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1 **Restoring harmony in the life-world? Identity, learning, and leaving pre-elite sport**

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21 **Restoring harmony in the life-world? Identity, learning, and leaving pre-elite sport**

22

23 **Abstract**

24 Sport provides many youth participants with a central life project, and yet very few
25 eventually fulfil their athletic dreams, which may lead them to disengage from sport entirely.
26 Many studies have explored the processes of athletic retirement, but little is known about
27 how youth athletes actually reconstruct their relationship with sport and embodiment post-
28 retirement. We explored these issues in the story of 'Pilvi', a Finnish alpine skier who
29 disengaged from sport in her late adolescence. Employing an existential-phenomenological
30 approach, we conducted six low-structured interviews with Pilvi, combined with visual
31 methods, and identified key themes relating to the body, space, culture and time. Our findings
32 highlight the difficulty of building a new relationship with sport and the often restrictive
33 cultural horizons of sport and exercise culture that limit the 'possible selves'. We discuss the
34 significant implications for applied practitioners helping youth athletes and effectively
35 supporting them in leaving their sport.

36

37 Keywords: existential learning, adolescence, boundary situations, embodiment, athletic
38 career, athletic identity

39 **Restoring harmony in the life-world? Identity, learning, and leaving pre-elite sport**

40 The extensive efforts to investigate and theorise an athletic identity in the past three
41 decades have resulted in strong awareness of the theoretical and applied importance of
42 identity in sport and exercise contexts (for reviews, see Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Ronkainen,
43 Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016). Quantitative research – often using the Athletic Identity
44 Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, van Raalte & Linder, 1993) – has shown that while high
45 levels of athletic identity can provide individuals with positive benefits of motivation and
46 sport commitment, there are also less positive consequences such as unethical sport conduct,
47 lower career maturity, and career transition difficulties (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Qualitative
48 research has extended the knowledge base by shedding light on the physical-cultural
49 'building blocks' of athletic and exercise identities (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007;
50 Carless & Douglas, 2013; McGannon, Pomerleau-Fontaine, & McMahon, 2020). Moreover,
51 the qualitative perspective has provided important insights into the complex negotiations that
52 athletes may undergo in relation to numerous intersecting identities (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke,
53 & McGannon, 2017) and the socio-cultural processes that contribute to identity development
54 (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Several studies from both quantitative and qualitative
55 perspectives have garnered empirical support for Brewer et al's (1993) original contention
56 that athletic identity can function as 'Hercules' muscles or Achilles' heel' (Douglas &
57 Carless, 2009; Franck, Stambulova, & Ivarsson, 2018; Sparkes, 1998).

58 A strong and exclusive athletic identity has been found to be particularly problematic for
59 the adaptation to athletic retirement. In particular, research demonstrates that those athletes
60 whose careers are terminated involuntarily, who have not anticipated career termination
61 (often by decreasing or balancing their athletic identity), and have not engaged in career
62 planning, can be at elevated risk of psychological distress (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013).
63 Qualitative research has shown that it can be extremely challenging for retiring athletes,

64 whose life has revolved around sport, to craft a new narrative of the self (Sparkes, 1998;
65 Douglas & Carless, 2009). Given the evidence on the relationship between strong and
66 exclusive athletic identity and distress in athletic retirement, it has been recommended that
67 psychological interventions or screening during athletes' careers should be undertaken,
68 potentially to mitigate these risks (Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2017).

