the San Antonio Rampage. He, alongside other coaches on the national and club level, provided such a fostering and challenging environment that both participants started to become aware of the possibility of a Paralympic career. Furthermore, Hannah recognized the importance of the role wounded veterans could play for Para sport after 09/11 and the onset of the American war on terror. His coaching and mentoring skills did not only include developing Para ice hockey by demonstrating how to include veterans but, furthermore, how to address their special needs within the training environment.

“He can relate and translate language to us military guys” (Player 2)

This will also be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.3.4 in relation to team dynamics and military identity, and how challenging it can be to find a balance between civilians and veterans. The coach's role is particularly important here as the mediator not only between the sport and the veterans but also between all the team members.

The impact staff has on an athlete's career and even life outside of the sport is not limited to the coaches' impact. Other support staff such as trainers are, in fact, just as significant. In the Sports Path Model these were named social capital experiences in which athletes were able to utilize different forms of social capital such as friends, coaches, trainers, and support staff. As already mentioned in chapter 2.2, some disabled athletes face the challenge of being dependent on an interpreter or assistant that enable them to participate in sport (McConkey et al., 2013). In this study, this concept applies to the challenges of adapting to the loss of limb and mobility, and how to overcome physical barriers. These are, for example, non-accessible ice-rinks and other environmental barriers. Player 2 outlined the emphasis on the team's prevalent mindset of "adapt and overcome", that is enforced by the abovementioned support staff:

"We have physiotherapists and different people on staff who will try and help you. But overall, it's like they'll help you one time maybe give you one or maybe even give you that push that second time, but afterwards you have got to figure it out on your own." (Player 2)

Overall, Lonnie Hannah serves as a great embodiment of successful talent development and how Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010) conceptualised successful talent development. By being both a member of the U.S. national team and the San Antonio Rampage, he bridged the gap between these two programs. He essentially built a coherent organisational structure out of them, while also serving as a role model himself. His insistence on the participants' ability to become a Paralympian also helped foster long-term development while Operation Comfort helped to integrate the rest of the participants' environment into the sporting one. Thus, fostering a successful institutional support network.

5.3 Success in Para Ice Hockey and Its Systemic Norms

“What effect did the systemic norms of the sports system have on the participants’ career?”

Success rationality was the third most frequently found theme. It ties in with the unexpected finding of the importance of non-military team members for team dynamics, sustained success and enjoyment. Paralympic sport was not observed as a viable career option by either participant upon initiation. Additionally, their initiation and socialization into the elite sport path happened rather by chance. For the participants, the opportunity to compete on higher levels, and have access to appropriate coaching as well as sustainable support were key to a Para ice hockey career pursuit. Success rationality and socialization into a sport are both parts of the “Systemic Norms of the Sports System” section of the Sports Path Model. Sport is a subculture in society that reproduces life patterns, ideologies and norms (Carison, 1988). Examining the socialization process into a sport is interesting by itself. Adding the level of dedication towards the sport and the talent development initiatives to the examination further enables a broader understanding of career paths. Hence, the utilization of the Sports Path Model that combines all of these into the “Systemic Norms of the Sports System” component. Experiences resulting from the interaction with the systemic norms were labeled normative-institutional experiences (Aarresola, Itkonen, & Laine, 2017) in the Sports Path Model. They encompass the progression through the different stages of sport including socialization and specialization via different institutions. In this study these institutions are the, aforementioned, military support program, namely Operation Comfort, the San Antonio Rampage, the World Class Athlete Program and the U.S. national team.

5.3.1 Socialization into Para Ice Hockey

Macphail and Kirk (2003) noted two phases in the socialization into a sport. The first phase is the specializing phase in which the athlete hones and develops sport-specific skills and reduces the number of sports in which he or she participates. Afterwards comes

the investment phase, in which the entire focus is put on one sport and intensive training regimes. These phases are also present in Para sport but at a rapidly accelerated pace. This was manifested in the rapid career progression of this study's participants.

“I got here four months and then about a month or two of rehab before they were pretty much introducing adaptive sport as part of the therapeutic [approach] and rehab.” (Player 2)

The socialization process into the sport of Para ice hockey has to be examined upon the backdrop of injury onset and subsequent beginning of rehabilitation. Both participants of this study were active duty military personnel at the time of their accidents. One was in his early twenties, the other in his late twenties. Their medical treatment was, consequently, conducted in American military hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. There are a total of fifty-one military hospitals and four hundred and twenty-four military medical clinics around the United States and also abroad. They are also called military treatment facilities or MTFs. (Military Health Services, 2020) Among the most well-known, is the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. Landstuhl is often times used for initial medical interventions, treatment, and rehabilitation of wounded before they are transferred back stateside for further treatment. Both study participants ended up being transferred to the San Antonio Medical center in Texas for their rehabilitation. The start into adaptive sports for both players was made fairly early into their rehabilitation at the aforementioned San Antonio Medical Center.

Player 1 went through an extensive year of rehab before his eventual amputation and then two months into rehabilitation started playing Para ice hockey, alongside his recovery and continued rehabilitation. He had no prior experience in ice hockey and had to learn the entire game from scratch. Eight months after he started playing, he tried out for the national team for the first time but did not get selected. His first national team call-up happened at the following year's trials and he has been a member of the national team ever since.

Player 2 grew up playing ice hockey in high school, in the same position he is playing in Para ice hockey now. He did not have to learn the entire game from scratch, but his playing days had long ended before he got injured. Para ice hockey has many similarities with mainstream ice hockey, but it still has very distinct differences when it comes to technical fundamentals. Therefore, Player 2 did not perceive his previous ice hockey knowledge as a distinct advantage. This is also reiterated in other studies trying to investigate whether skills acquired pre-injury are actually transferrable and if so, if athletes are actually doing it and even enhancing them (Dehghansai et al., 2017). There has been a relation suspected concerning a general lack of awareness of those skills pre-injury (Bednarczuk, Rutkowska, & Skowroński, 2013) and thus the ability to utilize them post-injury. Player 1's national team call-up happened not even a year after he first started playing, and with the exception of a break from 2015 to 2017, he has been a member of the national team ever since.

The participants' timeline of their amputation, beginning of rehab, introduction into adaptive sports and eventual specialization in Para ice hockey was remarkably short. They reached their national team debuts within two years of the amputation and have since had extensive elite playing careers of around ten years. Both of the participants further plan to extend their careers until at least the 2022 Winter Paralympic Games. Such short timeframes between injury onset and involvement in Para sport activities have also been beneficial proven within literature. An early start in sport and recreational activities whether it be at an early age or after acquiring the disability has been found crucial for developing an interest and later on success in Para sport (McLoughlin et al., 2017). A study conducted by Kämpfe et al. (2014) used the three career phases of Initiation, Development and Mastery of the career development model proposed by Coté, Baker and Abernethy (2003) to describe different Para sport careers. The different career phases were being passed at different ages due to the variety in injury onset, which is also congruent with this present study. The Initiation phase was found to be very quick and informal through for example a fellow teammate or purely by chance (Wheeler et al., 1999). This is also reiterated by the participants of this study whose entire career development from initiation to Mastery took less than two years. Their careers might have also not happened at all, if they had not been transferred to San Antonio and brought in

contact with Operation Comfort and Lonnie Hannah. The latter was already covered in more detail in chapter 5.2.3.

