

**IMMIGRATION TO FINLAND AS AN UNDERAGED ICE HOCKEY PLAYER**

**Experiences of growing up and building an athletic career in a foreign country**

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## ABSTRACT

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An increasing number of foreign junior ice hockey players move to Finland every year to pursue their athletic career in a competitive environment. According to the players' views, Finland offers better opportunities to develop during junior years than their home country, and makes it possible to play ice hockey as a professional. The dream of becoming a professional athlete is pursued by many, but only a few make it to the top.

The purpose of this study is to find out how players describe their immigration experience, what kind of support the players have received or needed, and what factors have influenced their adaptation. The aim is to produce the first overview of the experiences of ice hockey players who came to Finland as children and became successful in their careers.

In this study, I interviewed six male players who moved to Finland at the age of 13 or 14, half of whom moved from their home country without their family and half of whom arrived with one parent. The sample consists of players whose careers have successfully progressed during or after their years in Finland towards becoming professionals, i.e., players whose immigration has led to them achieving their career goals. The interviews were analysed according to the narrative framework.

All the players felt that the sacrifice was worth it. For some, the experience was more difficult, others viewed it mostly as a positive adventure or an anticipated continuation of their ice hockey career. These stories were all presented with gratitude, joy, and contentment, and as a key finding, the players described how the difficulties they faced made them stronger and readier for a professional career. Loneliness, language barrier and the demands of growing up quickly were named as the biggest problems. The players emphasized the importance of the support of family and friends for their adaptation, but also pointed out that one's own personality and actions influence the success of immigration and thus career advancement.

**Keywords:** junior athlete, ice hockey, immigration, acculturation, transition

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The number of underaged foreign ice hockey players in Finland has been significantly increasing over the last ten years. According to the statistics of the Finnish Ice Hockey Association, there were 67 transferred minors during the season 2013–2014, whereas in the season 2022–2023 the number was 157 (chart 1). The growth has been steady, apart from a few larger groups that have been part of international cooperation, such as 20 players from South Korea for the 2015–2016 season. The majority of young players come from European countries, where ice hockey is a popular sport, like Russia, Czechia, or Slovakia. Migrating ice hockey players under the age of 18 almost exclusively play in age-appropriate junior teams, which means they are at a stage in their career that precedes the professionalism in the adult series. (T. Vanhala, personal communication, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020)

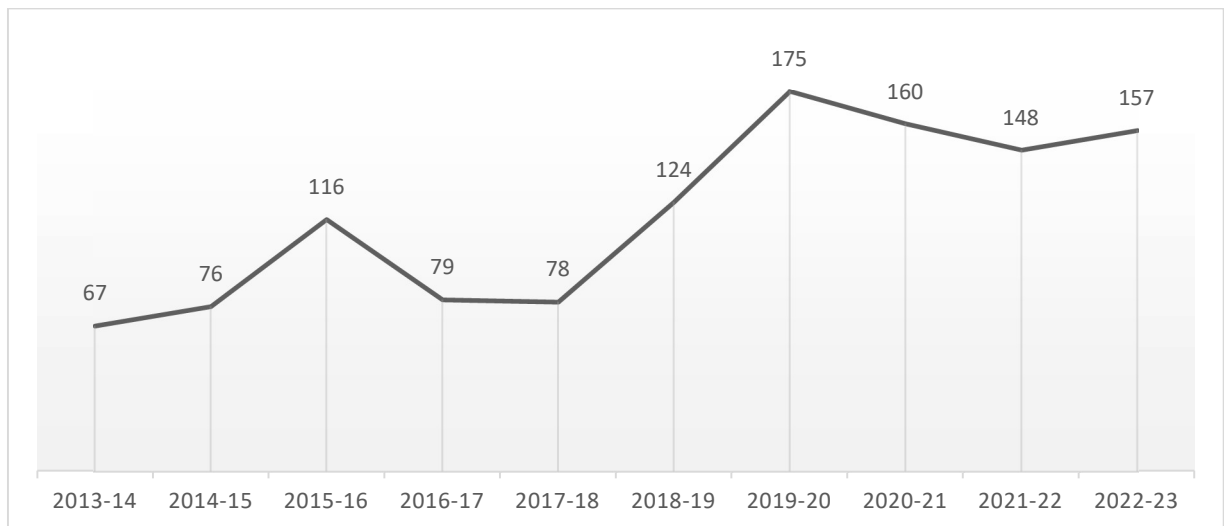


CHART 1. Transfer of players under the age of 18 to Finland. (Vanhala 2023)

Many athletes are eager to pursue their career abroad, and Finland is an attractive destination for a young ice hockey player. Finnish ice hockey is highly competitive, and the Finnish national ice hockey team is ranked 1st in 2022. IIHF World ranking reflects the long-term quality of the country's national ice hockey program and embodies an effective coaching culture and player development. (Merk 2022)

Because a professional career span is relatively short, ice hockey players try to maximise their career potential. This might be one reason why there is pressure to lengthen the career from the beginning and gain a competitive advantage from an early age. As a result, sporting

achievements are acquired at the expense of other areas of life. It is a drastic change to leave one's home country, friends and family members, and sometimes the opportunity for academic education behind, and move abroad to invest in ice hockey. (Van Bakel & Salzbrenner 2019, 506; see also Ryba, Aunola, Kalaja et al. 2016, 2.; Bourke 2002, 388)

Some of the athletes arrive in Finland with their father or mother, but many of them come alone despite their young age. According to Eurostat (2020), in Europe the average age of young Europeans leaving the parental household is 25,9 years. Variation is high between different countries. For example, Slovakian men live with their parents on average until the age of 32. The same number being 26 in Czechia and 28 in Hungary. Compared to the rest of the population, these ice hockey players, aged 14–17, become independent and leave – not only their parental home, but also their country – a lot earlier than their fellow countrymen.

### **1.1 My interest in the subject**

When I worked among junior athletes in comprehensive school for over 10 years, the dedication and sacrifices of young foreign ice hockey players caught my attention. Migrated young players adopt the professional athlete's lifestyle early on. Most of them live independently and take care of themselves and their daily lives on their own, which sets them apart from their local peers. In Finland young foreign ice hockey players are rarely placed in host-families. More often they live alone or share an apartment with teammates, and they are expected to manage their everyday life and household chores to the best of their abilities.

Their life stories, which include both hardship and success, have amazed me and raised many questions. As Richardson et al. (2012, 1607) have stated, for some young ice hockey players, the migration seems to be an enjoyable adventure, whereas others face multiple challenges and suffer from the lack of psychological or social support during their stay. Even adult athletes are vulnerable when migrating to another country as they have extreme pressure to perform and a limited time frame to become successful in their sport (van Bakel & Salzbrenner 2019, 506). Sports migrants are aware of their need to perform at a high-level from a young age. If their play is not what is expected, they can be replaced and sent back home. (Carter 2015, 101).

Although these young foreign players, whom I have had the privilege of getting to know, openly explained what it is like in Finland, many questions remained open. These questions intrigued

me and gave rise to this research plan. What kind of an experience is it, all in all, to leave all the familiar things behind and move abroad, at such a young age?

## **1.2 Ethical issues**

My primary ethical concern is how I take care of the anonymity of my interviewees, which is important because professional ice hockey players may be worried about their reputation or career opportunities if they bring out critical perspectives. Players are often extremely loyal to their clubs and may not want to answer questions or bring up problems in the immigration process or painful memories if they cannot count on remaining anonymous. The public nature of athletes' careers brings its own challenges here. Because of this, I have already excluded from the study some ice hockey players who would be particularly easy to identify or connect with me, even if it would have been easy to recruit them for the study. In addition, the information consent form is prepared with particular care, and I have carefully erased all identification data, including nationality, current age, and teams, when reporting the interviews. A notable ethical contradiction is that the richer the data in qualitative research, the poorer the preservation of its anonymity. (Sparkes & Smith 2014, 217) I had to make difficult choices and leave out interesting and unique details to protect these players who trusted me and wanted to share their stories.

Another crucial aspect is to formulate the research results, conveying the experiences of the interviewees as unchanged as possible, without mixing the data with my own opinions or attitudes. Over the years, my own attitudes towards this topic have varied. I admit that at first, I was shocked when I heard that children go abroad without their families because of sports. There is nothing new about the phenomenon of the separation of children and parents: for example, boarding schools are an old and well-known practice. What is special about this sporting phenomenon is that the system is not built for the needs of children like an educational institution, but children are expected to live the everyday life of an adult as an athlete. Also, in the literature on the immigration of athletes, the issue of age has been left out, as if it would be the same thing to experience that transition at the age of 14 or 24.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Media and sports literature cover sports migration through global icons and sport celebrities, whose wealth and success are widely known and acknowledged (Carter 2015, 6). The research literature of sports migration has a different tendency: research has focused on migrants of lower-class backgrounds (Carter 2015, 136). This can be seen especially in research exploring young football talents' immigration from South America or African countries to Europe. Human rights problems and human trafficking around football migration have undoubtedly increased research interest and, moreover, have led FIFA to change the rules that have severely restricted the movement of foreign children into football academies (Bruera 2020).