69 Despite the intensive physicality of sporting life projects, Hadiyan and Cosh (2019)
70 recently noted that considerations of the athlete body have been remarkably absent from
71 athletic retirement research. That is, when retirement challenges are addressed, the questions
72 often revolve around (lack of) career planning, educational qualifications and transferable/life
73 skills (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Lavallee, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Often the
74 implicit assumption is that retirement involves moving 'out' from sport, orienting efforts
75 towards other life domains (e.g., education or work), and finding new social networks outside
76 of sport. In contrast, we know relatively little about former athletes' relationship with sport
77 post-retirement and their embodied selves, including how they re-orient themselves 'within'
78 the world of physical culture practices. Although Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) highlighted
79 decades ago that athletic retirement should not be equated with a complete withdrawal from
80 sport, only recently have researchers started to focus more attention on the transition that
81 occurs within the realm of sport, exercise and physical activity. Whereas some scholars have
82 found that former college athletes are no more physically active than non-athlete
83 alumni/alumnae (Reifsteck et al., 2013; Sorenson, Romano, Azen, Schroeder, & Salem,
84 2015), others have reported that many retired athletes remain actively engaged in different
85 forms of sports and exercise including at competitive levels (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019; Plateau,
86 Petrie, & Papathomas, 2017; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).
87 In one study, participants maintained the same level of athletic identity as pre-retirement,
88 when assessed by AIMS (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019). Reifsteck, Gill and Labban (2016) found

89 that athletic identity and exercise identity were both independent predictors of physical
90 activity participation post-retirement, with exercise identity the stronger predictor. Many
91 athletes have a difficult relationship with their post-retirement body, however, and those who
92 sustain athletic identities more frequently experience body dissatisfaction, guilt about weight
93 gain, and disordered eating (for a review, see Buckley, Hall, Lassemillante, Ackerman, &
94 Belski, 2019). Taken together, findings from several studies challenge the assumption that
95 retirement is about leaving sport entirely, and 'retirement' might be more about trying to re-
96 align oneself with the sport or physical-cultural world and searching for new meanings from
97 movement (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019; Plateau et al., 2017; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017). The
98 psycho-social processes of doing so, however, are still poorly understood. This research gap
99 opens space for qualitative research to shed light on the complex negotiations of daily
100 practices and embodied meanings of movement with which athletes are confronted when they
101 leave behind the highly structured world of high-performance sport.

102 In the current paper we theorise identity as an existential learning process that is triggered
103 through 'disjunctures' in the life-world (Jarvis, 2007). In our analysis, we focus on the
104 embodied process of restoring harmony of the life-world after athletic retirement, through a
105 case study with 'Pilvi', a Finnish pre-elite athlete whose promising athletic career terminated
106 in late adolescence. Through an existential phenomenological approach, we examine what
107 Pilvi described as "such a horrible time" in her life. We analytically distinguish the bodily,
108 cultural, spatial and temporal disjunctures engendered by athletic retirement and explore how
109 this young woman formed a new relationship with her embodied self and her world. The
110 following research question guided our enquiry: What processes contribute to restoring
111 harmony of the life-world in a disruptive athletic retirement? Based on the findings, we
112 discuss the salient, applied implications of the research and the value of using an existential
113 approach when working with retiring athletes.

114 **Theoretical Framework**

115 Our research draws on an existential-phenomenological perspective that is situated within
116 hermeneutic realism (Yanchar, 2015). From an existential perspective, identity means much
117 more than a social role or a position in discourse, but comprises a more encompassing 'mode
118 of being', shaping what matters to us and what events, actions, experiences and possibilities
119 'show up' to us and are deemed meaningful. Thus, being an athlete is a particular way of
120 being-in-the-world that is necessarily grounded in the body, temporality, a cultural horizon of
121 meanings, self-awareness and intersubjectivity (Aggerholm, 2014). Young athletes'
122 existence, in particular, is characterised by intense physicality where being-in-the-world is
123 made meaningful through the powerful, youthful and (seemingly) invincible athletic body
124 (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Athletes' mode of being is often characterised by projection
125 towards explicit athletic goals (major competitions, seasonal goals, specific times, etc.) that
126 are made possible through years of disciplined practice and that shape their orientation to not
127 only training, but also food intake, rest and other components of daily life.