The previous brief career timeline serves to reiterate the aforementioned significant differences in career development timelines between athletes with congenital disabilities and those with acquired disabilities. Overall, the type of disability an individual athlete possess plays an important role for his or her eligibility for a particular sport or competition. As previously stated, having a deficiency of the lower limbs is a requirement by the international Paralympic Committee as well as World Para Ice Hockey to compete in any international Para ice hockey competition. The details of the classification and eligibility are not a concern of this study. What is important to note, however, is that whether the disability is congenital or acquired does in fact matter greatly for this study. As previously outlined in chapter 2, the onset age and therefore the age in which the athlete starts competing and figuratively speaking walking the elite sports path varies significantly. Therefore, their experiences vary greatly too. Congenital disabilities are generally related to significantly younger starting ages, which consequently leads to an earlier or rather younger culmination of sporting milestones. Athletes with congenital disabilities are on average ten years younger than their peers with acquired disabilities (Pensgaard et al., 1999). However, while this might be interpreted as an advantage when looking at mainstream sports careers where early starting ages can be a distinct advantage (Law, Côté, & Ericsson, 2007), the effect is leveling itself out towards the late career milestones. An example for a late career milestone is the national team debut. Those milestones are reached at similar ages by athletes with congenital as well as acquired disability. The different developmental patterns are unfortunately still fairly under-researched (Dehghansai et al., 2017).

“I grew up playing sports and sport . . . I’ve always enjoyed playing sports and . . . even though I was injured I was joking with my therapist in the hospital. I mean I was like 2 months in bed, and I said: oh man once I get up and walking, I’m going to beat you in basketball. Just joking around you know. So, sports was always on my mind. I was watching basketball in the hospital in the bed.” (Player 1)

Similarly to the able-bodied athlete population, a strong attachment to an able-bodied athletic identity and past definitions of sport and athletic ability will become a barrier in transitioning for example out of sport (e.g. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). It has further been found limit the (re)development of a new disabled athlete identity (Perrier et al., 2014). This, however, did not seem to be the case for the participants of this study. For both players a vested sporting interest and athletic background prior to their injury played a crucial role in their eagerness to begin rehabilitation and adaptative sports. This did not only include participating in sports but also watching sport. Overall, older starting ages and therefore a prolonged sporting and personal history prior to the injury might also work as an advantage in elite Para sport careers. Those athletes who start older may have enjoyed more variability in their training pre-injury than those with congenital disabilities.

A unique opportunity for wounded veterans transferred specifically to San Antonio, with an interest in ice hockey beyond the initial rehabilitation efforts, is the possibility to join the San Antonio Rampage club team. The San Antonio Rampage are an American Hockey League (AHL) affiliate team to the National Hockey League (NHL) team San Louis Blues. Their Para ice hockey team is exclusively comprised of military veterans (San Antonio Rampage, 2020). The San Antonio Rampage Sled Hockey Team is a joint effort of the San Antonio Rampage and Operation Comfort. This is what Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010) described as a supportive training community. In this case it also provided what Aarresola (2016) called a personal development experience by granting its members access to new skills and resources that facilitate adjustment to life with a disability.

“ . . . an all veteran team, the teasing, it was nothing but fun and I was learning how to walk on a prosthetic in this process. Some of the guys on my team had already mastered walking on a prosthetic leg and they were giving me tips as well. Some of the guys stayed in the military and some of the guys have transitioned out of the military. So, this, this sled hockey and this team not only just gave me you know something of an outlet for working out and stuff like that, but also the guys on this team showed me where I wanted to go in life.” (Player 1)

What Player 1 described here was not only his accumulation of social capital but also a personal-development experience (Aarresola et al., 2017). Research among individuals with an acquired spinal cord injury has found five general dimensions in which sport participation affected athletes' lives. The first was that sport helped with the injury-relevant processing and finding a new sense of their own body. Secondly, participants gained a new appreciation for life while thirdly, reacting to whatever the Para sport environment required of them. Fourthly, participants learned to relate to others and their experiences while lastly, investing in their own health and well-being (Crawford, Gayman, & Tracey, 2014). Being surrounded by peers in similar situations helped participants come to terms with their own injury, relate better to others, re-establish their identity and confidence, and gain new forms of appreciation as well as perspective of life (Crawford et al., 2014). This is what Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) called "Post-traumatic growth" (PTG) as a result of dealing with extremely challenging life crises. Changes that were perceived and reported by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), included 1) changes in self such as increased confidence and empathy, 2) improved relationships with others such as recognizing the value of them, 3) changes in life philosophy/ existential awareness such as becoming aware of mortality, 4) changed priorities including money and appearance, and 5) enhanced spiritual beliefs demonstrated through prayer. Those are not all strictly related to sport itself, which was also found by other researchers examining Para triathletes (Hammer et al., 2019). Gender differences could not be detected related to post-traumatic growth, but there were differences between veterans and civilians, whereas veterans had significantly lower PTG (Stutts & Stanaland, 2016). However, investigating rates of post-traumatic growth is beyond the scope and aim of this study. Specifically related to the athlete population with acquired injuries, Day and Wadey (2016) found two additional narrative types that describe the socialization process into sport. The first was called positive assimilation. It was related to the provision of master experiences through sport, a general corporeal understanding, enhanced life philosophies and the enhancement of relationships. Assimilation was the second narrative. It was related to re-capturing previous life meaning, the (re)formation of an athletic identity using past definitions of sport and a general resilience to trauma. (Day & Wadey, 2016) These findings were reinforced by the narratives of the participants of this study and their involvement in both the San Antonio Rampage and the U.S. national team.

“Prior to sled hockey, it was wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, amputee golf, track and Field, running, as well as swimming, wheelchair softball, wheelchair polo, wheelchair soccer, all kinds of different sports.” (Player 2)

While Para ice hockey eventually became the respondents’ number one sport, both of them also mentioned involvement in a broad array of other adaptive sports. Not only as part of their rehabilitation efforts, but also for fitness and enjoyment during their Para ice hockey career. This is where the aforementioned specializing phase (Macphail & Kirk, 2006) occurs. The athletes did not focus on Para ice hockey straight away, but tried or rather were introduced to many different sports and then ended up reducing and specializing.

“I first got introduced to hand cycling . . . from there I started to play wheelchair basketball and then I did wheelchair soccer, wheelchair football, as well as (Para ice) hockey. And then I mean I still play wheelchair basketball, but hockey is my number one.” (Player 1)

The investment phase (Macphail et al., 2003), as found in mainstream sport, is also prevalent in adaptive sport. This is illustrated in the last sentence of the quote above. Over time, the main focus of the participants’ time and effort was put towards Para ice hockey. Trying out and being invested in many different sports before specializing is also congruent with the findings of one the sub studies that made up the Sports Path Model. That particular sub study found that a sports path through different sports is very beneficial and highly prevalent among Finnish mainstream athletes (Aarresola et al., 2015). Late specialization and multi-sport participation have generally been found to be positively correlated to sporting success among able-bodied athlete populations (Coté et al., 2003). The perspective of the athletes in this study allows the assumption that this also holds true for Para athletes. This is interesting because it provides another perspective on the timeline of athletic sports careers. Usually the research into multi-sport athletes focusses on youth and progression into specialization or drop-out in younger years. The present data shows that multi-sport involvement is potentially beneficial for adult sport careers as well.

The socialization into Para ice hockey in particular was then done through a combination of characteristics of the sport itself and fellow teammates as well as mentors, which led to the eventual specialization. Specialization in Para ice hockey and focusing on it as a main sport happened mostly because of the physical, challenging and fast-paced nature of the sport.