Rojo, Simiyu and Starepravo (2020) present the current state of sports migration research, the methods used, and the sports of interest to the research. Sports migration has received multidisciplinary attention from sport science, sociology, psychology, history, geography, and economy. (Rojo et al., 2020, 546) The international mobility of athletes has been studied through globalisation in labour migration research. Various sports have been addressed, but mostly football players have been studied. It makes sense, considering the dominance of football as a global sport. In previous studies of athletic migratory experience, interviews were the most common method used (notably Bourke 2003; Magee and Sugden 2002; Weedon 2012)

Because other sports have received more attention than ice hockey, I will use the meritorious literature of the sports migration of different sports where applicable. Concerning research literature related to ice hockey, William Crossan's (2020) paper is worth mentioning. It describes the phenomenon of ice hockey immigration to and from the Czechia, also paying attention to junior leagues. Crossan's paper does not qualitatively examine the experiences or lived realities of migrated players, but he points out the effects of migration to junior leagues and to the future of ice hockey in Czechia, so the question of age is not neglected. (Crossan 2020, 394)

Although the number of publications about sports migration has increased, the research on the topic has some overlooked areas. The immigration of athletes under 18 years of age is heretofore almost completely ignored. Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 175) commented on the lack of research about young migrating athletes stating the fact that very little is known about how they cope abroad and what they themselves think of their experiences. One can only guess why



such a theme has been systematically overlooked. Interestingly, children seem to be treated as adults or like adults on the issue of sports migration (as in Schinkeet al. 2016; Van Bakel & Salzbrenner 2019). Some studies do not mention the age at which immigration took place, or if the athlete crossed the borders with or without family. Research might refer to the age of the players, but age is not treated as an influencing factor, even though some of the migrating players are significantly young. From a developmental psychological point of view, this disregard is questionable. Transitioning into professional sports is mentally demanding and requires strategies to cope with publicity, fear of failure, anxiety, performance pressure and other factors. Those strategies evolve over the years and from experience, so age is undoubtedly a relevant factor in assessing the abilities and lived realities of young athletes. (Egilsson & Dolles 2017, 190)

What is known about the migration of underage athletes comes from a few researchers: Weedon (2011) interviewed 16 underaged Premier League academic football players, Darby (2012) investigated the recruiting and preparation process of young (12 - 18 years old) players from Ghana, and Bourke (2002) explored Irish players moving to England. Bourke's (2002) study participants were 90 football players from Ireland of which 10 % migrated at age of 15, 35 % at 16, and 35 % at 17 years old. The rest migrated at the age of 18 or older. Unfortunately, Bourke does not announce how many of his sample immigrated alone, but 86% of his respondents admitted the lack of family ties as a difficulty for their first year abroad. (Bourke 2002, 379 & 386) The previous research literature highlights the challenges and negative consequences of migration. If the player is not mature enough, or if there are no supporting people around, he might not cope with the demands of the new environment (Egilsson & Dolles 2017, 190). There is no previous literature about if young ice hockey players experience this in the same way as football players, and are their stories equally saturated with challenges.

Intense loneliness has been one of the major issues for young players migrating alone (Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen 2016, 11). And that may be the reason why the importance of family can be emphasised, like Richardson et al. (2012, 1607 & 1610) affirm: players who migrated at a young age, give credit to their families, whose support has been paramount for them.

The life of an athlete is demanding due to constant competition and level measurement. (Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen 2016, 9) Surprisingly, Hanton et al. (2005, 1129) discovered that environmental and organisational stressors are mentioned even more often by athletes than

competitive performance stressors. This can be seen, for example, in Smith and Smoll (2012, 13), when players are valued based on their performance. Their responsibility is to provide results and generate profit for the organization, and the well-being of the players is sometimes left aside. Environmental and organisational stressors exacerbated when moving abroad, especially for young athletes when they face the independent stage of psychosocial development earlier than usual. For this reason, the well-being of athletes might require special attention and support. The lack of adequate support is especially harmful to young people who are still developing, when they start facing the demands of a professional athlete.

## **2.1 Junior-to-senior transition**

Although the subject of the research is immigration, the stage of development in which the young players are cannot be ignored. In late teenage years, significant adaptation is already necessary for growing up and transitioning to the adult sport and professionalism. Junior ice hockey players are also young people like all their peers, and the ascetic life and discipline of an athlete does not always coincide with the adventures of youth (Ojala 2020, 323).

For immigrated athletes, the process of immigration is an inseparable part of their transition from junior to senior level in sports. It looks as if there is a two-way relationship: immigration adds challenges as well as opportunities to the transition, and the desired success of transition is the reason for immigration. This seems to be a high-risk-high-reward attempt where, of course, the majority most certainly do not make it to the top. According to Weedon (2012, 188), transitioning to professional sports places extreme mental demands on young players. Players need to cope with performance inhibiting feelings like self-doubt, anxiety, and fear of failure. Add to this moving abroad and the publicity that comes with sports. There is enough challenge here for even the most mature young person who has excellent supporting resources. Weedon (2012, 190) states that age is a significant factor in terms of when athletes should first move abroad. His research shows that in the interviews the players have mentioned the importance of moving abroad as young as possible. This is apparently intended to move the difficult adaptation phase before the most competitively demanding years in sports in order to maximise the benefit that can be achieved.

Drew et al. (2019, 18) demonstrate transition-theory, which describes the factors influencing a favourable or unfavourable junior-to-senior transition in sports. The right kind of support is important for a successful transition phase. This includes financial, social and psychological

support. A wider support repertoire increases the possibility of a positive outcome. A successful transition experience increases well-being and fosters mental health, while negative experiences in the transition phase weaken well-being and expose athletes to mental health issues. Van Bakel and Salzbrenner (2019, 507) raise another important point of view: it is in the best interests of the receiving organisation to minimise wasted time with the usual struggles of the adaptation phase. Investing in support in this critical period is investing in optimal performance of these migrated athletes. Supporting players is a way to develop players.

Based on meta-data analysis, 59 factors were identified to be perceived to impact the quality of athletes' junior-to-senior transition. These 59 factors were categorised into 13 themes: perceptions of the transition, psychological factors, personal development factors, performance development factors, social support, motivation, sources of stress, physical factors, organisational culture and values, youth culture and values, coping strategies, mentoring, and educational programs. (Drew et al. 2019, 18) When these themes are examined in the life of an immigrated ice hockey player, it is possible that young people who live with their families in their home country and who have moved abroad notice differences in these factors in their own situation and compared to their peers, due to the fact that a player coming to Finland from abroad is in a new environment, surrounded by new people and builds his social networks from the beginning by using a foreign language. On the other hand, a young person who makes a decision to join such a project may have coping strategies or support networks that a young person who does not go abroad does not necessarily have or even need.

### **2.1.1 Dual career and education**

Balancing sports and education is a significant concern for young athletes. There is a large overlap between sports and school, both in terms of required time and effort (Ryba et al. 2017, 2). The continuation or interruption of academic education is a controversial topic to the immigration of underage athletes. Previously there have been a variety of practices regarding the studies of foreign athletes in Finland, depending on the ambition of the young person and his/her parents, and the possibilities in the place of residence, but the new Compulsory Education Act has clarified the situation also for foreign athletes. The Ministry of Education (2021) states that education is compulsory until the young person turns 18 or graduates from a secondary school. If a young person of compulsory school age moves to the municipality's territory from abroad, it is the responsibility of his/her parents and the municipality of residence

to ensure that the young person of compulsory school age applies for education and begins completing his/her compulsory education.

A young person may apply for an exemption from compulsory education under certain conditions, but for negligence, the guardian can be punished with fines. Participation in sports at any level is not grounds for being exempt from compulsory education.

In the past, some athletes did their studies remotely at a school in their home country. Today, students have to participate in teaching in Finland. According to the instructions of the Ministry of Education (2021), it is not possible to complete compulsory education as remote or online studies at a foreign educational institution.

The law therefore defines the conditions according to which the education of junior athletes must be organised. However, going to school is not just an obligation, but also a factor in adapting to a new country, learning the language and creating valuable social relationships. At best, it balances the athlete's everyday life and secures their future after the ice hockey career. In chapter 4, when analysing the experiences of adaptation, I will also present the role of the school in the stories of these six athletes I interviewed. From my sample group, 2 out of 6 completed basic education remotely to their home country first, and after that, continued their studies in Finnish schools. It is noteworthy, that 5 out of 6 have studied in Finnish educational institutions at some point during their stay, although only three of them graduated, while 2 out of 6 dropped out of school.

## **2.2 Acculturation**

As Egilsson and Dolles (2017) point out, the conceptualisation of expatriates lacks research of young athlete professionals or talents, whose situations are different to the main subjects of labour migration research, who are highly educated professionals sent abroad by their multinational corporation or business organisation. (Egilsson & Dolles 2017, 175) Even the vocabulary is incomplete: what should they be called? Underaged immigrated athletes? Unaccompanied sport expatriates? I prefer calling them simply foreign junior players.

The process of acculturation is the key concept in explaining the experiences of migrants. It includes surviving in a new country, and it is about adapting to an unfamiliar language and

habits, different cuisine, and different sports culture. Acculturation load, as Ryba et al. (2016, 11) call the challenges athletes face, is used to address the impacts of migration. For some athletes, the process of migration seems to be mainly enjoyable, positive and unproblematic, whereas others find it more difficult to adapt to a new culture, weather conditions, coaching style or social environment. (Egilsson & Dolles 2017, 147).

Bourke stated (2002, 383) the common belief that youngsters would easily settle in into the new environment is misleading, because his data about young football players suggests that it usually takes more than six months to feel settled in. For 31 % it takes more than a year. Schinke et al. (2013, 1685) explain that adaptation does not mean abandoning one's homeland or its culture, but partially living in both, and these two are layered together in individual patterns. Thus, an athlete drifts between two places - home country and host country.

Weedon (2012, 190) is frank about the reality that if the player is not mature enough, or if there are no supporting networks, they will not thrive in their new environment. The requirement of maturity is certainly justified, but on the other hand, it is unrealistic for an early teenager. According to Bourke (2002, 387): only the strongest – physically, and psychologically – will survive. Preparation is vital for a successful transition abroad. Young people may find things difficult that adults can not necessarily expect. Young people do not innately know who they can ask for help, or in what way. If you have to send an email, what should you write in it? Dealing with responsibilities in a foreign language brings its own challenges here. After a long and demanding day of high-level training, it can be easier to just leave it than to try to solve problems alone with Google Translate.

The cultural transition model by Ryba, Stambulova, and Ronkainen (2016, 5) represents psychological mechanisms in the process of going abroad to play sports. There are three stages, the first of which is the pre-transition phase, where psychological preparation for the transition takes place together with practical arrangements. The second phase is acute cultural adaptation after relocation. It includes integration into the sports team to achieve normative belonging. The final stage is socio-cultural adaptation where an athlete has created a new social network and finds balance between the cultural norms of the host country and his own background. Like Ryba et al. (2016, 6) notice, some athletes are never able to pass though all three phases, making the journey unsatisfactory.