128 Existential accounts emphasise that identities are primarily developed through practical
129 action or 'concernful involvement' (Yanchar, 2015) rather than via abstract reflection. They
130 share with narrative theory assumptions about the storied nature of human life, and the
131 cultural embeddedness of identity and meaning-making, while also emphasising embodied
132 and pre-reflective ways of inhabiting lived space (Felder & Robbins, 2011). As Yanchar
133 (2015) noted about the role of narrative in phenomenological thinking:

134 Concernful involvement unfolds along the lines of a life narrative and entails concern
135 about the projects of life situated in this temporal context—for example, regret about past
136 actions, optimistic pursuit of goals, plans for the future, and going about present activities
137 made possible by previous involvement. (p. 119)

138 In our everyday existence, we often take our identities for granted; our bodies, social
139 relations, and projects 'happen' without undue self-reflection and awareness (Allen-
140 Collinson, Crust, & Swann, 2019). Our life-worlds are characterised by harmony, a sense of
141 'at-homeness' where we feel connected to others and the world around us. As Jarvis (2007)
142 explained, when we are in a harmonious state with our world, we feel related to others,
143 trusting that they perceive the world in the same way as we do. This is made possible by the
144 cultural meaning systems which form the shared backdrop of meaningful interaction and
145 relatedness. In the harmonious state of the life-world, the body tends to remain 'absent', as a
146 corporeal background that rarely shows itself as a thematic object of our experience (Leder,
147 1990). It is only at times when this harmony is shattered that we become aware of our
148 corporeality and how we are attuned (or not) to the world – and it is then when we learn and
149 develop.

150 A key tenet of an existential account of human development is that it is not a smooth,
151 straightforward process, but one that happens through 'discontinuities' (Bollnow, 1987) or
152 'disjunctures' (Jarvis, 2007). The sport psychology literature drawing on existential thought
153 has also used Karl Jasper's (1970) notion of 'boundary situations' (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017)
154 and 'critical moments' (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012) to
155 describe ruptures in the life-world that can push us to change our perspective and find new
156 meaning (although not necessarily for all). What is common to these ideas is the role of
157 subjectivity in what constitutes such discontinuity, in that one event could become a
158 disjuncture for one person but not necessarily for another (depending on how they are attuned
159 to their life-world). Writing about lifelong learning, Jarvis (2007) described 'disjuncture' as
160 "the situation when our biography and the meaning that we give to our experience of a social
161 situation are not in harmony" (p. 3), resulting in a sense of unease and disorientation.
162 Focusing on bodily disjunctures in particular, Leder (1990) wrote about the 'dys-appearing'

163 body; a body that erupts into our consciousness in moments when it refuses to be a willing
164 'tool' for our projects. These moments are often associated with bodily discomfort, pain or
165 illness, disrupting the lived harmony of the mind-body-world relation (Allen-Collinson &
166 Owton, 2014; Zeiler, 2010). Disjunctures and their consequences for identity can be analysed
167 for their spatial, bodily, cultural and temporal elements, which are, necessarily, intertwined.
168 While often filled with anxiety, these occasions of disjuncture provide us with possibilities to
169 grasp 'how' we are in the world and push us to change and grow as a person. The analytic
170 points associated with each aspect of disjuncture are outlined in table 1.

171 [Insert table 1 here]

172 Methodology

173 The Case Study

174 Our study draws on data from the Finnish Longitudinal Dual Career study where 18 pre-
175 elite athletes (age 15-16 at baseline) were interviewed six times over a four-year period (for
176 details, see Ryba et al., 2016). The relevant university ethics committee approved the
177 research prior to participant recruitment, and all athletes provided their written informed
178 consent (for young people over 15 years old, informed consent from parents or guardians is
179 not required in Finland). In phenomenological research, it is common to use low-structured or
180 even an unstructured approach to interviewing (Clarke & Iphofen, 2013; Dale, 1996) to allow
181 participants to share their experiences freely and in their own words. The longitudinal study
182 we draw on was designed from a life-story perspective and involved a low-structured
183 approach, where the specific questions were not decided in advance but derived from the
184 interactions between the participant and the researcher (Ryba et al, 2016); moreover, the sixth
185 interview involved a phenomenological focus on existential learning. The interviews were
186 twice complemented by arts-based methods to gain a deeper understanding of lived

187 experience and visual meaning that cannot be captured by interviewing alone (Pink, 2011).
188 We describe the details of the methods in table 2. Here, we focus on the story of 'Pilvi', who
189 had been involved in alpine skiing for a decade, but terminated this promising career in late
190 adolescence between the second and the third data collection points of the research. She
191 reported disengaging from the sport primarily due to a severe injury whilst also struggling
192 with performance issues and a conflict with her father, who emphasised the importance of
193 school over sport.