“I enjoy the physical side of it and because you can do that and at the same it’s a fast- paced game. It’s nothing like wheelchair basketball or sitting basketball . . . in hockey you have to be fast, everything’s happening fast, you gotta think quickly and gotta be able to move the puck and it’s a very difficult sport too.” (Player 2)

Player 2 also mentioned a very interesting reason why military veterans in particular might be drawn to the sport of Para ice hockey:

“Us military guys, who’ve either been in the war or you know been in the service for many years and then you know went to the worst warzone, got to come back and got hurt. A lot of them being that they come back and they’re rehabbing. A lot of them have a lot of frustration and anger from everything and then Sled Hockey is one of the only if not the only adaptive sport in which you can still hit people. A lot of them grew up playing Football and a lot of different sports, that are part you know make them who they are as a soldier and whatnot, as a combat person.” (Player 2)

This was also reiterated by Player 1: *“What I think got me with hockey more (than with other sports) was because it was like Football on ice. I mean it is very physical, it is hard hitting, and to me that was the best.”*

Adapted sport serves as an outlet and means for personal expression and provides an environment that is fruitful for personal and social identity development as a whole (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). The benefits of a physical outlet and an added sense of challenge has also been found by other authors that examined the impact of adaptive sports participation on the rehabilitation of injured service members (e.g. Ferrer & Davis, 2019; Goff, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2011)

Violence in sport and its manifestation in society has, furthermore, been examined throughout the development of sport sociology (Elias, 1976) up until today (Robène & Bodin, 2014). Particularly Norbert Elias claimed that violence in sport is a competition over power, popularity and materialistic forms of capital. Aggressiveness and competitiveness are seen as natural human feelings expressed and controlled within sport. (Elias, 1976) These feelings might be heightened by the additional mental affects that war participation and injury had on the athletes. This is what Player 2 was suggesting when he said that the sport of Para ice hockey gives wounded veterans a (legal) outlet. The specific psychological effects and interactions at play within the choice of sport were however, beyond the scope of this study.

5.3.2 Becoming A Paralympian Is Not A Dream (At First)

“For me the first thing is not I lost my leg, I got hurt, I go to the hospital and I’m like Oh my gosh, I want to be a Paralympian or get into a Paralympic sport.”
(Player 2)

In the Sports Path Model, the success rationality of the participant also defined their level of dedication. Mainstream athletes measure their increased level of dedication by how they perceive their chances of actually reaching the elite level. In this study, however, the possibility of making Para ice hockey into a viable post-military career, even going to the Paralympics, was not on the forefront of either of the participants when they first started out. Therefore, their success rationality came from external reinforcement and reassurance.

“Lonnie Hannah and Chris Leverkusn. Really led me, I didn’t even know this was a Paralympic sport. They’re the ones that let me know it was and they’re the ones that said I should try out.” (Player 1)

Disability sport research reveals two distinctive transformations in a Para athlete’s career. The first one is the recognition of their disability identity, which is given to them by society. The second is the rejection of that identity and the limitations that come with it, which marks the transition to an athlete. (Le Clair, 2011) This is also indicated by the

general opposition to the term disability itself. According to Para athletes, it indicates a non-willingness and non-ability to participate in sports, while they are, in fact, willing and able to participate in adaptive sports (Le Clair, 2011). The athletes become aware of themselves and their disability at different stages. With awareness comes the acceptance of body shape and differences, and that while they are all officially disabled, they all have a different disability. (Le Clair, 2011) The lack of self-image and the refusal to be labelled as disabled have also been documented on several other occasions (e.g. Haslett, Choi, & Smith, 2020; Pack, Kelly, & Arvinen-Barrow, 2017).

Player 2 expressed his view on the matter this way: “...*the word disabled made its imprint on the world . . . but once you’re out there there’s no such a thing as disabled. You’re playing sports you’re competing.*”

Wheelchair basketball is one of the most popular Para sports. A comparison between wheelchair basketball and able-bodied basketball players revealed that the wheelchair basketball players had increased family encouragement and significantly less goal perspective (Hutzler & Shemesh, 2012). Thus, fun and enjoyment are on the forefront of their sporting endeavor. This also reflects the findings of this study, where the participants got involved in Para ice hockey for the sake of the sport and teammates, not Paralympic dreams. Generally, elite wheelchair athletes have been found to exhibit significantly more positive psychological well-being traits such as mood states than non-athletic wheelchair users (Campbell & Jones, 1994). Wheelchair rugby players also reported a new-found sense of control over their lives and re-gained physical independence (Goodwin et al., 2009). Those positive effects were also visible in a comparison between an elite group of wheelchair athletes and wheelchair athletes competing on the national, regional and recreational level. The elite displayed more vitality combined with higher self-esteem and levels of competence, while also experiencing lower levels of anxiety (Campbell & Jones, 1994). The experience of being seen as less competent because of a disability could be negated through the affirmation of skill in sport. This was demonstrated by elite Para athletes in a study conducted by Page, O’Connor and Peterson (2001) and reiterated by the participants in this study.

“None of us really thought about that [becoming a Paralympian]. It was just really all the basic survival instinct or whatever you wanna call that. Can you still walk? Will I be able to walk again, run again, do all these things, that I used to do just normally and don’t even think about, you know?” (Player 2)

Generally, success in Para sport can be achieved quite quickly. Sometimes within two years of the introduction into the sport (Wheeler et al., 1996), as was also demonstrated by the two participants of this study. This might mean that they are an international athlete before they have actually learned to cope with their injury and life with a disability (Wheeler et al., 1996). Success rationality in this case study, therefore, also meant the participants’ assessment of whether or not they were still good enough to play on the elite level. Para sport careers can be quite extensive in length and retiring from them just as difficult as from mainstream sport (Bundon et al., 2018).

“I’m going to continue to play until somebody takes my spot. . . . I’m very fortunate to be able to coach. Through the last 3 or 4 seasons. So, I know where the development teams are in terms of their levels and . . . they’re going to have to show me or prove or give me reason to say oh wow this kid is outplaying me, I can definitely step down now.” (Player 2)

The critical transition into retirement of elite Para athletes has been found to be a similar experience than that of those of able-bodied, with the addition of chronic overuse injuries and the worry of aging with a disability (Wheeler et al., 1996).

A strong athletic identity is usually an important resource for an athlete at the peak of the career, but it can become a barrier in the process of adaptation to the post-career (Stambulova et al., 2009).

“I’m the oldest guy on the team. and I’m not saying that I couldn’t [continue to play after 2022]. Because I am sure I am pretty strong-minded so, I feel like I could, but I’ve got children, two, and a family and I’m ready to change gears maybe help the next guys grow into that level. Maybe coach or something like that.” (Player 1)

Many elite athletes go from being competent and skilled in an arena in which they have invested a great deal of physical, emotional and psychological energy to an area in which

they have little experience and might also be years behind their counterparts (Coakley, 2006). Athletic identity has been found to be a risk factor for athletes facing transition which corresponds to a longer duration of the adaptation to post-athletic career life (e.g. Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). An athlete's intrinsic feelings of accomplishment and joy may also be lost because they were previously associated with highly competitive performances (Lavalley, Park, & Tod, 2010). The challenge is then to find meaning and substitute motivators in other activities when, for so long, they have characterized their lives around one specialized activity (Anderson, 2012). Retirement and a subsequent loss of perceived competence through sport (Wheeler et al., 1996), was not found to be significant for individuals with disabilities, however. Elite Para athletes were able to utilize their sporting experience as a stepping stone to return or build a disability identity after having to give up their athletic one (Wheeler et al., 1999). This occurred regardless of their rapid career progression and suspected lack of adjustment to life with a disability beside the sport.

5.3.3 Participation in Talent Development Forms the Dream

Participation and more specifically being given the opportunity to participate in talent development initiatives and programs is a vital part of the sports path.