In addition to temporal periods, acculturation can be divided by themes into four categories, which are, according to Schinke et al. (2016, 40): 1. settling in in a foreign sports system and sport culture, 2. adjusting to local training and coaching methods, 3. adapting to cultural differences in athletic mentality, and 4. creating a balance with sports and leisure.

### **2.3 Research questions**

The purpose of the study is to emphasise the individual experiences of young foreign ice hockey players, and their own interpretations of their life stories. The main purpose is to form an understanding of how they reflect their observations and memories about their migration to Finland without their families, or only with one guardian, in which case the rest of the family has remained in the home country. Information is gathered based on subjective narratives by interviewing the players who have immigrated to Finland under the age of 18 to play ice hockey.

RQ1: How do players describe their process of the immigration as a junior ice hockey player?

RQ2: What factors players consider meaningful for their adaptation?

RQ3: What kind of social, emotional or practical support players have received, or would have needed for their first years in Finland?

RQ4: What feelings do the players mention or describe, when they tell about their experience of immigration?

This study is not designed to provide generalisation, but to present the unique experiences of individual young people. The results can be useful in developing the migration process of young athletes.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach is selected considering the aim of the study. The data is gathered by semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions invite interviewees to share their stories, memories, and thoughts. Interviews will be analysed with a narrative approach. The advantage of the narrative approach is the possibility for individuals to share their own story with their own voice, using their own words. The ethical challenge arises from the same source: when an informant gives his consent to be interviewed, he might not know beforehand, where his own stories carry him – that is, what he is going to say. (Hänninen 2018, 204)

#### **3.1 Experiences as the object of narrative research**

In scientific literature, experience is a complicated and multidimensional concept. It is related to events, encounters, emotions, and thoughts - in everything, both the external and the internal world are involved. The subject of the study is the contents of the experience, its structure and recurring themes. The goal is to observe the data and search for the essence of the immigration experience and essential structures and factors that emerge from the interviews of these six players. With only a handful of interviewees, it is not relevant to make generalisations, but as Kukkola (2018, 42) remarks, similarities in individual stories might be seen to underline characteristic features. Both in Backman, Toikkanen and Virtanen (2018, 36) and in Kukkola (2018, 42), experiences are described as the way in which an individual perceives their lived realities, recognizing its structures and meanings.

It would be problematic to explore subjective experiences by observing one's life from the outside, so we rely on the stories athletes choose to tell us. We do not know, if we get "the truth", and what parts of the story players intentionally or unintentionally emphasise, and what they leave out. We do not know what they remember, or what they might have forgotten.

According to Kukkola (2018, 66), despite the individual and unique nature of experiences, stories about them are not created only by the power of one person. The ice hockey community, historical and social contexts and situational aspect of interviewing are present in the narration of the story. It is possible that players tell stories that they believe are acceptable in the eyes of the ice hockey community or the interviewer. I have decided to believe in the stories of these

players, and respect their narrative choices. I am thankful for their openness and trust in me, which made this research possible.

The research of experience does not create a deeper understanding of the perception of the experience, but it aims to explicate and structurize the experience. This is done by describing and summarising the story. (Kukkola 2018, 46). The challenge in studying experiences through stories is that experience is not necessarily linguistic, but it can be put in the form of language, when it is shared with others. (Kukkola 2018, 44). An interview is a conversation with a pre-set purpose. The researcher is an initiator and also leads the conversation with a pre-selected set of questions. Because of the interactional nature of the interview, both parties influence each other, so different interviewers may get slightly different answers on the same topic. (Puusa 2020, 46). Narrative interpretation happens between the researcher and the informant, through the communication and with the words. Meaningful communication is the only possibility for researchers to gather understanding of the experiences of another person. (Heikkinen, 2018, 184)

As Kukkola (2018, 65) presents, narrative research includes the presumption that experiences are connected to the community and therefore do not mean only the contents of an individual's consciousness. Experiences are formed both individually and socially because stories do not only express experiences, but also shape experiences and create personal understanding about lived situations. For this reason, describing the events of one's own life can be perceived as useful. According to Hänninen (2018, 191) storytelling may increase one's own self-understanding, because then the stream of experiences is put into a more or less logical form. Narrating is acting with a purpose: to inform, to annoy, to explain, to deceive, to get admiration, just to mention a few. Narrating might also serve as a self-reflection or lightening one's heart.

### **3.2 Interviews**

The data of this study consists of the interviews of 6 ice hockey players conducted in August and September in 2022. Two of the interviews were set up face-to-face, all the others online by using a Zoom Virtual Meetings. Remote connection was necessary due to two reasons: physical distance when players were currently located in other countries, and some Finnish ice hockey clubs also required remote interviews as a Covid-19 health safety precaution. As Sparkes and Smith (2014, 89) state, risks with online interviews are that it might not be that personal and



some of the nonverbal data will be left out, but sometimes it is the only option to approach some informants. Sparkes and Smith (2014, 95) also encourage active listening with nonverbal responses even online, to communicate approval and interest.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, added with comments about the players' expressions, reactions or tone of voice when I found it relevant. I gave the players an opportunity to choose, whether they wanted to do the interview in Finnish or English. Two of the players wanted to answer in Finnish, the others preferred English. All quotations are presented in English to protect the identity of the participants and also to make it understandable for the reader. I discuss this choice of language and the challenges it brings with it in chapter 3.4.

Before each interview, or right at the beginning of the interview situation, I introduced the purpose of the study and the consent form to the interviewee. The interviewees were given an opportunity to ask questions, and they also had the contact information of both me and the research supervisor for questions that arose later.

Like in the research of Schinke et al. (2011), the Cultural transition model by Ryba et al. (2016) provides a chronological and thematic structure to the interviews. The interview started with warm-up questions, which were meant to create a pleasant atmosphere. First question was: "How did you become an ice hockey player?", and follow-up was based on the interviewee's response. As Sparkes and Smith (2014, 93) recommends, I deepened the topic with actual interview questions, and when necessary, I used expansion questions for getting more information. At the end of the interview, I stopped the recording, and we had a short debriefing, that is, we talked a little about what it was like to recall experiences and answer the questions.

Interviews were conversational, and athletes were generous with their answers, explaining the topic with earnestness. To get narrative material through interviews, the role of the interviewer is to support their speaking nonverbally and let interviewees talk freely, avoiding interrupting questions and asking for clarifications on their answers only when the interviewee has finished speaking (Hänninen 2018, 193). I followed this guideline especially in the online interviews, when nonverbal cues are limited, making genuine eye contact unachievable or microgestures barely perceivable. Despite the online setting, I consider all the interviews successful and no

unexpected problems occurred. The length of the interviews varied from 32 to 58 minutes, depending on how much time the player had and how much they wanted to share.

The interviewees had agreed voluntarily, so they had some kind of desire to talk about this topic. After the interview, they all said something positive, such as “it was a nice interview” or “it was good to think about these things after the years”. This shows that the interviews were pleasant experiences and supports the notion that the atmosphere was good. Heikkinen (2018, 183) underlines that it is important to realise the therapeutic function of storytelling, and this may explain the positive feedback after the interviews. There was no need to beg for answers, but even short questions were answered in detail by the players, so I felt that gathering material through interviews went well.

### **3.2.1 Participants**

Sparkes and Smith (2014, 70) describe sampling in qualitative research as a purposeful method with which the goal is to gain as much knowledge as possible. Researchers choose individuals, or a group in which they have an interest and who they feel will provide information rich data. My aim was to find the players who had achieved successful careers in ice hockey.

I recruited the interviewees by using a combination of two methods: I contacted organisations for the first interviews, and after those interviews I asked players to nominate their fellow countrymen or other foreigners that might be interested in taking part in this study. In this way I was able to expand the group of interviewees beyond my own contacts. In order to keep the identity of the players anonymous, I will not reveal their current age, teams, home country, or whether the player is a goaltender, defender or forward. I have also changed other identification information when necessary to make sure players cannot be tracked down. The anonymity aspect has also influenced the choice of interviewees, and I have excluded some of the most easily identifiable players.

I selected six ice hockey players to participate in the interviews in this research (chart 2). All players have played in men’s teams and represented their countries in the national team in one or more age group. Some of the interviewees have stayed in Finland for only one season, some significantly longer. It is rare for a foreign junior player to retire in Finland, because ice hockey

players' temporary contracts often take them from place to place, and for some Finland is a stopover, not a final destination.

pseudonym	nationality	age of immigration	moved to Finland
Alex	A	14	alone
Jakub	A	14	alone
Matthew	A	14	alone
Oliver	B	14	with one parent
Peter	B	13	with one parent
Simon	C	13	with one parent

CHART 2. Participants of the interviews

All of the players had turned 18 at the time of the interviews, so some years have already passed since moving to Finland, and in some cases also moving away from Finland. I wanted to interview adults because of my narrative approach. I believe that processing and examining experiences after a few years helps to construct the narrative more clearly. Sometimes when encountering major changes in life, it can be challenging to put in words the experience, until after temporal distance. As the oldest of my interviewees, “Oliver”, describes: “I didn’t understand these things when I was young, but now as an adult I have understood more.”

### 3.3 Data analysis and narrative method

For the study of individual experience, a narrative approach is a sensible choice, because narrative analysis can help to understand the multi-layered nature of experiences. In a narrative analysis, the language is also examined, not just the content. All choices are shaped by the telling situation and intentions. (Sparkes & Smith 2014, 131) For this reason, the research excerpt contains an interpretation: why certain things have been brought up, what kind of story was wanted to be told. Interpretation is also what the researcher considers worthy of attention and what is irrelevant. I have reviewed the data looking for answers to the research questions and results will be presented in chapter 4.