194 [Insert table 2 here]

195 Several scholars have recently problematized the various uses of purportedly
196 'phenomenological' approaches mistakenly subsumed under 'qualitative research' (Allen-
197 Collinson & Evans, 2019; Van Manen, 2017; Zahavi, 2019). Our approach was informed by
198 an existential phenomenological ethos, and constitutes what has been termed an 'empirical
199 phenomenological' study (see Allen-Collinson, 2009; Berry et al. 2010). We thus adopted the
200 phenomenological attitude of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions throughout the
201 research. This included engaging in the *epochē* to make best efforts at bracketing or 'standing
202 back' from our existing pre-suppositions and assumptions (see Allen-Collinson, 2011 for a
203 detailed discussion) regarding young athletes' life-worlds and the challenges confronting
204 them. In relation to the case of Pilvi, our ambition was to develop a theoretical reading of her
205 story to illuminate broader processes of restoring the harmony of the life-world after athletic
206 retirement through an individual case. Following Zahavi and Martiny (2019), our attempt was
207 to produce an informative account of how existential-phenomenological thinking surrounding
208 life-world harmony, temporality and embodiment can help us understand how young athletes'
209 lives can be affected by a disruptive athletic career termination.

210 At the beginning of the analysis, the first author coded the transcripts and worked with a
211 thematic approach drawing influence from Giorgi's (1997) empirical phenomenological
212 work, and involving the adoption of the phenomenological attitude, including: engagement
213 with the *epochē* (see Allen-Collinson, 2011); initial, impressionistic readings to gain a feel
214 for the overall data-set; in-depth re-reading and data 'immersion', to identify key themes and
215 sub-themes, categorising units of Pilvi's story related to identity development and
216 disjuncture. These initial steps were taken to gain familiarity with the content and to reduce it
217 to more concise thematic units. These initial themes worked as "intermediate reflective tools"
218 (Van Manen, 2017, p. 777) to help recognise prominent elements of Pilvi's story and to
219 reflect on their significance. Careful attention was given to the shifts of content and tone of
220 the pre- and post-retirement interviews, to understand how her mode of being had changed
221 during the disruptive experience. Throughout the data analysis, the second and third author
222 acted as 'critical friends' and we had numerous discussions about how to interpret Pilvi's
223 verbal and visual stories (interpretive validity) as well as the inferences she made from it
224 (theoretical validity) (see Maxwell, 2017). In other words, we aligned our considerations of
225 research quality with the broader realist assertion that some interpretive accounts can be more
226 accurate than others, and sought to address threats to validity by considering how our existing
227 assumptions might be 'wrong' or 'clouding' the phenomena, rather than procedural
228 approaches characterising some positivist and relativist perspectives (Maxwell, 2017).

229 **Results and Discussion**

230 A raft of themes was identified during data analysis, but following arguments that identity
231 and meaning are typically expressed in a form of (life) narrative where 'concernful
232 involvement' is linked to past and future events, hopes and regrets (Yanchar, 2015), we
233 decided to represent our analysis within a temporal sequence tracing Pilvi's disengagement
234 from sport. After careful deliberation, we decided that this would be a more helpful structure

235 than would a ‘classic’ thematic ordering, and would resonate strongly with Pilvi’s lived
236 experience of living-through her sporting life-journey. Throughout the following sections, our
237 reading of the story focuses on Pilvi’s relationship with her body, space and people around
238 her, with temporality considered as the ground that provides her with the possibility of
239 meaningful experience. We use extensive quotes to help engender a feeling of how it is for
240 Pilvi to be living through the disengagement from pre-elite sport.