“It's the exposure of it. We're very fortunate that because we were military, we had the resources. We had the care, we have everyone that pretty much in a way raises me to get involved, just to participate.” (Player 2)

What Player 2 illustrates here is what has also been found in adaptive sport research as a major barrier for participation in adaptive sports. There is a wide-spread lack of knowledge about available programs and resources (e.g. Anderson, Bedini, & Moreland, 2005; Batts & Andrews, 2011). Furthermore, a general lack of programs as a whole and, moreover, an even bigger lack of suitable facilities to hold them in (Armila et al., 2018; Jaarsma et al., 2015), are further reasons for low participation rates of adaptive sport. This is also the reason why the comparatively low numbers of participants have been associated with a higher chance of achieving success in Para sport, purely based on the

lack of competition (Bullock et al., 2009). Cocquyt and Sigmund (2011) investigated the influence of competition level by comparing elite Para athletes and recreational Para athletes. They found significantly higher levels of self-perception among the elite, which is the athlete's own opinion of their identity. The general implication of their findings was that a level of competition should be included in designated programs for individuals with a disability, as long as it increases and invokes a positive experience for the participants. This also reflects other studies' findings that a sense of challenge is vital for a positive experience (see e.g. Allan et al., 2018; Martin Ginis et al., 2010). Considering this, it becomes even clearer why military support programs are so successful in creating and fostering elite sport talent. They have a relatively high influx of participants, with a competitive nature, and possess fairly sufficient resources to create awareness and supportive environments.

The progression from rehabilitation into the club environment and then from there to the national team level can be termed a normative-institutional experience within the realms of the Sports Path Model. This progression was, however, more accelerated than the ones in the model study since participants were rehabilitating from their injuries, learning a new sport, and starting an elite sport career with almost no time in between. The significance of this progression and going from the Development to the Mastery stage (Coté et al., 2003) was also stated by the participants in this study.

“Once you make the team then you know you learn a lot more, the speed you know going from club to National. Then the national level is just so much faster, the guys are so much better.” (Player 1)

The talented development system of USA Hockey is also built upon a two-tier system in which the national team is based on a pool of athletes who are playing in the so-called development team and competing for spots on the national squad within the trials every year. (USA Hockey, 2020)

The experience of being part of the development team, of trying out and not making the national team was cited as vital for their development as players as it drove them to

become better and try again. Which is also what was found within the model study in which these experiences and opportunities to compete are what foster elite careers.

5.3.4 Dedication to Para Ice Hockey Keeps the Dream Alive

Aarresola (2016) described the “Dedication to the sport” element of her Sports Path Model with all the mental and material investments that athletes make in order to continue on the path to elite sport.

“Now it’s just full-time Paralympics, playing two teams and working with different sponsors of the game.” (Player 1)

Para sports has grown a lot in popularity in recent years (e.g. Bush et al., 2013; Hammond & Jeanes, 2018; Misener et al., 2013). This means that the level of dedication expected from the participants has also grown. Both players are full-time Para ice hockey players, practicing several times a week on and off the ice.

“It’s not just one of those you skate once a week or you work out whenever you feel like it, and then you can just show up to these camps and be ok kind of things. You constantly have got to be maintaining at a high level. So, for that I have to spend more time on the hockey and on my hockey career or whatever you want to say, or however you want to call it.” (Player 2)

The continuous need to hone skills and train is also the accumulation of sport capital to be able to continue their elite career, as described by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1996). Despite essentially being professional athletes, in terms of training times and efforts dedicated to the sport, neither of the two participants was really eager to call themselves professional athlete. Nor did they exhibit any form of arrogance associated with their status as elite athletes or Paralympic champions. Neither one of them even have their gold medals on display at home and only take them out for public and promotional events. That humility is also illustrated by the quote above. This could also be attributed to the fact that they do not actually get paid by either the club or the national team. Just small stipends are given out to the national team members to pay for needs directly related to

their sporting career. The lack of pay would traditionally put them into the amateur category of sport (Mason, 1980).

What was even more remarkable in terms of their dedication to succeed and not get hung up on past achievements, was their extreme willingness to travel for the sport. Player 1 lives almost 3500 kilometers away from his club team in San Antonio and continues to fly in for practices and tournaments. The national and club team schedules work in a tournament format, for which the players travel to different parts of the U.S. on separate weekends. Player 2 drives one hour twice a week to practice at a rink with open ice times at lower costs than in San Antonio. Both are paying for extra ice and practice times out of their own pockets, while the San Antonio Rampage are able to offer them two ice practices per week. This stands in vast contrast to other professional full-time athletes, especially in ice hockey that essentially have unlimited access to practice facilities daily. Sponsored ice times increase around the Paralympic Games or other major tournaments. This even led Player 2 to a year-long move across the country prior to the 2018 Paralympic Games to take advantage of advanced practice possibilities there with other fellow national team members. Therefore, their personal-development experiences are also very much linked again to their normative-institutional ones along their path of accumulating sports capital.

“If you want to play hockey, you want to get down on the ice, you want to know how to get in the sled with one leg or no legs or whatever, all these little things you have got to be able to figure out.” (Player 2)

Another measure of dedication found in this study was their remarkable willingness to just adapt to and overcome obstacles presented to the environment. This includes, for example, the wide-spread lack of accessibility at ice-rinks over which they could have a completely justified sense of anger, but they did not.

National Team Membership and Identity

“I was really eager to be a part of it [U.S. national team] and I really wanted to represent my country again and I really wanted to do whatever it took to be on that team.” (Player 1)

A large mental part of the journey to elite sport participation is the formation of an athletic identity. Described by Anderson (2012) as the measure of how much of their self-worth athletes relate to their sport participation. The athletic identity of disabled athletes has been found to be similarly constituted to that of able-bodied athletes and demographics have been found to play no significant role in its development (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006). Quality of life improvement as well as the development of an athletic identity has been positively correlated to adaptive sport participation (Groff et al., 2009). Researchers, moreover, suggested that due to a lack of other forms of expressions, athletes with disabilities might develop strong athletic identities quicker than their able-bodied peers (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006). When put in relation with the severity of the disability, athletic identity can actually predict the positive impact on the participants’ quality of life (Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005).

The formation of athletic identity is not strongly correlated to whether or not an athlete has a disability, but rather to the level of engagement in sport itself (Groff et al., 2009). Consequently, skill level and the level of competition are what increase and shape athletic identity. For elite athletes with a disability, identification with the role of an athlete was also not found to be related to the actual time spent as such (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006). Formation of an athlete’s identity is connected to the level of achievement that is being reached within the chosen sport. This includes for example the ability to join the national team and whether or not the athletes are being recognized as high-level athletes and not merely as disabled. (Haiachi et al., 2018) The feeling of belonging to a special group and having a multidisciplinary support network that encompasses the athlete’s special needs, has also been found to favour the development of athletic identity (Haiachi et al., 2018). This was also outlined in this case study. Hawkins, Coffee and Soundy (2014) investigated the effects athletic identity had on the adjustment to a spinal cord injury and

it was found that it promotes recovery, while encouraging and maintaining long-term adjustment and acceptance of the disability. However, they also described a paradox in which the development of the athletic identity that is, as aforementioned, a facilitator, occurs simultaneously to sustained feelings of shock, loss and intense fear of the future, which are indicators of not embracing the disability (Hawkins et al., 2014). This could also be explained by the extremely short timeframes of the development in elite Para sport, as outlined in chapter 5.3.1, during which developments simply have to occur simultaneously.

“That chapter of your life has closed, and one opens up . . . whether or not you make the [national] team, it just kind of sets a boundary of where you are as of right now and there’s challenge and more limitation down the road.” (Player 2)

This fits into the fifth narrative found by Allan et al. (2019;2001), called “Embracing change” perfectly. It was found particularly in individuals who became disabled in early adulthood so between the ages of 18 and 30. This is also applicable to the current set of participants and was described in a change of mindset from who they were before, to seeing what they might be able to be after. (Allan et al., 2018; 2001) Trying out and getting picked for the national team is associated with reaching the mastery stage (Coté et al., 2003) of an athletic career. That association is the same in mainstream sport, as well as in Para sport (Kämpfe et al., 2014). Overall, this illustrates the special nature of Para sport careers again, where developments might be similar, yet also very different to mainstream sport careers.