Another reason for choosing this approach arises from the target population. In adolescence, personally meaningful memories combine with the cultural narrative and form the story of one's own life. In other words, at that age when those immigration experiences have happened, an individual begins to form an autobiography. (Ryba et al., 2017, 1) Sharing these stories creates structure and understanding to one's life and experience. Storytelling is used by young people from the late adolescence to construct their lives. This can be seen in remembering past, projecting future and describing present, all in an internalised identity narrative. This narrative has two purposes: it supports self-coherence and identity and also communal relatedness, when it connects to others with similar experiences. (Ryba et al., 2017, 2)

Stories create meaning for events by building cause-and-effect connections between individual coincidences and people's motives. Stories may or may not reflect actual events; they are about experienced things, not objective truths. All narratively oriented researchers do not necessarily assume that the interviewee speaks about their experiences truthfully (Kukkola 2018, 68)

I started the analysis phase by going through all the transcribed data from the interviews (about 18,000 words), and immersed myself in it as it was, without taking notes or looking for answers yet. I wanted a general idea, and paid attention to the naturally interesting points. As the analysis process progressed, I started coding the data and looking for answers to the research questions one by one. This required several readings until the lines from the interviews began to stick to my memory, and the search for answers accelerated.

As Hänninen (2018, 191) explains, the way narratives are represented gives information about the narrator's idea of the cause-and-effect relationship, which is revealed by the told order of events: first-told matters are the ones that lead to, have an effect on, or cause later-told matters. Storytelling includes dramatising and exaggerating, and also creating stories that present the narrator in a certain light, for example favourably or humorously. The aim of the research questions is to discover what kind of stories these ice hockey players create and how do they present themselves and their life. According to Kukkola (2018, 72) during analysis the parts of the data are excluded which do not answer research questions.

## 4 RESULTS

I present the results according to the order of the research questions, so that at the beginning I talk about the process of immigration for these six players, then the factors that influenced their adaptation from their own perspective, and the support that the players have received or would have needed. Finally, I examine the emotions that have been noticeable in the narratives. Since the theme of sacrifice emerged from the interviews, I discuss it in its own chapter. In addition, I pass on the players' suggestions or recommendations on how organisations in Finland could promote the successful adaptation of foreign players.

The overview of the players' stories gives a general idea of the structure and the content of the stories (chart 3). When the row is divided into columns, the players have experienced or told things in different ways. I have marked in the superscript how many players' stories each detail appears in.

I came to Finland to build up my athletic career at the age of <sup>6</sup>		
13 <sup>2</sup>	14 <sup>4</sup>	
alone <sup>3</sup>	with one of my parents <sup>3</sup>	
The idea was		
my own <sup>1</sup>	my parents' <sup>3</sup>	my agent's <sup>2</sup>
My parents' first reaction to this plan to move to Finland was		
to be happy for me <sup>1</sup>	uneasy and worried <sup>2</sup>	supportive <sup>3</sup>
It was my dream to play abroad, because in my home country, the opportunities to develop as a junior ice hockey player are not ideal. I certainly wouldn't be at this level now if I had stayed there. <sup>6</sup>		
In the beginning, I struggled with the language and I was lonely. <sup>6</sup>		
When I started to make friends, it got better. <sup>6</sup>		
My family <sup>4</sup>	My friends in Finland <sup>2</sup>	
supported me the most		

CHART 3. An overview of the key structure and main similarities and differences of the immigration stories.

#### **4.1. Process of immigration**

Although Carter (2015, 5) claims that the decision to migrate for sports depends on a number of socioeconomic conditions, all the players I interviewed agree on why ice hockey players from their home countries aspire to come to Finland. The reason for all six of them was that they could not expect sufficient development as ice hockey players in the junior leagues of their home country in the important years, approximately from the age of 14 upwards. In some countries, the level of the adult leagues is not high enough either, if the player aims to maximise his own potential or maybe even reach the international top.

Wright, Gould and Erickson (2022, 2) have noted that when a young player shows potential that distinguishes him from his age group, it means that the moment has come to decide whether he is leaving or staying. It is not an ideal situation to develop if you are already the best player. “Oliver”, one of my informants, described how in his homeland he got to play however he liked; he was able to score five goals per game because he was so superior to the others. The games did not give him a challenge. Or as “Simon” said: “There is no point in winning games 20–0”, because the teams are clearly not on the same level, and there is no competition to make the games meaningful and worth the effort.

Sometimes young skilled players are placed into adult leagues, to try and challenge them in that way. However, this is not ideal either, like “Oliver” describes: “In the last season [in his home country], I already played in the men’s league, even though I was 13–14. It didn’t make any sense. I was a talented player, but everyone I played with was bigger and stronger. Sometimes it felt intimidating that you had to play with adults when I was just a kid.” In sports, the ideal is a fair game where all parties have a chance to win. This includes skills as well as physical and mental abilities, and in all of these age is a factor. Because of this, it can be said that these relocations are necessary for the development of the athletes’ potential, to provide suitable challenges in an appropriate athletic environment.

Although for all of the interviewees, ice hockey was the primary reason for immigrating, it was not the only reason. Adventure, learning a new language and simply moving abroad attracted these young people. Like “Peter said: “Of course I wanted to play hockey, but it felt nice to move to another country and learn [a new] language. But the main thing was hockey.”

Already in the planning phase of the research topic, I was interested in whose idea and initiative leads to a young player going abroad to further his sports career. In this sample of six players, only one said that the idea of immigration came true after his own initiative. In half of the cases, the initiative came from the players' parents, especially from father. Two players said it was their agent, who proposed such an option.

When these starting points are compared, some players present the decision as the result of a single discussion, or a simple solution, like "Peter": "Father just asked if you would like to move to Finland. And I answered that of course!" Similarly, "Oliver" describes that the decision "to take this adventure" was his parents and not his, but he was happy to go anyway. "Alex" brings up a longer reflection that preceded the final decision: "My father came up with that idea, what if I would go to Finland. To be honest, I didn't like the idea at first. My mom hated this idea, because I was so young. And she didn't want me to go, and I understand because it's hard for a parent to let go. But I convinced her and she didn't have any choice."

According to Carter (2015, 127) the family of the athlete is active in making the immigration decision. They make a plan, figure out the strategies and prepare a family member to leave. According to Carter (2015), behind the decision of migration is the intention to achieve a better life in some way. When "Simon" was 15 years old, he told his parents that he wanted to pursue a professional career abroad. His parents were supportive, and promised him that they would do "everything possible to make it work".

De Vasconcellos and Dimeo (2009, 734) point out that the migration history in the family or moving before the start of their professional career may make the transition easier. In my sample, in the families of two of the athletes, a family member had previously gone abroad to pursue a sports career, so examples and experiences were available within the family.

For "Jakub" and "Matthew", it was their agent who suggested moving to Finland. The relationship between the agent and the player is interesting, because "Matthew" was only 13 years old at the time, but the agent treated him like a friend and discussed the matter with the young man first. In the stories where the agent was proactive, he represents the player, and the parents apparently do not come between them. Like "Matthew" indicates: "I had a really good friendship with my agent, and he called me first." In the same way, "Jacob" made the decision with the agent, and the parents accepted it with some reluctance: "Parents were scared, because they didn't want to let go of their child. It was my decision."

“Alex” was the only player who mentioned that he hesitated to move to Finland, because he was not sure if he was ready. The other players did not remember having concerns in advance, but thought the idea was great and were enthusiastic about the possibility. Correspondingly, Bourke (2002, 383) describes that in the interviews the players were so delighted with the possibility to play abroad, that they did not worry about practical matters or possible difficulties beforehand. Also in my sample, everyone mentioned that playing abroad had been a dream for them.

Not all players had an actual try out period. “Oliver” and “Peter” got into Finnish junior teams directly, which was probably helped by the relationships their families and coaches had. “Jakub” came for two weeks in the autumn, without any promises of continuation, but he impressed the coaches with his skills in the very first games, and did not return to his homeland until the Christmas holidays. “Matthew” had been selected based on scouting and was offered the position directly. “Alex” arrived with his father for an official try out, after which he stayed in Finland. “Simon” and “Jakub” felt a bit remorseful and tried to back out after they had already moved to Finland, but their parents convinced them to stay.

For some players, the time for reflection came later. “Alex” and “Oliver” also described moments when they wanted to give up and leave. For “Oliver”, those were the rebellious teenage years of 16–18, when the everyday life of an athlete had not yet become a routine, and sometimes parents had to lead him with a firm hand, so that the temptations of youth would not spoil his sporting career. For “Alex”, at his late teenage years, he had serious discussions with his parents if he should return home, because his parents were worried about him. At that stage, the pressures of the career seemed to be too much in relation to the amount of resources and support available.

#### **4.1.1 Why do players come to Finland without their families?**

None of the interviewees had their whole family with them in Finland. In fact, such stories seem to be rare. One can only speculate the reasons. Presumably, a decision is made that the other siblings’ daily life will continue as usual, even if one family member starts to turn their sport into a profession. A junior’s ice hockey career is uncertain, and moving the whole family to another country would also be a tremendous investment (Carter 2015, 127–129). The system takes in a young ice hockey player, but there is no assured place for parents without Finnish



language skills, unless they are employed in sectors where foreign labour is common, such as cleaning or the construction industry, or manage to grab sought after expert positions in international corporations. The decision is certainly not easy for the parents. They need a high confidence that their child has such an enormous potential that it is worth trying.

Unlike, for example, in the USA and Canada, minor athletes in Finland are not usually accommodated with local families. Of these six ice hockey players, two have experience with the billet family in another country, and only one in Finland. Addedly, one's family tried to arrange it for their son, but they were disappointed because none of their teammates' families volunteered. "Oliver" ponders the doubts or worries that could have been the reasons for the reluctance: "My parents' first thought was that I could live with a family, but it never worked out. No family wanted to have me. Maybe it felt like a strange idea to everyone. Like, if a foreign boy comes, who doesn't go to school, and what does he do during the day?"

For the player who was placed in a family in Finland, the arrangement was miserable and short-lived. In Finland, the selection and preparation of families could be improved. As Wright et al. (2022, 3) state, the demands on billet-families are heavy, as they are expected to provide the same kind of support and security as biological families. Wright et al. (2022, 2) see adapting to a billet-family as a big challenge for players in the American system. As a consequence, while it solves some problems, it also introduces new ones.