241 **Approaching disjuncture**

242 In the first interview at the beginning of upper secondary school, Pilvi was transitioning to
243 senior sport and reported that: “of course, my dream is to be skiing in the World cup… with
244 the Beijing Olympics as my main goal.” While adolescence is developmentally considered
245 the time for exploring various future scenarios, her elite sport life project appears to provide a
246 clear sense of direction to inform her daily choices and provide a rhythm of life where
247 training twice a day has become the norm. Soon after the first interview, however, her
248 problems began. In the second interview, she admits to struggling: “I am that kind of a person
249 that I stress about everything, and particularly since the school is so demanding… It is
250 mentally quite hard for me.” She then explains that she has been ‘thrown off’ her familiar
251 mode of being at ease with her skis and navigating the track:

252 > I have developed my technique and I can come down the track a lot faster, but now I
253 > am having a new problem of not being able to come through the track anymore… I’ve
254 > had nine slides off the track in a row. I cry in almost every practice because I can’t get
255 > down the track.

256 The experience of not feeling at home on the slope and not excelling is very disruptive for
257 Pilvi, as she admits: “I like to win. I like to be better than others. I think that motivates me the
258 most.” The cultural narrative resources of elite sport, where winning is lifted as the ultimate

259 purpose of sporting endeavors (Douglas & Carless, 2006), are no longer providing her with a
260 sense of direction and 'at-homeness' because she cannot align her experience with the story
261 she is aiming to live up to. Her body now refuses to be the willing instrument for her
262 ambition, leading to a profound sense of unease and emotional disruption:

263 I felt really frustrated and angry. Like "why can't I do this like I did half a year ago?"
264 and I was really mad at myself. I talked about it with my family but of course they
265 didn't understand because they were just like me, like, "well you were so good like
266 half a year ago so why can't you be now?"

267 Her sporting life project, driven by the desire to be the best, begins to crumble and
268 disintegrate. Tensions with her father "who did not want to pay [for equipment and trips] and
269 never understood or valued sport" are exacerbated when she is no longer successful: "when I
270 had these failures, he was saying 'you should quit'." At this point, Pilvi is a knot of inflamed
271 nerves: frustrated with her failing body, confused, emotionally strained and angry, feeling
272 that no one understands. Pilvi then sustains a knee injury that forces her to take a break from
273 skiing. She is at first hopeful it will get better (perhaps, because she is not ready to let go, she
274 swings and clings to her athlete self). She subsequently returns to competition but realises the
275 knee is not getting better. The coach then 'abandons' her (at least this is what Pilvi *felt*
276 happened). Finally, the doctor's prognosis and advice that she should stop skiing is taken as a
277 refuge; although it does not give Pilvi comfort, she views it as a bargaining device for
278 preserving her athlete identity (which gains meaning through a performance narrative). Her
279 projected future as an Olympic athlete is gone.

280 **"I would [now] like to look more like a person, not like an athlete"**

281 Pilvi speaks openly about her sense of radical disjuncture: "When I was an athlete, those
282 social networks were my life. When it all crashed down, I was completely lost. What am I

283 going to do?" In addition to losing the shared activities and meanings with her teammates,
284 Pilvi's athletic body, which had been the tacit basis of her performance identity when things
285 were going well, has 'dys-appeared' (Leder, 1990) as a problem-body. "I have gained weight
286 and I have been very anxious about it. I followed some extreme diets and then I got pissed
287 off, and then gained weight again." Once she is no longer an athlete, Pilvi tries to make sense
288 of her body through exercise and femininity-based discourses that focus on body size and
289 shape (see McGannon & Spence, 2010), rather than the capabilities and skills of the body.
290 She has started to think about movement as a means to control her weight, and explains:
291 "Now I can live in a kind of balance where, okay, I went for a run, so I can eat half a pack of
292 candies." When Pilvi is no longer an athlete, her body 'dys-appears' as being the 'wrong
293 shape', something that needs to be changed:

> 294 Alpine skiers usually have very big thigh muscles. Now, I will start running so that
> 295 my thighs get smaller. As a normal person, I have no need for big muscles in my legs
> 296 or elsewhere. I would like to look more like a person, not like an athlete, when it
> 297 makes no difference anymore. So, I planned not to do strength training anymore and
> 298 do more running and fat burning type of things.