Player 2 took a year off and completed his university degree after the 2014 Paralympic Games before returning to the sport in time for the 2018 Paralympic Games. This can be seen as another aspect that often defines dedication to a sport. It encompasses the degree to which athletes are willing (and able) to focus on it full-time. Often times, elite mainstream athletes sacrifice a dual career for the sake of athletic achievements (e.g. Giulianotti, 2004). Generally, education is an important development necessity for elite athletes because of its great implications for future prosperity (Torre, 2009), employability (Coffee & Lavalley, 2014), and entrepreneurship (Pavlidis & Gargalianos,

2014). Employability is not only dependent on qualifications or education but they play a major role (Coffee & Lavalley, 2014). Among the Para athlete population education or rather a dual career has also been found to be a positive predictor for employment (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016). Overall, athletes with disabilities face even greater challenges after retiring and searching for employment than their able-bodied peers. This is due to a pre-existing lack of employment opportunities (Lockwood et al., 2003). While athletes might have achieved a certain level of equality within their sport and athletic career, that equality is absent from the labour market (Bundon et al., 2018). Therefore, Para athletes experience even more uncertainty when it comes to life after sport. That life after sport then also includes the return to “disabled people” and no longer “athletes with a disability (Bundon et al., 2018). While both of the athletes in this study were full-time players they still worked at the same time and did not express feelings of anxiety concerning their retirement.

Throughout the athletic career, it might be possible that the disabled athlete is able to support him- or herself at least partially with the sport. Among the athlete population with congenital disabilities, this can lead to a shift in dynamics within the family that used to cover the expenses before (Haiachi et al., 2018). However, it can also lead to a conflict with society. It can become difficult to explain why the individual might not be fit for certain types of traditional labour but be an example of life and strength in other spheres of life like the sport field at the same time. (Haiachi et al., 2018) Athletes face the dilemma that wanting to avoid the stigma of being disabled and not disclosing it on their CV, also results in them not having a viable reason for what they have done so far in their lives. It, furthermore, undermines the achievements that they have in fact reached in the athletic field. So, by disclosing their athletic career on their CV they automatically also disclose their disability and face the potential backlash of stigmatization. (Bundon et al., 2018) Overall, it has been found that disabled athletes are generally more employable than disabled non-athletes (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016). Therefore, not disclosing their athletic career achievements might be detrimental. Any extra year up to year ten of participation in adaptive sport also leads to an approximately four percent increase in likelihood of employment (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016). The duration of the disability is, moreover, a positive predictor of employment, while severity of the disability (Lastuka

& Cottingham, 2016) and veteran status have been found to be negative predictors (Pfeiffer, 1991). Overall, for people with a disability, substantial economic benefit results from increased participation in adaptive sport. Employment is directly related to increased earnings. This in turn decreases the burden on society and government spending and simultaneously benefits their sense of independence, self-esteem and social grounding. (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016). A study done by Schur (2002) showed that employment raises household-income by forty-nine percent while social isolation is reduced by ten percent. This is a significantly larger impact, than employment has among the non-disabled population (Schur, 2002).

Upon his return to Para ice hockey, Player 2 initially struggled to get back onto the team but found that getting cut also helped him to really redefine his motivation.

“You have to prove it yourself. Do you still have the capability, the skill- set and then that kind of mental grasp to play at a high level?” (Player 2)

Taking time off elite sport, doing something else in life and then returning to the competition can probably also be partially contributed to the higher age of the athletes. The participants also mentioned this themselves, in how they have more of a grasp and appreciation for life outside of sport. This was also found in mainstream athletic career research (e.g. Wylleman et al., 2013). A changing perspective on life was also illustrated by the way that they mentor the younger players on their team.

“They look up to us . . . and they’re growing as well because they see there is going to be life after hockey. You still have got to do your job as a person, you still have got to be a good human being. I think the military definitely plays a great role of it, but along with our teammates who are willing and very capable of adapting to the things too, to the environment.” (Player 2)

The second part of that quote ties in with the next part of this analysis, that concerns the impact of military service on the player’s dedication to the sport. Both participants learned to play Para ice hockey at the San Antonio Rampage with the help of Operation Comfort. Their socialization processes were outlined above, but the affect that military service had

on their athletic identity has not been covered yet. In the broadest sense, military service also creates a unique type of athletic or at the very least an identity of its own. Military veterans are used to physical challenges, however, they are also used to a certain type of training and discipline.

“Us as military guys, we are used to learning in proper, in a structural order.”
(Player 2)

Whereas sport thrives on creativity and fun, military service does not. Within the San Antonio Rampage team, they all had the same athletic background and were used to the same way of learning and training. When they started competing and later on joined the national team that changed. Their opponents as well as their teammates are civilians. This requires a shift from a military mindset to one that is exhibited by the others on the ice and their team. That shift is based on the aforementioned characteristics of sport such as creativity, fun, and solid athletic ability not gained through drill. The socialization process into Para ice hockey, therefore, also included a shift of identity. A shift occurred from an able-bodied military identity to a disabled military identity and potentially even away from the military identity all together. This process coincided with a general uncertainty of the future and struggle to adjust to life post-injury.

“Figuring yourself out because at the same time we just want to do things. You wonder if you can still be a soldier and you can still serve and all these great things, but then that’s taken away, that chapter has closed.” (Player 2)

Where sport gave them a great outlet and a way to cope it also brought humbling experiences along the path of a (re)formation of their athletic identity and letting go, or also reformation of their military identity.

“Mentally, we all felt like we’re like the best shaped or we’re the best athletes. We were going to crush these little civilian kids or what not, that were born with disabilities and then you realize how challenging the sport was. Not only that but also how competitive these athletes are. Our perspective was they don’t have the mentality like we do.” (Player 2)

“The most important cultural and political roles in the United States are athlete and soldier” (Abdel-Shehid, 2002, p. 317) Military mentality as well as patriotism was also something that was represented in the participants’ view on their national team membership.

“For me it’s an honor and I don’t take it for granted, putting on that red white and blue jersey. I do it with a sense of pride and remembering all the guys that have sacrificed themselves for this amazing country that I live in.” (Player 1)

There has always been a close link between military and sport. Sport has also been utilized as a means to provide a nation’s younger generation with pre-military training (Brohm, 1978). Big sport events are a display of national prowess and can also serve to cover up grievances within a society (Mandell, 1972). Additionally, Sportive Nationalism has been found to be extremely powerful in mobilizing and instigating the public (Hoberman, 1993). On a political scale, sport presents an arena where gestures of hostility and rejection can be displayed that would otherwise lead to war (Wilson, 1988). Attendance or non-attendance of Olympic Games are political gestures (Wilson, 1988), but also sometimes ambiguous as nations at war will often still compete against each other within the Games (Brohm, 1978). As aforementioned, war veterans also served as the main reason for the establishment of the Paralympic games (Legg & Steadward, 2011). With the onset of the War on Terror post 09/11 and the rising number of wounded, the militarization of sport has risen (Atkinson & Young, 2002) as well, and with it the focus on military and sport has returned too. The national discourse within the United States regarding patriotism is manifold. A phenomenon called “Coercive Patriotism” (Jenkins, 2013) emerged through excessive display of national symbols and pride at sport events, which is criticized to romanticize the horrors of war in conjunction with offering the armed forces a valuable recruitment tool. Furthermore, it is also found to be promoting a form of patriotism that is morally problematic for some athletes and fans (Jenkins, 2013). This culminated most recently in wide-spread public backlash to several NFL players taking a knee at the playing of the national anthems prior to the games (Schimmel, 2017).

“It’s definitely an honor. It’s definitely an honor to continue to represent my country in a different way now for the second time. And just over the last 7 to 8

years we always have had a different group of military veterans playing at the same time.” (Player 2)

What Player 2 voiced here about being able to continue to represent his country is something that Batts and Andrew (2011) termed the “serving athlete narrative”. In this study the continuation of an active duty military career as part of the World Class Athlete Program (U.S. Army, 2020) reinforced that narrative. Batts and Andrew (2011), in their paper, called wounded veterans who turned into elite athletes “tactical athletes” because they still serve a distinct political purpose within society.