For those who live alone or have moved abroad, the responsibility in everyday life as an athlete comes at a young age. Ojala (2020, 323) has found that the most crucial areas for an athlete's development are exercising, nutrition, rest, motivation, player role and emotions. It takes excellent life management skills to get these foundations in order to advance one's career. Those who live at home with their families have the advantage of the support provided by their caring parents. Sometimes my interviewees envied their Finnish teammates for going home, where there is food on the table, clean laundry ready in the closet, and maybe even a beloved parent in a car waiting behind the ice rink for the journey home.

#### **4.2 Players' perceptions of factors affecting acculturation**

Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 178) reminds that athletes are not "ready made" from childhood. Their transitions are important, because they shape them as people and athletes, not only in the athletic dimension but in psychological and social dimensions as well, and also as professionals,

members of organisations. When they reach adulthood, they tell stories about immigration experiences that are passed down from generation to generation.

Settling in in a new country begins gradually when the decision to stay is made. Success in sports and earning a place in a team are the most important factors in whether players stay in Finland or not. If an athlete does not achieve the expected results in sports, they may not get playing time and their contract can be terminated, which means buying a return ticket home. Another factor that the interviewees highlighted was a functional everyday life: cooking, laundry, going to school. Finding social relationships, i.e. friends, which creates a sense of belonging, was mentioned as the third factor. Players reflect on what made them achieve results with these three factors, and they mentioned acquired language skills and support from others. However, success in ice hockey comes first, because every goal scored or other notable play helps in getting the teammates acceptance, getting in the favour of the coaches a regular place in the lineup and thus also furthering their social status.

“Simon” describes the process of deciding to stay, and remembers that parental encouragement was needed before he was convinced that he should try to stay:

“Actually, I remember the first week, after the try out, when I got the opportunity to stay. I told my parents, I was not sure If I wanted to stay. But my parents comforted me and they encouraged me. And make me realise that it was worth it to take this shot. I’m glad they pushed me to do it. And they were really great years. I adapted to the lifestyle, and I made many friends that I’m still in contact with. So, it was very great. “

For “Oliver” it took several years before Finland became a more permanent location for him because a future as a professional was not so certain during early junior years. It was more of a faint possibility that he and his family wanted to explore. When this dream was invested in, and it started to pay off, the enthusiasm grew even more:

“I don’t think that my parents had a clear plan, that in so and so many years I will be a professional. We really went one year at a time. We saw that professionalism is possible, and we saw that I can start making money with this favourite hobby of mine. Of course, we began to pursue it more. My family has been a sports family, we have lived in the rhythm of sports. We began to pursue it more. My family started making more sacrifices. And that made me invest more in hockey.”

#### **4.2.1 Building social relationship and learning the language**

According to Weedon (2011, 185), learning the host country’s language is a key to acculturation for many sports migrants. From the interviews I noticed, that the language barrier

comes as a shock, because not even the coaches necessarily use English, only some of the teammates speak English, and the player may notice that his own English language skills are limited. Some of those who came to Finland have persistently studied Finnish, and for them, language skills have opened up social networks and made it possible for them to participate in a team or school just like locals. “I didn’t speak a word of Finnish at first. But it came pretty fast. Probably half a year and then I was able to manage somehow”, “Peter” says. The capability to communicate in English, or even better, in Finnish has therefore been an important factor affecting adaptation. Schinke et al. (2013, 1685) remind that foreign players are expected to study the local language, instead of being offered instructions in their own language or in English.

This importance of social relationships and friends comes up in all the interviews. Some of the players got into their new team almost immediately, like “Matthew”. He did not describe any loneliness or feelings of being an outsider. “Jakub” soon made friends with other foreign players, but he only found contact with the locals when he started school. “Oliver” and “Peter” felt they were a bit on the sidelines at first because of the language barrier, but both learned the language quickly and got into the team thanks to it. “Simon” struggled a lot at first. Even the coaches did not speak English, and in fact his own English was not especially good either. He did not understand a word of Finnish. Now “Simon” speaks both Finnish and English, but still apologises for his limited language skills. He does not directly say that he is shy, but that is the impression that comes from the interview. because he seems more restrained, introverted and perhaps a little distant in a polite way. Speaking of such personality analysis “Peter”, who mentions his own sociability several times, shares his observations: “I mean, people who are not so outgoing, it has been much more difficult for them to adapt. I still know guys who have lived in Finland as long as I have, but they still don’t feel like home for sure.”

Experiences vary about what it is like to enter as a foreigner into a new ice hockey team, which is their primary social community. “Matthew” was delighted when his future teammates started following him on social media even before moving to Finland and immediately after moving, they asked if he wanted to spend free time together. “Jakub” was disappointed that he was only introduced to the team in Finnish, because he did not understand a word of it himself, and he was left with the impression that the team did not really know why he had come. In the beginning, he did not feel like he belonged to the team.

“Peter” encountered bullying at a Finnish school, although he wanted to point out several times that it was not serious: “I had maybe a little difficult time at first. There was some bullying and such at school, but it is probably pretty usual if you’re coming as an outsider and a foreigner. I would not say that I suffered.” I am not sure why “Peter” seems to want to downplay bullying, saying “it’s probably usual”. Maybe he feels that it was because of the situation and not so much because they did not like him, since he has made a lot of friends later. “Peter” is the only one who directly mentions bullying or inappropriate behaviour towards him. This does not mean that others have not had these experiences, but in these narratives they did not appear. Competition between athletes is not always completely fair, and the players must ensure that they are as good or preferably better than the locals so that the coach is not accused of unfairly favouring them. There is always room for a good enough player, as “Oliver” looks at:

“I always tried to be good enough that I would get the place and that no coach would get into the situation of having to choose a local instead of me. I didn’t feel like I was left out of something or got less playing time because of my nationality. Coaches are different and you have to be grateful that there were coaches who didn’t feel that I was different, or that I wouldn’t fit in that team. Of course, I learned the language quickly and I was part of the guys and I didn’t stand out in any way in that crowd, as I understood everything well and didn’t need any special attention. It certainly helped.”

Social relationships are such a strong rooting factor in a new country that “Peter” thinks he will stay in Finland even after his ice hockey career: “Now I’ve thought that even if I didn’t play anymore, or if I quit hockey, I would probably still live here. Now my friends, girlfriend and all my close ones are here.”

#### **4.2.2 Adjusting into different ice hockey system**

Sport expatriates are expected to adapt fast and be ready to attend in training and team activities right away after their arrival (Van Bakel & Salzbrenner 2019, 506). As “Matthew” vividly describes, the adaptation had to start literally immediately:

“When I arrived on the first day, it was very late. Someone from the organisation picked me up from the airport and drove me to the hotel. I went to sleep maybe around 3 a.m. And he said he will be at 7 a.m. in front of the hotel for the first practice. It was a time when I haven’t been on the ice for like two months. And I had about 4 hours of sleep... And I remember that after that, the ice practice was... It was probably the only time when I was so glad that the practice ended! [laughing hard] Because it was crazy!”

Players may face adaptation challenges on and off the ice. According to Samuel et al. (2020, 721), on-ice issues are not entirely about performance, but adjusting to different training schedules and ways of practising. “Oliver” illustrates the changes he observed:

“The big thing for me was physical training, which suddenly became a part of ice hockey training. I had played football, basketball, cycling, triathlon along with ice hockey, but suddenly it happened that in addition to ice training, we started doing physical training. It was a new thing for you. At first it was maybe strange, but I was relatively well prepared as I had practised different sports, and I was physically in a good situation and I was no weaker than a local”

In training, the intensity of physical play surprised “Alex” as a newcomer: “I still remember the first training in Finland. I was not used to how they practise here. It was a shock! I was so tired after the trainings I didn’t even have enough energy to worry if I was playing good or bad.”

Some of the changes happen gradually, as the player progresses to the older age groups and the level of competitiveness increases, and if his role changes because there are many equally talented players in the team. “Oliver” noticed this: “In the beginning, everything was easy and good, but the competition gets tougher and tougher. Yes, at some point the reality hit me that I can’t score five goals in every game, and I’m not superior in every game, and I can’t play as I want, but I have to commit to the team thing. It was difficult at first.” “Oliver”, like many talented immigrants, was used to being the hero and a star player in his home team from an early age, but there were many eager rivals in Finland, and therefore he had to learn to adapt to work as part of the team.

As Drew et al. (2019, 17) point out, success in sports alone is not a reliable measure of a player’s well-being. When evaluating the success of the transition, achievements in sports should not be glorified over well-being. Well-being supports the best performances in ice hockey, like “Simon” emphasizes when explaining why psychological support is important in an ice hockey player's career: “I don’t think it’s possible to play good hockey, if you are not mentally in the right mood or in the right mindset.”

#### **4.2.3 Going to school in Finland**

From my sample group, 5 out of 6 have studied in Finnish educational institutions at some point during their stay, although only three of them graduated from Finland. In addition to that, two graduated from their home countries’ basic education after online-studies. Only 2 out of 6 dropped out of the education system during their stay in Finland. In terms of percentage, it is a considerable amount from such a small group, but statistical significance should not be assumed in a study of six participants.

Most of the interviewees saw going to school in Finland as a positive thing that gives rhythm to daily schedules and even more, an opportunity to make friends. Integration begins when life in the new country begins to function. Like “Alex” sees it: “When the school started, it started to be more normal, like in [home country]. Actually, the best experiences started when I got used to my new school and made some friends. Everything started to be better. And I started to love it here.” Unfortunately, not everyone had the opportunity to go to a Finnish school. “Oliver” tried to study remotely so that he could graduate from his home country, but it turned out to be difficult when he suddenly had a lot of responsibility for his own life anyway: “I had training in the morning, then I had the day to do school stuff by myself. How can I get motivated to do school things at the age of 15, even though no one is watching me!”