299 Becoming a "normal" person is not only about how she looks, but what kind of movement
300 activities (and how much) she should do. The future perspective of an elite athlete has
301 provided her with a sense of direction that motivates daily training, whereas as a non-athlete
302 she does not have any particular future to pursue in terms of physical culture practices. She
303 notes that an athlete *must* train every day, whereas a 'normal' person does *not* have to: "I
304 often think when I am training, why am I doing this, when I don't have to." The gym in
305 particular now becomes a space that she does not need to occupy anymore, as building
306 muscle strength is no longer meaningful in her changing horizon of meaning. However, even
307 if she has difficulty in finding purpose in training, the long-standing habits that are almost

308 automatic in the everyday life-world of an athlete are resistant to change (see Felder &
309 Robbins, 2011). The athlete's mode of being that she associates with the compulsion to train
310 nevertheless remains: "I am still learning that you don't need to be active if you don't want
311 to. [But] I still feel guilty if I don't do something every day."

312 Although Pilvi attempts to reconstruct herself as "a normal" person, it is difficult for her to
313 live up to that narrative. Some of her previous training practices still feel normal and 'right'
314 to her, even if they don't fit her attempts to reconfigure her identity: "Yesterday, I did
315 plyometrics, which has nothing to do with a normal person's everyday life. It is an alpine
316 skiing thing. But… it is stuck in my brain, it is a normal and a nice thing." Her boyfriend is
317 moreover an active athlete "who is doing sport all the time" which also keeps her life-world –
318 thoughts and practices – tied to the sporting life-world:

319 I feel that I need to go training with him and I need to be able to do the same that he can,
320 even if it is not so. This athlete-way of thinking, in a way, never disappears. Especially if
321 our relationship becomes long-term.

322 **"I feel like crying if I go to the slope"**

323 A central aspect of restoring harmony for Pilvi has been avoiding the space that
324 reminds her most of her athletic identity. Two years after disengaging from her sport, she has
325 only been to the slopes twice, using what she terms just "tourist" equipment, and recalls: "it
326 just feels bad, feels like sh*t, that I really suck at it. I have started detesting it. I don't want to
327 do it any more". The second time, she had a foreign friend visiting, and "with her we went
328 skiing, but again it felt like sh*t. But I felt I had to go". She no longer feels at home on the
329 slopes, and two years post-retirement she confesses: "Somehow I still feel that I have open
330 wounds, I am not ready to go back there. I still sometimes feel that I will cry." Emotionally,
331 she is still in the state of disjuncture even if she has been able to start storying her experiences

332 into a narrative about a new phase of her life. Pilvi expresses eagerness to leave her
333 hometown, which she has always wanted to leave, but especially after athletic retirement, this
334 features as a central part of her narrative. She notes that she "realized that this is some kind of
335 intermediate phase, I am not going to stay here. Real life starts somewhere else". She has
336 been accepted to study at a prestigious foreign university and is waiting to enter this new life-
337 space that has nothing to do with her sport. As she explains: "It sounds like a cliché, but when
338 one door is closed, another one opens." At the same time, she is restoring the harmony of her
339 temporal life-world by storying her life as a series of separate phases with beginnings and
340 ends: "Life has gone on after that, when I realized that there are other possibilities. It is easier
341 to talk about it because it was [just] one part of my life."

342 **"It is so near, but so far at the same time"**

343 Despite the profound sense of rupture in her relationship with sport, there is a crucial
344 strand of continuity that allows Pilvi to project herself toward meaningful future goals and
345 actions. The performance narrative plot centralizing achievement as the prominent life theme
346 (Douglas & Carless, 2006), something which she considers "a family thing" and has given
347 meaning to her pursuit of elite sport, works as an interpretive resource that can also be
348 applied to other life spheres where achievement and winning are important:

> 349 I've tried to downplay my competitiveness, but it is still somewhere there in the
> 350 background. Maybe it also makes me a better student and it can be an advantage that I
> 351 aim for perfection and want to be the best.