As outlined before in chapter 2, participation in adaptive sports can be very expensive, especially when it comes to specially manufactured equipment and training facilities. As illustrated earlier, there are clear benefits in a multi-sport athletic background and there is a broad array of adaptive sports available. They do, however, not always present themselves as equally accessible to anyone as also documented in chapter 2 by Carlberg and Junker (2011). Therefore, participation in talent development initiatives, in this case military support programs, becomes particularly crucial. They not only provide the opportunity to participate and thus raise awareness for the sport, but also provide high level competition to those involved at an affordable cost. This, yet again, ties back in with the overall importance of institutional support networks.

Through this joint effort, military veterans are able to play Para ice hockey without having to worry about the expenses.

“Operation Comfort raised a lot of money. They were able to generate a lot of sponsors, donors and investors that want to help out the veterans, you know the military guys. And so the expenses on the club level are covered by them. . . . So, travel, lodging, entering the tournaments, competitions, equipment, transportation. So, we’re very fortunate that we don’t spend a dime.” (Player 2)

This fortunate position can be also seen as partly due to the geographical location of their rehabilitation center. Texas is a fairly pro-military state, in which the fundraising efforts for the benefit of the armed forces appears to be easier than in other states. This also

manifests itself in the sheer number of support programs offered for veterans in the state of Texas. Only California was level with it at twenty-two programs offering adaptive sports to wounded veterans (U.S. Paralympics, 2020a) One of the players also specifically mentioned that in Texas individuals do not take kindly to athlete activism as displayed in the NFL, because it is being perceived as disrespectful to the armed forces. Therefore, it is important to stipulate that a veteran's ability to afford playing, based on the program's financial means, can vary greatly within the United States.

In addition to the club level support, national team members also receive a small stipend by USA Hockey that allows them to cover some expenses such as extra ice time, gym memberships or equipment as well. Neither financial support, however, is enough to be considered an actual salary or livable income. Thus, Para ice hockey players cannot live off their sporting income alone. This particularly applies to those players who are not military veterans and subject to the aforementioned amenities of organizations like Operation Comfort.

“I’m very fortunate, like not fortunate that I’m missing a leg, but fortunate in the fact that I’ve been medically retired from the military. So, I’m retired from the military and I do generate income from being retired.” (Player 1)

Being a medically discharged service member due to injury and, therefore, being eligible to receiving retirement benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018) can also help ease the financial burden of Para sport participation.

Player 2 was able to stay on active duty for several more years despite his injury and join a specific high-performance athlete squad called “World Class Athlete Program” (U.S. Army, 2020). Similarly, to programs in countries like Germany, military service members can become members of that particular high-performance squad. They receive financial and institutional support through the armed forces that aids their pursuit of sporting excellence at both the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

“It was a pretty cool thing, because that way they were my main sponsor as far as getting anything I needed off the ice, more training or ice time, or if I needed equipment. You know they will be able to help me out with it and then because of that I was able to stay in the military too, because of this particular program I was involved in. It was kind of like a win win for me.” (Player 2)

These narratives serve as an example of how prior military service can potentially give participants of adaptive sport easier access to institutional and other crucial support than their civilian peers might have. The participants’ dedication to the sport manifests itself not only in their willingness to travel but also their continued sense of duty to their country.

5.4 Athletes Become Agents and Activists

“In which way did the athletes develop and exercise a sense of Agency?”

Agency was the last theme found in the interview transcripts. The sports path continuum of the participants of this study differs greatly from that of mainstream athletes. Their sports path and introduction into the sports environment happened at significantly older ages. Thus, the levels and forms of agency developed and exercised by them are significantly different from those of Finnish youth, which were the basis Aarresola’s (2016) study. The agency found in this study mostly manifested itself in the participants’ desire and ability to act as advocates for Para ice hockey, disability sport, and individuals with disabilities as a whole. This was further extended by their unique opportunity to capitalize on their personal stories as wounded veterans that bring public attention to their sporting success but also to the horrors of war.

“You can cry about it or you can just do something about it.” (Player 2)

Their involvement in Operation Comfort gave them a certain level of freedom, also financially, while providing the means to influence public perception of military service, Para ice hockey, and adaptive sports. As explained earlier, agency is an individual’s ability to make choices within a given context (Hitlin & Elder, 2006).

Agency has also been found to manifest itself as a form of self-expression (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014). The mindset “adapt and overcome” is definitely a form of agency the participants developed over time, fostered by their environment. They chose not to complain about the lack of accessibility, but rather demonstrate how you can still do what you want to do, while still pointing out needs for improvement. This self-expression was demonstrated by the participants’ willingness and ability to become advocates for their sport, Para sport, inclusion, and accessibility.

The desire to grow the sport and to help the next generation of participants into adaptive sport was very prevalent in this study. Sport is widely seen to have the potential to change society for the better (Haslett et al., 2020). However, it is important to keep in mind that the role that sport by itself can play to reach permanent social change, especially regarding individuals with disabilities (Bush et al., 2013), is limited. Using it as a seemingly simple solution for a complex set of social problems might not be feasible (Browne-Yung et al., 2015). Athlete Activism is known as athletes using their sporting platform to protest or at least raise awareness to, for example, social justice. This includes, but is not limited to, community engagement, protest, and collective action (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2017). It is often related to some variety of fan reaction (Smith & Tryce, 2019) that was triggered by high-profile incidents such as Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in the NFL (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Kaufman investigated the potential consequences for athletes that engage in activism and found that on the positive side a sense of purpose and vocational skills can be achieved, while on the negative side burnout, stress, and harsh public criticism stand (Kaufman, 2008).

While mainstream athlete’s activism such as that, has made some waves, disability activism, similarly to the disability athletes themselves, have received much less attention (Haslett et al., 2020). This also reflects the general inequality within disability politics as a whole (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2014). Over time, social equality and social justice have come to the forefront of sport management (Cunningham et al., 2019) as it is faced with Para athlete activism. Para athlete activism tries to combat and transform society, policies, attitudes, and systematical structures so that they no longer socially oppress disabled people (Smith et al., 2016). However, also within the community of disabled

athletes there is no unity regarding the type of activism they agree with. The type and extent of involvement in social justice initiatives in the sports club context also varies. Some if not the majority of athletes in a recreational adaptive sport club, might simply be involved for the exercise and chance to socialize, not to change the system (Tucker, 2016).

In disability sport it also a question about whether there is a perception of misrepresentation of disability and life with it when the negative sides get highlighted extensively. Some would rather portray an affirmative disability identity with a narrative of ability because of the disability and not despite of it. (Haslett et al., 2020). This mindset was also reinforced in a study done by Le Clair (2011), in which athletes vocalized that they wanted to be seen and see themselves as capable and independent as opposed to disabled or even limited. Those studies' findings were also reflected in this case study where both participants expressed a desire to grow the sport but also reach a level of equality in which Para sport is on par with able body sport and access to it is easy. The mindset "adapt and overcome" on the other hand, reflects that neither of the participants was actually aggressively engaging in athlete activism, but rather playing their part through public appearances and telling their story to those interested.