One possible solution to this is that after a year-long preparatory class, students without completed basic education can attend a Finnish school. Depending on the municipality of residence, basic education may also be organised in Swedish or even English. In Finland, there are basic and secondary education study programs for athletes, and in some educational institutions it is also possible to complete these studies in English. However, it should also be noted that not all immigrants have academically sufficient English language skills, and the development of their Finnish language skills can take so long that it is not necessarily possible to reach a sufficient proficiency for studies during the intense junior years. There are other kinds of stories, too: “Peter” achieved language skills at such a young age and so quickly that he has been able to study vocational studies with his Finnish friends.

For “Jakub”, the whole idea of studying in Finland seemed complicated: “Well, I think the most challenging thing was school, I did not know how to speak English. I don’t know how to, or who would go to school with me, did not know the email or the school’s name...” However, “Jakub” applied to school with help from his organisation’s contacts, and he was satisfied with it. For him, studying in Finland felt quite easy after he was used to it. He was really happy that the school had an understanding attitude towards playing ice hockey, and he could always go to practices and games, even when they overlapped with lessons in his schedule.

Thanks to remote studies, “Alex” graduated from his home country’s basic education system while simultaneously participating in classroom teaching in Finland. He attained both degrees with good grades.

### 4.3 Needs and sources of support

The right kind of support has an impact on what kind of an experience the immigration process is and how the adaptation progresses. Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 190) bluntly say that an athlete cannot survive without the support of other people. It is therefore not only a humane ideal but also necessary for the athlete's psychological well-being. As Ryba, Stambulova and Ronkainen (2016, 11) reminds us, the experience of intense loneliness threatens well-being and mental health, and is especially a risk especially for those who come to the country alone.

However, interestingly, the support of families is seen as particularly important in Richardson et al. (2012, 1607 & 1610), even if the family members are in a different country and can only be reached by phone or online. The importance of family can also be emphasised also because support is not necessarily available elsewhere. If new social circles are just forming, or relationships are superficial due to insufficient language skills, deep and supportive relationships may not exist in the new country. The people in the athlete's life are not necessarily supportive beyond their professional roles. As Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 182) further show, limited support can be expected from coaches and agents.

Teammates may not support a newcomer if the competition between players is fierce, but in my own interviews, the support of other players and teammates came up in a positive way. "Jakub" is grateful to his flatmate, with whom he spent a lot of time: "I had an amazing time with [flatmate and team member]. Without him I would have been lost. He was the one who really helped me." From these few lines, it appears that quite a lot depended on one friend. "Jakub" met his flatmate only after he had been in Finland for a while. The weeks leading up to his flatmate's arrival were miserable and shockingly lonely.

"Alex" was also terribly lonely the first year, until he moved in with a flatmate. Cohabitation was not all fun - the flatmate was already an adult, so he brought female guests for the night, making it hard for 15-year-old "Alex" to sleep. "Alex" began to wish for his own apartment, and it was arranged before long.

"Oliver's" memories about Finnish hospitality were warm and he quickly found his place in the team: "I would say that the locals welcomed me well, and I made many friends with whom I am still in contact. I felt at home. The guys took good care of you. I guess it was fun for them to see a [nationality] hockey player, it was something special and exciting."

In “Peter’s” story, the importance of friends is constantly repeated. He describes his circle of friends consisting mostly of Finns today. “For me, it was mainly teammates and friends, and all that social stuff that makes it easier. It helps with adaptation. And of course, family members help. But I would say that friends are important. And when I started making friends, it was such a good feeling.”

“Simon” also has happy memories of living with Finnish roommates and having fun with them, from when he had just turned 18. Before that, he had not settled in the same place for a long time, which perhaps made it difficult to establish friendships.

Support does not always come when needed, and it does not feel easy to ask for help. “Alex” talks about an awkward situation, which embarrassed him, although adults could have handled it better: “When I came to Finland for the second time, no one came to pick me up from the airport, and I did not have the keys to my apartment. I begged if I could stay with my teammates’ family for a couple of nights.” The first time he came to the country accompanied by his parents, and the club had arranged everything ready for him. Maybe both the family and the club thought that the second time, he would be able to solve such problems on his own. After all, he had already lived independently for some time.

The importance of the organisation is emphasised in the early stages, when there are no friends yet, and practical matters must be arranged. In some organisations, young players are thoroughly counselled. “Matthew” received all the advice he needed, starting with shopping tips, and appears to be grateful for it. This is how he recalls it: “When I arrived, they helped me with the drives to the ice rink and stuff like that, and they also showed me where I could buy food. [Coach] took me straight to the shop, and he showed me everything around, like where are cheaper products, where are the main things, like eggs, bread and where to find everything I need. He really helped me a lot with this.”

Other players did not have such experiences, and “Oliver” has an explanation for this: “So, we had to organise everything ourselves. And that’s how it is when you come here as a foreigner and take a place from a Finnish junior player.” His reflection conveys the attitude that help must be earned, for example, by bringing a competitive advantage to the team.

“Matthew” shares a sweet story about one team, which had a very special support person for the players: “In [the team], we had a person who was called “the mother of the team”. She was



a mother of one of the old players and, and she really helped us a lot. It was so nice! Even if you don't have your own mother or father there with you, there is someone who helps and encourages you. She even helped with cooking and washing clothes." Her caring left its mark on "Matthew", as gratitude and warmth could be heard in his story.

The club has an important role in supporting the players. As an essential object of development Ryba, Stambulova, and Ronkainen (2016, 10) found that, an essential object of development, receiving organisations were not aware how athletes' well-being was sometimes compromised by challenges of transition. Host organisations were more prepared to assist in practical arrangements. Psychological support was not a standard practice. As Van Bakel and Salzbrenner (2019, 507) in unison with Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 182) have noted, the club's attention is focused on the athletic aspect; whereas the psychological and psychosocial aspects are neglected. According to Smith and Smoll (2012, 18), young athletes should also develop in other areas of life, not only as athletes. Furthermore, as Ryba et al. (2016, 11) describe, psychosocial support as well as career and life design counselling should be organised to help athletes to reach their potential and to minimise the negative effect of crises, problems or harsh transition process to their performance or well-being.

"Alex" felt the lack of support after facing difficult times. He thought he got a lot of attention from agents and coaches when things were going great on the ice, but people disappeared from around him, when he would have needed them the most. "Alex" was left alone, and describes it with disappointment: "When I got injured and was on the sidelines for a long time, they didn't visit and didn't even call. None of the coaches called to ask how I was doing. I did not hear anything from my agent. Everyone knew what had happened to me, but they did not contact me. Then I saw who was interested in me as a person and who was only interested if I was on the ice." Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 182) have noted the same thing: plenty of encouragement and attention is available when a player is performing well, but when their performance is not up to par, support tends to disappear.

Family is mentioned by all interviewees as a source of support. "Jakub", "Matthew" and "Alex", all of whom moved to Finland alone, kept in touch with their parents almost every day. "Alex" also mentions siblings, with whom you can talk about things that you don't share with your parents. Sturges (2018, 87) raises a problem that involves residential mobility: it has been negatively affecting social relationships between an athlete and their parents. Distancing from family members did not come up in this research. Of all the interviewees, only "Oliver"

mentions having any conflicts with parents, after the decision to move to Finland had been pushed through despite some objections.

Parental support is not only about helping, but also about preparing for an independent life. “Oliver” is grateful how gently but firmly his parents taught him all that was necessary: “Certainly, the last years that we lived together, he more and more forced me to do things, for example cooking, and it prepared me well for that independent life. I was definitely readier than many young people who go to live alone or abroad.”

“Jakub” and “Alex” mentioned teachers as people providing support. It is positive that support is also available from places other than the ice hockey environment. As Dubé et al. (2007, 298) have noted, for athletes who travel a lot, support from their community and teachers was significant. Players need a trustworthy person to share their concerns with, and they themselves may also take the initiative to seek help, support and advice. Of course, the age level and stage of development must be taken into account here. Van Bakel and Salzbrenner (2019, 507) present the results of a research project on football, where it was found that successful and unsuccessful players are distinguished by the ability to seek social support, which is an effective coping strategy in challenging situations.

#### **4.4 Description of emotional experiences**

Interestingly, when I asked the players about what kind of emotions immigration evoked, the answers were mostly connected to ice hockey, i.e. games, practices and their ice hockey career. Ice hockey was the reason for the move, the most significant content in life and also the emotional experiences come strongly from there. The one emotion that stands apart from the ice hockey context is loneliness, which was described by “Alex”, “Jakub” and “Simon”. As Ryba, Stambulova, and Ronkainen (2016, 11) have stated, those who move alone might experience intense loneliness. Carter (2015, 6) also brings up psychological difficulties including loneliness and separation from family.

The beginning seems to be an extremely hard time for young immigrants. For “Simon” and “Jakub”, the first days were the worst, but it did not get any better within the first month. “Jakub” remembers those feelings: “I was so confused! I was sad, because I did not have anyone here. And the first month was brutal.” Alex’s memories are quite identical: “It was really hard in the beginning. I was crying a lot. First two months were the hardest.” The worst thing for

“Simon” was not being able to talk to anyone: “That was really hard. Not many guys spoke English, or even my coach. So the first days were pretty hard.”

Whilst “Jakub”, “Simon” and “Alex” were stressed and especially in the beginning sometimes lonely, “Oliver” rebelled and “Peter” sought comfort from his friends, “Matthew” was content and focused on the positive sides. “I was not even thinking if I had some difficulties. Maybe they were there, but I was not even feeling them. When you don’t have food at home, and you go to practice, and you are happy about the good practice and everything, you don’t even think about the food. That was my case.”

Among these six interviewees, “Matthew” stands out with his positive feelings and experiences. He uses the word happy six times, and none of the others use it even once. The only negative thing in his story is, when he describes the first on-ice practice in Finland. He went to the ice straight after his flight, with four hours of sleep: “It was crazy! Everything was hard. I was tired and breathing heavily. It was hard to keep up with the tempo.” He was surprised how well his teammates welcomed him. A good example of his positivity is that he considered himself fortunate to get a small injury right after he arrived, because then he was out of practice for two weeks and had time to learn how to cook with her mother’s video calls.