352 She notes that she has applied the same mentality in her studies as in sport: "even if I felt
353 like crying – and I did cry sometimes – I just had to push through". In this sense, her mode
354 of being has not changed but the context of its application has, and she has recently "won" in
355 the contest of entry to an elite university.

356 For Pilvi, shifting her ambitions to education and becoming a successful businessperson
357 has also resolved a lasting disjuncture with her father. “He is the happiest person in the world
358 because I was accepted to a good university. We haven’t talked about the sport [anymore], it
359 is just finished.” The disjuncture in her sporting life project has, therefore, worked to restore
360 harmony between her and her father, whom she deeply admires for his work career. The
361 projected future of a university student also allows her to reconstruct the disjuncture in her
362 sport-life in a positive light:

363 I could not have continued in the sport [because of the injury], but if I had, then I might
364 not have graduated with such good grades and been accepted at this university. So, in that
365 sense, I am quite happy after all, that I quit.

366 In thinking about her life transition to another country to enter university, Pilvi also starts
367 to project herself to a new athletic future. While she is certain that alpine skiing forms part of
368 a closed chapter in her life, she starts to reimagine herself as an athlete, but in a new sporting
369 domain: “Now that I’m starting at university, I could start doing a new sport. Athletics, for
370 example…” When asked whether she could compete again and how she would feel about
371 starting something new when she used to excel in her sport, Pilvi replies:

372 Probably, it will be depressing and feel crushing that I am no longer good or one of
373 the best. But I have an athletic career behind me so I have better pre-requisites for
374 being good than someone who is just starting something new. So I assume I would not
375 be one of the weakest. If I were, I would probably feel that this is sh*t and just quit.

376 Despite acknowledging that “when everyone has started so young, I cannot think that I can
377 now start a new sport and see you in eight years in the Olympics – it is not realistic”, she still
378 approaches the idea of sport participation with a highly competitive and results-oriented
379 mindset. As such, the performance narrative plot works to provide her with a purpose for re-

380 engaging with sport, but at the same time it gives her a fragile grounding for meaning that
381 might well be shattered every time she is unable to live up to her expectations.

382 **Summary of main findings**

383 Two years after athletic retirement, Pilvi attests that life has gone on and her
384 storytelling is characterised by a meaningful future perspective focused on education and
385 work, which provides her with a strong sense of student and career identity. At the same time,
386 her relationship with sport, exercise and the body is problematic and she is attempting to find
387 interpretive resources to help her make sense of her embodied experience. The ways in which
388 she has reconfigured her relationship with her body, space, culture and time are summarized
389 in table 3.

390 [Insert table 3 here]

391 As our analysis shows, Pilvi has reoriented her temporal perspective, with the past, present
392 and future seemingly forming separate chapters and thus making sense within her emerging
393 life narrative. However, she is far from fully restoring harmony in her life-world of
394 movement, and continues to seek ways to engage in sport and exercise practices and
395 discourses in a meaningful way, to feel at-home in the sporting life-world. She asserts that
396 she now has "a positive perspective" on movement (as opposed to "being compelled" to train
397 as an athlete) and seeks to develop an identity as an active person. At the same time,
398 however, her body 'shows up' as a problem to be managed, with exercise as the solution. As
399 she continues to seek alignment with her experiences and the cultural horizons of meaning,
400 there is no closure to her developing story and, as with any young person, multiple ways to
401 reconfigure her identity are open to her. This said, the dominance of the performance
402 narrative plot in her life design, combined with the limited discourses about exercise and the
403 female body on which she is drawing, might narrow the horizon of possibilities for her in the

404 world of movement. Taken together, they restrict her to narrow techno-scientific ways of
405 relating to the body and sport, while silencing those ways of engagement and experiencing in
406 movement that might emphasize, for example, bodily pleasure, fun, lifelong learning,
407 connectivity and freedom. Although performance narratives provide her with a sense of
408 direction and self-worth, they are highly susceptible to future disjunctures because they
409 always remain subject to her ability to live up to her high ambitions – both in sport and in life
410 more generally.