"When they put our sport on TV and show it to the world that's huge for our sport I would really like to keep seeing it grow and that's why I do my part you know going around and telling everybody about it and talking about it, because that's how it grows." (Player 1)

Mainstream media generally puts Para sport second to mainstream sport and elite Para athletes are conscious of it (Brittain, 2004; Hardin & Hardin, 2003). This is also illustrated by the quote above. Sport serves as a tool to foster national pride and unity, sometimes even as an illusion (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001). Modern sport and media supply each other with necessary resources such as capital, audience, promotion, and content (Miller et al., 2001). Therefore, it is crucial for sports to be present in media as it has become the prime currency in the cultural economy of sport and the main gate way for people into exposure to a certain sport (Miller et al., 2001). Media also has immense power over what they report on (Hargreaves, 1986). Disability sport promotion and broadcasting and, therefore, in turn spectatorship is unfortunately under-researched

(Cottingham et al., 2015). Whatever factors motivate spectators to watch able-bodied mainstream sport, might not be the same factors that motivate disability sport spectatorship. This has been found to be at least partially related to the perception and popular discourse about disability itself (Cottingham et al., 2015). Due to the sometimes confusing classification and measurement categories success in disability sport is also far less easily understood for an outsider (Michaluk, 2011), which might also negatively affect spectatorship. Among the reasons for disability sport spectatorship that have been researched were, for example, the attempt to support opportunities for people with disabilities, seeking inspiration (Cottingham et al., 2014), wanting to gain knowledge about it, and educating themselves. Others had personal interests in Para sport through participation themselves, because of family members and friends, or through volunteering (Cottingham et al., 2015). Fitzgerald and Kirk (2009) called the phenomenon where families establish an interest in disability sport because of their child's disability "reverse socialization". Maurice Roche (1993) further argued that sport is divisive and differentiating by nature also in terms of adaptive sport. Many people have seen the viral Guinness beer commercial (2013) in which non-disabled join their disabled friend for weekly wheelchair basketball games. While it is arguable whether the message of that commercial was really reducing and not enhancing the stigma of disability (Ladau, 2013), it still serves to point out the fact that Para sports are generally inclusive, also for the non-disabled. There are attempts within school settings to include adaptive sports into the curriculum to try and expose non-disabled children to the world of disabled sport and reduce prejudices (Evans, Bright, & Brown, 2015). The participants of this study reported attempts by friends, medical professionals and family to try out Para ice hockey and learn more about the sport. High-level competition is limited to athletes with a disability, but the leisure sport activities are still inclusive also for those non-disabled.

"I wish it can be like that in general, everything as a whole where Para sport, adaptive sport, Paralympics whatever you call it, it's been exposed since you are aware of U.S. sports, when you are kindergarten, when you're in elementary or whatnot, where it's the equal level of things." (Player 2)

Overall, disability sport organizations make efforts to increase spectator attendance and in turn make disability sport more attractive for media (Cottingham, Gearity, & Byon,

2013; Cottingham et al., 2015). The promotion of disability sport through their able-bodied counterparts has been seen critically. It was argued that that might further enforce the phenomenon that only those disability sports closest to mainstream aesthetics are being promoted and made visible (Cottingham et al., 2013).

“Team Toyota has just been amazing with me, embracing the whole Paralympic movement and not just being a car company but more of a mobility company.”
(Player 1)

Since disability sport is far less broadcasted than mainstream able-bodied sports, revenue streams through sponsoring that might facilitate sport equipment funding are also limited (Cottingham et al., 2013). It has also been found that disability sport sponsoring is often times seen as an act of charity instead of a search for an image match and transfer as is done in traditional sponsoring (Cottingham et al., 2013). This was further elaborated by MacDougall et al. (2014) who found that image congruence, which is one of the main drivers in able-bodied sport sponsorship, did not even appear on the list of reasons for corporate sponsorship in disability sport. What has been found however, is that the Paralympic Games have a largely positive image and sponsors of it and the perceptions of their corporate social responsibility influence consumer behavior (Park, Taeho, Yun Seok, & Olson, 2011). Therefore, that act of charity or image transfer might still occur and transform into economic value.

“And that’s why it’s so important you know like having sponsors like Toyota and showing the equality of you know this Paralympic sport is just as is just as amazing as regular Olympic sport.” (Player 1)

Sponsorship money is crucial for exposure as well as for simply being able to operate. Sponsors are elemental for athletes’ ability to compete full time and leave amateurism (Barnett, 1990), as was also demonstrated by one of the players who is generating income through work with the game’s sponsors.

“I’ve been really fortunate enough to work with some of the sponsors of the games . . . they bring us out, we were signing Autographs, taking pictures, I was showing people the gold medal, telling them a little bit about my story . . .” (Player 1)

This further ties in with the fact that compelling narratives are a great selling point in media (Whannel, 1992), and help garner attention. Sport coverage, over time, has changed towards more of an emphasis on sensationalism (Holt & Mason, 2000), which is definitely given through stories of war heroics and explosions. However, as Player 2 was quick to point out:

“For us, you know in this, it’s not just a story. Like this is based on true you know these things happen, where guys get send off to war, Iraq, Afghanistan and then boom an explosion, an IED, or get shot at and they come back and whatnot.”
(Player 2)

This illustrates that media often also tend to forget the humans behind the sensational stories. The sport of Para ice hockey is unique because it requires a visible body impairment in order to compete at a high level. This becomes especially relevant in the context of media coverage as it has been found that a visible bodily sacrifice of a soldier is treated differently and more favorable than an “invisible” brain injury (Batts & Andrews, 2011). However, what is also important in Para ice hockey is that their use of prosthetics is not what enables them to play the sport. This is imperative to note because veterans were found to gain cultural visibility through advanced prosthetic technology that allows them to represent their country on the sporting field (Batts & Andrews, 2011), or at least enable them to go out for a jog with the U.S. president (Grabham, 2009). This is not the case within Para ice hockey, where no athletic advancement is related to the use of prosthetics or even the narrative of a “supercrip” (Howe, 2011).

Being a wounded war veteran that became a Paralympian has been noted as a definite plus by the participants of this study when it comes to garnering public attention. Demonstrating resilience gains Para athletes symbolic capital (Forté, 2018). While their public appearances are usually related to sport, they might still also garner some additional public attention for the horrors of war and the effects it has on those who fight in it. As outlined before, sport plays an important role in the formation of national identity and unity as a whole (Wilson, 1988), and being exposed to their veterans’ stories might play an important role here. Sport is used as a means to represent national characteristics. Batts and Andrews (2011) argued that sporting success of veterans might also

simultaneously deflect from the broader problems such as that the majority of veterans do not get to represent their country on this stage and are instead battling for their disability claims and avoiding homelessness. Therefore, a very special form of agency in this study is that those military veterans who make it to the elite sport stage, become “tactical athletes” (Batts & Andrews, 2011), and get to utilize their capital to raise awareness, while also escaping the fate of many other fellow veterans.

Another aspect of agency is their growing popularity and ability to turn that into advocacy for equality and inclusion. Bruce (2014) noted that if a Para athlete’s success can be connected to national identity, which soldiers are an embodiment of, then media coverage and representation is significantly closer to that of able-bodied athletes. Both participants of this study have been given the opportunity to tell their story and to present their medals to the public on numerous occasions. This would not have been possible had they not actually been that successful at the Paralympics, which goes to show how the environment shapes agency and agency shapes the environment. Their widespread experience of over ten years of elite Para sport also gives them ample knowledge in how to mentor the new generation and how to improve their own game mentally.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the narratives of elite Para ice hockey players with a military background in the Sports Path Model. Thus, investigating the extent of which prior military service influenced their paths. An in-depth analysis of different elements that were unique for wounded veterans' sports paths led to the conclusion that access to not only adaptative sport, but Para ice hockey through Operation Comfort played a deciding factor in their elite athletic career.