“Oliver” avoids emotion-related words throughout the whole conversation, but he calls moving to Finland “an adventure” and says that he is “thankful” for his parents about how well they raised him and prepared him to become independent in a new country.

#### **4.5 Sacrifices for ice hockey**

In my sample, 5 out of 6 players bring up the theme of sacrifice. Carter (2015, 149) names emotional and social sacrifices as costs of migration. The players have dreamed of progressing their careers by making sacrifices, like leaving home and family at an early age. The described sacrifices are mainly social, like relationships with friends, but also practical, like having to leave familiar everyday life including home, food, routines, and language behind. Two players, “Alex” and “Jakub” worried about their education, which is not always easy to continue in Finland, meaning that their future career would be solely based on athletic success, if they do not have any further education after basic education. According to Bourke (2002, 388), not being able to combine sport and studies can be one major sacrifice. “Simon” does not seem to

be sorry that he missed school: “I did go to lukio [in Finland] for a bit, but not much. It was just about ice hockey, it was the only thing that mattered. I wanted to become a pro in ice hockey after junior years. That was the main focus.” There was no space or time in his life for anything else. From my sample, all except one studied in Finnish educational institutions and three of them were able to complete their studies.

Sometimes the sacrifice can feel extensive. “In [home country] I had everything”, “Jakub” says, and falls silent when he thinks about all that he left behind. A unique feature of “Jakub’s” story is that he did not really have time to ponder his decision to leave. He got a suggestion from his agent about the possibility of coming to Finland during a camp abroad, flew to Finland from there and stayed. “I came here just for a few games, the plan for me was to be here for two weeks. But after that, I didn’t go back. So I didn’t have time to say goodbye to my friends, and tell them that I was leaving.” Perhaps the move that came as a surprise required a little more adaptation. “Jakub” was genuinely sorry for the way he had to leave. Players often get permission to travel to their home country during Christmas and summer, so “Jakub” did not get to his home country until about half a year after his arrival.

“Oliver” goes through his sacrifices, and what it is like to miss an entire stage in life: “My biggest sacrifice has been childhood. Normal teenage life with friends and everyday stuff has been minimal since. I kind of totally skipped that part and became an adult immediately. Sometimes there were moments when I felt like giving up, going home and doing everything a teenager does. There have been many things that maybe a normal teenager has done but I didn’t do.” There is no bitterness in “Oliver’s” voice. He does not sound regretful about the choices he has made, but rather points out the facts. Although you can hear the self-confidence in the players’ voices when they contemplate how they have developed, grown and come a long way, some of them have feelings of melancholy because their youth fell a little short. “Alex” noted this: “To live alone without family, affected me a lot. I had to grow up a little bit sooner, I needed to learn how to take care of myself.”

It is not just about the player’s personal sacrifices, but when a child moves abroad, it affects the whole family. This point of view is brought up by “Oliver”, who, as the one of the oldest of the interviewees, has a mature perspective for evaluation and comparison: “The changes were not so big in my life, but everything changed for my parents. They ended up in a long distance relationship.” Of the players I interviewed, 3 out of 6 had come to the country with one parent,

while the rest of the family stayed in their home country, so these long-distance relationships are not unusual in athletes' families divided into two countries.

#### **4.6 Practical suggestions for organisations**

I have compiled key insights in this chapter into how sports organisations can develop their own processes with migrating junior players. Organisations seek financial and sporting results with their player selections, so the expected development of the players is of interest to them (Madsen et al., 2020, 1236). Dolles and Egilsson (2017, 188) and Bourke (2002, 383) suggest pre- and post-arrival training to facilitate adaptation for sports expatriates. This could include individual guidance and support, as well as team building. As a matter of fact, "Jakub" has later noticed that in some teams more attention was paid to team building. He would prefer a similar practice with teams receiving foreign junior players, because it was lacking in his first Finnish team. When "Jakub" arrived at the team's practice for the first time, he was briefly introduced to the team in Finnish. Obviously, he did not understand a word of it. He could not get over the feeling of not belonging in the group during the first year. Later, when he moved to a new country again, a welcome party was organised for all the players, where everyone got to know each other. He felt that it worked, and found his place quickly. "Maybe it would be a good idea to introduce this new player to the team more. I do not think it was clear for the players who I was", "Jakub" suspects.

The players needed help with practical matters, like finding an apartment, cooperation with the authorities and arranging a place to study. The responsible party for handling these matters is either the underage player's parents or the inviting organisation, depending on who initiates the player's move to Finland. Sometimes there can be confusion on both sides about what needs to be taken care of and whose responsibility it is. "Oliver" hopes that the club will take responsibility clearly, especially when the parents do not come with the child:

"In my opinion, the most important thing that the club should take care of, is to help ensure that everyday life runs as normally as possible. That a home could be found, that everyday life could be found around it. It was great for me that my dad came along, but in some situations, the parents won't always come along. I mean, that you could get into the kind of everyday life that Finnish children have. That someone would take care of you. After that, it's up to the boy and the girl whether he or she has what it takes to make it work."

"Simon" highlights the psychological aspect, and how important it is especially with young players, to support that, because well-being brings success in ice hockey as well. "The best

moments in my career were when I felt best mentally”, he reasons. “Peter” has similar thoughts, and talks about the “mother of the team”, who the players could go to for advice, and who especially supported players who came to play in that city without their parents. It is not appropriate to seek similar support and care from coaches, because their role is completely different, and coaches should be able to focus on the sporting side.

Swainston, Wilson and Jones (2022, 19) state that players may hesitate to ask for help from coaches or from within the organisation, because it is risky to reveal vulnerability to a person who makes decisions about playing time or contracts. The player has to appear as an excellent candidate in the eyes of the organisation so that their future and career are not compromised. As “Peter” states: “It has to be a different person than the coach. Someone who does not tell the club management everything, but is on the players’ side.” In other words, players need someone to whom they can open up about issues, even sensitive ones, without having to worry whether they will get playing time or an extension of their contract if they face a more difficult phase in life. There is competition between players, and there is always the next person in line waiting for a place in the lineup, if the foreigner is too incompetent or weak to survive. The players must be able to reveal to someone that they do not know how to make chicken pasta or do laundry, that is, to play the role of an insecure and confused young person without fear. In the case of foreign players, family is not always a simple source of support, because players want to send home the message that they are handling the situation and everything will be fine, because they know parents are worried anyway, and because they do not want to go home embarrassingly in the middle of the season.

Psychological support and practical help can therefore be offered by a professional mental coach, or other staff member, but it cannot be left on the head coach’s or assistant coaches’ shoulders. The aim is not to pamper them, but to empower the players and help them grow so that they can play sports at their own level, develop as players and as human beings, and achieve their goals. Egilsson and Dolles (2017, 181) warn that lack of support can damage career development potential, because “support from others can play a crucial role in the life of the athlete”. Therefore, the importance of a functioning support system should not be underestimated, but seen as an investment that pays dividends.



## 5 DISCUSSION

Sports is a remarkable phenomenon. It makes people endure discomfort, fatigue, pain, disappointments and other negative emotions to extremes. But it also undeniably provides great experiences and teaches mental, physical and social skills in a way that is difficult to achieve in other activities. Through this research process, I have learned to understand and appreciate these decisions made by children and young people and their families. I deliberately chose successful stories as subjects for this research. I intentionally tried searching for players who have been successful in ice hockey and have gone professional, or at least close to it, so that the group would be somewhat homogeneous and the experiences could be viewed side by side from the point of view that the starting situation and the final result in terms of career development have been similar. These stories were all presented with gratitude, joy and contentment, where difficulties have been turned into strengths. A professional career in ice hockey is only possible for a few individuals from each age group, and those who have succeeded have given it their all.

In the results of this research, the difficulties that players faced were similar to what is reported in previous literature (Weedon 2011; Egilsson & Dolles 2017; Bourke 2002). Of those I interviewed, 4 out of 6 paid attention to their own age, and reflected on how it may have affected their adaptation or what kind of an experience immigration has been. Based on this alone, I argue that age should not be ignored when examining as big of a life change as immigration.

The results of the analysis highlighted, similar to what Weedon (2011, 185) has observed, that athletes face many problems arising from their transitions such as homesickness, loneliness, isolation, poor language competency, which was often compounded by their young age at the time of immigration. It is common knowledge that in ice hockey only a few make it to the top. This unfortunate fact also applies to those who leave their parental home and home country as sport-expatriates (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). As a tragic fact, de Vasconcellos and Dimeo (2009, 728) remark that if the player's immigration plans do not work out as hoped, their possibilities for return are restricted. There is no going back to the old life. Failure means shame, success means publicity with newspaper stories about the hometown hero who succeeded in the big world. Social changes have already taken place while they have been gone, and experiences and status are not erased. However, not everyone succeeds in transition. My research data subtly conveys the narrative also of those for whom the experience was not as successful as for my



informants: “Peter” speaks directly about those for whom he knows the experience was negative: "I know people who are not so outgoing, so it's been much more difficult for them to adapt. I still know people who have lived in Finland for as long but still don't necessarily have that kind of home feeling." Players are well aware that many things could have gone differently: "If I had been injured..." or "If my parents hadn't taken care", or "I was lucky to have such coaches..." This underlines the fact that in addition to hard work, perhaps luck and the right kind of circumstances matter as well. Further research is needed to develop an understanding of the differences between the immigrated junior athletes who succeed and the ones who fail.

Players explained their success with two reasons: their own effort and support from others. When immigrant athletes compare themselves to locals, they see their experiences of independent life and survival as an advantage which makes them readier for new challenges. They did not want to raise themselves on a pedestal, although they recognized their achievements. There are also reports, such as in Schinke et al. (2013, 1680), where immigrant athletes see themselves as mentally stronger, and their host teammates as softer, spoiled, and lazier.