411 **Concluding Reflections**

412 Our research adds to the emerging body of literature that has focused on understanding
413 retiring athletes' transition 'within' the world of sport and physical culture practices. Through
414 one athlete's story, we have generated analytic insights on the layered processes of restoring
415 harmony in the life-world after disjuncture, and shown how the lived body, space and time
416 are experienced and given meaning through engagement with the cultural narratives that are
417 available to the athlete. Our findings clearly support the contention that having another life
418 plan (e.g., through the pursuit of a dual career) can help athletes in restoring harmony in their
419 life-world, and channel aspirations toward other forms of 'concernful involvement'. Despite
420 this shift in priorities and key concerns, however, the findings also support previous
421 assertions that athletic retirement should not be considered merely as a process of 'leaving'
422 sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Rather, disengagement from the elite pathway can be a
423 challenging process of developing a new relationship with movement culture practices and
424 meanings. Adopting an existential-phenomenological approach has allowed us to identify
425 fundamental structures that shape our experiential realities and may help understand why this
426 process can be so challenging for some athletes. Namely, athletes might struggle with finding
427 a meaningful way of being and becoming in a life-world of movement when their past
428 experiences (of being a competitive athlete) and the culturally available discourses and

429 narratives (e.g., of the female body as a problem) seem to offer only limited inspiration and
430 guidance for the future. The athlete body, once so tacitly meaningful, is now deemed
431 'useless' because it has lost its purpose. To bridge such a fundamental gap, more than coping
432 skills or life skills are needed; there is a need for new meaning.

433 In sport psychology literature, de-training programmes (Fuller, 2014) and interventions to
434 help athletes in transitioning to a physically active lifestyle (Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018) have
435 recently been introduced. They form a much-needed part of career transition support services
436 that have traditionally been somewhat disembodied, and often focused on the transition to a
437 life outside of sport. Many recommendations of these programmes (e.g., educating athletes
438 about physical activity guidelines, nutrition and physiological changes in the body,
439 supporting goal setting, fostering self-determined motivation and exploring the impact of
440 transition to identity) are undoubtedly valuable. As our study highlights, however, in some
441 cases we could be dealing with a much deeper existential issue of 'not being at home' in the
442 sporting/movement life-world because of the disjuncture that has been opened up in athletic
443 retirement. Adopting an existential approach in applied practice can be particularly relevant
444 in this kind of situation because it sensitises the practitioner to the need to pay careful
445 attention to how the retiring athlete is attuned to her/his life-world and finds meaning and
446 purpose in movement (Felder & Robbins, 2011; Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2018).
447 Therefore, we argue, there would be real value in including an existential approach to sport
448 psychology training pathways, to help prepare future practitioners in becoming more aware
449 of the depth of issues that may surface when supporting athletes who are leaving their highest
450 level of performance.

451 Educating athletes about the benefits of physical activity for health and preventing
452 unwanted changes in the body is doubtless done with good intentions and can have benefits,
453 but it is worth pausing to consider how inspirational and meaningful these discourses are to

454 an 18-year old, who is developmentally at the stage of exploring possibilities and 'becoming'.
455 Furthermore, it is important to be aware that some health- and fitness-based discourses,
456 which often inform exercise promotion, are potentially detrimental in directing the retired
457 athlete's horizon of concerns to body weight and shape, which are likely to change following
458 athletic retirement (to what is often culturally scripted as "for the worse"). It is clear that we
459 collectively need to work towards creating and promoting more sustainable narratives of
460 movement culture that can sustain interest and a sense of intrinsic value of movement in
461 young athletes' lives, even if they do not realize their Olympic dreams.

462 **Disclosure statement**

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