The following conclusions will summarize the findings in the five categories of the sports path (socialization, accumulation of sports capital, events and states, experiences) and then give an outlook on possible future studies based on the limitations of the current study. Overall, this case study was able to explore elite Para athletes sport paths using the Sports Path Model. The Sports Path Model was not only a handy concept to theorise the sport development of Para ice hockey players but also to explain the re-emergence of the link between military and sport for rehabilitation, which marked the origins of the Paralympic games (Brittain & Green, 2012). Utilizing a sociological perspective allowed the application of a broad lens on the environment in which the Para ice hockey players developed. This is compliant with Patatas et al. (2019) who called for a careful consideration and examination of the broad socio-cultural context when looking at Para athletes' career pathways. Additionally, recruitment, coaching and mentoring of Para athletes has been found to be substantially similar to that of able-bodied athletes (McLoughlin, Weisman Fecske, Castaneda, Gwin, & Graber, 2017). This gives reason to argue that Aarresola's (2016) framework is also applicable to Para sport and Para ice hockey in particular.

Thus, the study provides valuable insight into how Para sport can be supported sustainably and opens up a discussion about how the benefits that veterans earn through hard bodily sacrifice, could potentially also be extended to civilians with a disability. The Sports Path Model was found to be applicable or where not, adaptable to include the specific athlete population of wounded veterans. Thus, also validating my pre-assumption

and fulfilling my secondary aim of enriching the model and shedding more light on the specific circumstances and needs of athletes with a disability. This case study further underlined how creating an integrated talent development environment, in this case club and national team, is beneficial in fostering talent sustainably.

6.1 Sports Path

The sports path is the synthesis of the socialization into a sport and the life course of an athlete. It is within the nature of Para sport that participants are being faced with obstacles and challenges that go beyond the scope of the general public's perception. I expressively include myself in that, as I have not been exposed to too many opportunities to get in touch with Para sport. Before this research project, I also had not made the conscious effort to change that. This, I think, is unfortunately rather prevalent even among those of us who are actually in the sports profession. Therefore, I would like to start with a notion by Player 2 who said his teammate and most successful Para ice hockey player in the world, Steve Cash, has summarized the Para sport mindset the best. He said that every Para ice hockey player had to go through some sort of obstacle prior to becoming an athlete, which as a collective makes them very appreciative of their current position. I feel like that is very important to keep in mind when considering the life course aspect of the sports path and when interacting with them and their incredibly humble demeanor. Mainstream athletes are often primed to become star athletes from a very young age. This can lead them losing focus of what is important in life and throwing them immensely off balance with the occurrence sudden injuries or other life events. The latter also happened to be a category of the sub study regarding significant experiences along the sports path, named "unexpected life events", including injury or illness. Within the athlete population that participated in this study such an unexpected life event was the reason they were even on their sports path.

Socialization

This study's participants' initiation and subsequent socialization into Para ice hockey happened mostly through a combination of favorable events and other factors such as individuals. These findings are congruent to Kämpfe et al (2014) and their conclusions based on Para athletes in Germany. Without the participants' transfer to San Antonio, the introduction to Operation Comfort, and the San Antonio Rampage with Lonnie Hannah as a coach and role model, then I dare to conclude their careers would have not happened. This study demonstrated the applicability of the criteria of good talent development initiatives originally set for able-bodied athletes by Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010). The sport and exercise context itself is crucial on the road to adjustment to life with a disability, hence institutional support networks being ranked as most important in this study. The network in this study provided the setting and the opportunities for success experiences among peers while testing boundaries, which allowed them to re-establish or even discover new meanings in life. This second the research findings by Melissa Day (2013). The group setting and learning from other veterans was perceived as particularly beneficial and even essential in re-establishing what had been lost after the end of the military career. In military sport programs it appears that re-gaining the sense of comradery, brotherhood, and challenge is on the forefront, which is also what other researchers found (Ferrer & Davis, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2011).

“When I was on the military team here you know it's a really tight bond. And from this team that I played on with the San Antonio Rampage there are like 5 or 6 of us have gone on to make this national and Paralympic team.” (Player 1)

This yet again ties back in with what Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (Henriksen et al., 2010) concluded and their assessment of successful talent development. The number of members of the San Antonio Rampage who have become national team members is an illustration of that.

Accumulation of Sports Capital

Athletes within this study were able to accumulate their sports capital through a combination of previous athletic experience and passion, parental and familial support, and most importantly adequate institutional support. The main difference to the accumulation of sport capital in the Sports Path Model is the timeframe in which it occurs. The participants in this study accumulated enough sports capital to become national team members in less than 2 years. Moreover, the crucial importance of institutional support was not quite as significant in the model study, but without the Operation Comfort program and opportunities attached to their status as wounded veterans their sport participation would not have been possible or at least delayed.

Events and States

This element of the study came down to timing of injury onset and key people's awareness of the special needs of wounded veterans. The most successful time of the U.S. national Para ice hockey team has been the past ten years (International Paralympic Committee, 2020), which is exactly the timeframe in which they started to invest their efforts into wounded veterans. Player 1 was one of the first wounded veterans ever to be part of the national team and since then many have followed.

Significant Experiences

In this study both participants had acquired injuries to their legs that were severe enough to require amputation. This amputation marks a significant change in their lives and that of their families and friends. Without it the Paralympic sporting career would have not started. These experiences are obviously specific to the environment and the context. So, what the participants in this study experienced is limited to the San Antonio region, which as outline before, comes with a pro-military mindset and willingness to support veterans. This is not the case everywhere. Further experiences include their success at the Paralympic Games and the different elements along the way. This part of the study was

kept deliberately short, as the Sport Path Model outlines significant experiences of children in Finland. Their experiences are not comparable to those of the participants in this study and defining or revising the different experiences was beyond the scope of this paper.

6.2 Limitations and Evaluation of This Study

The aim of this study was to find and describe factors that shape, influence and guide elite Para sport careers and thus give further evidence of how successful talent development in Para sport can be done. Its findings serve to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of elite Para sport and its development and hence give opportunities to improve it further.

However, this study was conducted only for the United States and with a focus on one particular program that has proven itself to be successful in fostering talent development in Para ice hockey. Their ability to provide what they can, is also based on their location within the United States. Other programs with similar approaches might simply fail due to lack of funding. Therefore, the scope of this study was rather limited. The United States are also a unique environment due to their large number of veterans. Within elite Para ice hockey, only Canada has one veteran on their squad. So, the athlete pool to choose from is much larger in the United States than anywhere else. Furthermore, the American attitude towards their veterans and military also differs a lot to for example the German one. In Germany the utilization and celebration of “tactical athletes” would garner a very different public reception than in the United States. Therefore, the findings of this study are specific to the American context.

Another limitation of the study was the athlete selection. The initial athlete selection was done by USA Hockey. This naturally limits this study, because I did not contact any other athletes and therefore don't have something akin to a control group like in quantitative studies. However, based on my own, congruent selection prior to making contact and the data that I was able to gather from the participants, I agree with the assessment of USA Hockey regarding the participants' suitability.

6.3 Ideas for Further Research

“We’re very privileged or very lucky to have these [programs]. People have a voice.”
(Player 1)

Giving individuals with disabilities a voice and opportunities is crucial. There are numerous programs and initiatives across the world, which are dedicated to preparing injured veterans for reintegrating into the society. This study has only explored one particularly successful one. The findings of this study could be used as part of a bigger comparative study with the aim of finding best practices and unifying them. Which is also what Enos, Busse, Davis and Megginson (2012) called for. Para sport as a whole still does not have sufficient talent development programs that serve the specific needs of athletes with a disability. This study helped outline some more specific needs that need to be taken into consideration when developing those programs.

This study only addressed the specific athlete population of wounded veterans within Para ice hockey. It was not possible to explore their specific psychological reasonings behind the particular sport choice by veterans. This might also be worth exploring in a future study.

On the U.S. National team alone, there are also numerous other athlete populations worth considering, such as those with congenital disabilities, or those who acquired their disabilities in different ways than the ones investigated in this study. There is also a growing body of research into female participation in disability sport and with Para ice hockey offering the chance for co-ed teams to participate at the Paralympics, they could be worth exploring as well.

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