It is not known what percentage of talents that have arrived from abroad achieve the professional level in Finland. but presumably it is only a handful. From this sample, everyone faced difficulties, whether they were financial, practical, social, or ice hockey related. But later they got appreciation. I excluded from interviews those athletes who did not become professionals but whose careers ended in their junior years. Exploring the differences between these groups, i.e. those who became professionals and those who quit ice hockey or continued to play only as a leisure activity in lower leagues, would be an interesting topic, but would require a different approach with a larger sample size so that the comparison could better look for the factors that make up the differences. The drop-out phenomenon has been studied a lot in ice hockey (see Imitiaz et al. 2014; Lemez et al. 2014; Owen et al. 2022) and other sports as well, but this research targets the very few who get over the hump of turning professional and gives a new insight to previously overlooked population.

“Oliver” comprehensively sums up the importance of the immigration experience for his own development and also on a general level to others who have experienced the same:

“If you can become a professional, it was definitely worth it. But in the big picture, I see that it's a bit like going to study somewhere for an exchange year. These experiences are never wasted experiences. Of course, things can go badly wrong, and sometimes

things do not work out, but you get life's lessons and always gain experiences. If nothing comes of it, you are one experience richer and get new input into life. I have become independent and this has prepared me well for life ahead. The daily life of a professional athlete is ascetic and you have to put a lot of effort into being able to cope and perform at a high level night after night. That experience at a young age helped me to do that. that I can definitely do it better than average. That is the biggest point of moving to Finland.”

He is a great example of how the meaning of immigration, the risk factors, and how he himself managed to meet that challenge, have integrated in his life story.

## **5.1 Trustworthiness**

In evaluating the reliability of qualitative interview research, there are two aspects that I want to highlight: the reliability of the researcher as a data processor, analyst and presenter, and the reliability of the interviewees as informants.

According to Sparkes and Smith (2014, 182) self-awareness means identifying one's own viewpoints and their effect on analysing, interpreting and reporting the findings. In this thesis, following the principle of openness, I have also shared my own thoughts and my attitude towards the results, however, presenting them separately to avoid mixing them with the results. As Eskola (2018, 210 & 213) mentions, results from qualitative research are not always clear, but the researcher must actively analyse and interpret them. Because of this, theory and earlier research are very much needed to support the findings.

Observing a researcher's own thoughts in connection with the analysis might distort the results, but according to Kukkola (2018, 74), this can be avoided by meticulous analysis. Conversely, it is possible to over-code the data, and to fragment the story by means of analysis (Sparkes & Smith 2014, 131). To put this in a nutshell: the challenge of the narrative approach is that it does not offer a simple interpretive framework or a consistently progressing process in which the end result would always be the same from the same material. Perhaps a certain kind of freedom is suitable for analysing and interpreting the topic of unique and personal experiences of these immigrated ice hockey players.

It is not elegant to doubt the reliability of the research participants, so it is necessary to explain this matter a little further, because the explanation is quite natural and digestible. As Puusa (2020) states, an interviewee may be tempted to give answers that he or she believes are

expected of him or her. Based on Puckett (2016, 26), when the interviewee forms his narrative, he chooses what he thinks is interesting enough or meaningful enough, but not too sensitive, embarrassing or distressing. The narrators edit their work consciously and unconsciously striving to create a result suitable for their own beliefs and also what they believe to be right for their audience. No story covers all events, but choices have been made. This is elaborated by Hänninen (2018, 192), explaining that stories about the same events are different to various audiences. The impact of the situation and intentions of the narrator have an influence on the narrative, and researchers should take this into account. So, there are good intentions behind the possible unreliability, or shall we say a subtle modification. It can be just artistic creativity, which is not always understood or accepted in science, where finding out the truth is valued above all else.

Another aspect despite the truthfulness of narration, is about being able to understand the stories. Two interviews were conducted in Finnish according to players' wishes. Finnish is my native language, but that is not the case for any of my interviewees. Other interviews were conducted in English, which is a foreign language to both me and my interviewees. The conversations felt smooth and I did not have difficulties in understanding. Naturally, in foreign languages, the word choices and sentence structures strive for simplicity, which was shown, for example, when talking about feelings. The vocabulary for describing the range of emotions was quite limited, as I will present in more detail in chapter 4.4.

## **5.1 Limitations and future research**

I consider this topic of junior player immigration thought-provoking and worthy of further research. As Heikkinen et al. (2012, 10) describe, the potential to evoke emotions is an evaluation criteria in research in narrative framework. With a topic like this, emotions inevitably arise, which can be seen as a strength of this thesis. Retrospective interviews have their undeniable benefits, because former expatriates share their stories from a distance. Some memories might have faded away but the most meaningful ones will still remain. When junior years are left behind, players have an adult perspective. If they have already moved on from the organisation, they do not have to worry about their criticism affecting their attitudes towards the place where they work. Narratives might be more versatile afterwards, and from an adult perspective some experiences might get a more multidimensional explanation.

Meanwhile, interviewing foreign junior players while they are in that situation, might give fresh data. The most intriguing model would be a longitudinal study. As Hänninen (2018, 195) points out, narrative research material is usually gathered in a cross-sectional arrangement: to obtain information about how an individual interprets their past, present and future, at the time of the interview. It would be interesting to follow these informants over a longer period to see how their narratives change and develop over time.

For this sample, I selected the most successful stories, the ones that achieved their goals. No one knows what percentage of young ice hockey players return to their home country disappointed and unsuccessful. Such stories would open up a whole new perspective on this. It would be possible to find out from the statistics how long the periods of stay in Finland are, but the numbers do not tell the causes and consequences, and therefore qualitative research is needed.

There are many open questions concerning foreign junior players, and this thesis of mine is an opening for investigating the issue in the context of Finnish ice hockey. It would be interesting to find out which factors make ice hockey players flourish in a foreign country, and which factors make adaptation difficult or make immigration unsuccessful. In this research, I was only able to open this theme a little.

Social relationships and their changes in connection with immigration of underaged athletes merit further research in the future, because the importance of social support came up in all the interviews. I see the study of relationships between family members as a particularly sensitive topic when family members live in different countries because of sports. How are fatherhood and motherhood maintained across national borders? Another research object related to immigrant athletes' social relationships is interaction: how multilingualism or the arrival of foreign players affects the dynamics or coaching of a team.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

The purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of young ice hockey players, who came to Finland unaccompanied or without their whole family, ambitious of advancing their athletic careers. Their aim was to take the steps towards professional ice hockey, for which foreign experience is seen as beneficial. In this sample, all players, measured by sporting

success, were successful both in immigrating and transitioning from junior ice hockey towards professional athletic careers.

The theme of sacrifices emerged in the answers of 5 out of 6 players. The most mentioned costs of immigration were the relationships they left behind and losing their carefree youth. They also missed the familiar and steady everyday life in their home country. Nevertheless, all players were content with their decision to move to Finland and believed that it was crucial for their development as ice hockey players. They also felt that challenges made them stronger and readier for professional careers in sports.

To make it possible for junior players to succeed in their new country, the support of family and friends is paramount. Learning the local language and continuing to go to school has also been found to be important for adaptation. Organizations should decide how psychological support and practical help are arranged for immigrants in order to ensure a successful transition and achieve the best results in terms of both well-being and performance. Organizations can select a person for this from within their staff or purchase the service from outside. However, psychological support and everyday help cannot be left to the coaching staff, so that role conflicts can be avoided and coaches can focus on their core responsibility, which is to take care of the development of the players and the team.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. Appendix 1 - Information sheet

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS OF A THESIS INTERVIEW

I am working on a thesis as a part of my master's degree in sport and exercise psychology at the University of Jyväskylä. The purpose of this interview is to collect data for the thesis "**Migration to Finland alone as an underaged ice hockey player** – Experiences of growing up and building an athletic career in a foreign country." The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of ice hockey players, who moved to Finland from their home country during junior years.

Participation in this research interview is voluntary, and you can refuse to answer or stop the interview at any point. Also, if there are any questions you feel you cannot answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, feel free to indicate this and we will move on to the next question. Your decision to withdraw or skip questions will not have any negative outcome for you. During the interview, you will be asked questions related to moving to Finland and your junior years in Finland. This interview is designed to be approximately one hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic.

All the information, including the recordings and notes, will be kept confidential, and the research data will be treated with respect. Your personal information will be changed in such a way that you cannot be identified from the research text.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

#### CONSENT FORM

I \_\_\_\_\_, am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

I understand the intent and purpose of this research.

The researcher has reviewed the individual benefits and risks of this project with me.

I am aware the data will be used for the master's thesis.

I give my consent to record the interview, and to keep the recording for research purposes until the research is approved and published. After this, the recordings will be properly destroyed.

I have read the above form, and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time, and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview.

Participant's signature

date

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ / \_\_\_ 2022

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, feel free to ask. If questions arise later, you may use the contact information.

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## **Appendix 2 - Thesis interview outline**

### **Introduction**

Instructions, information about confidentiality, recording

### **Warm-up questions**

How did you become an ice hockey player?

How would you outline your athletic career from its beginning to these days?

### **About the process**

How did the process of migration start? Whose idea was it?

Who were the important persons to make this possible?

What kind of expectations did you have?

How was it here, in the beginning?

### **About adaptation**

What were the biggest differences between playing ice hockey in your home country and here?

How did you adapt to the changes that came?

How did the organisation help you adapt to Finland and the team?

What kind of support did you receive? Who helped you?

What were the biggest challenges you faced?

What was the most difficult situation?

What are your best and worst memories from these years?

### **Evaluating the experience and its effects**

What kind of effect migration has on your career as an athlete?

How have you changed as a player and as a person?

How would you describe these years?

What was the most meaningful event here?

What made you stay/survive/enjoy? (Depending on the tone of the interview.)

How would you describe the optimal migration for a junior ice hockey player? What would it look like? How would it be similar or different with yours?

What recommendations could you give to organisations? Or teammates? Or staff members?

What do they need to know to make the transition as smooth as possible?

How do you know if this was worth it or not, or was the migration successful?

How do you see your future?

### **Feedback and debriefing**

What was it like going through these memories of your junior years?

Is there anything else you'd like to say about this topic that I have not asked?