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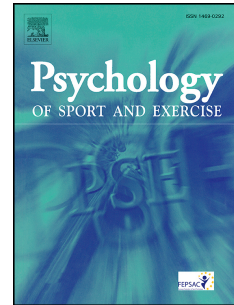
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“She is where I’d want to be in my career”: Youth athletes’ role models and their implications for career and identity construction

RUNNING HEAD: Youth athletes’ role models

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1 **“She is where I’d want to be in my career”:** Youth athletes’ role models and their
2 **implications for career and identity construction**

3 **Abstract**

4 *Objectives:* While role models have been documented to play a vital role in adolescents’
5 career development and identity exploration, in sport psychology they remain an untapped
6 resource. The present study drew on narrative inquiry to explore the patterns of role model
7 selection by adolescent student-athletes and the narrative maps these role models provide for
8 self-construction. As a second objective, the study sought to understand the impact of gender
9 on the selection and meaning of role models.

10 *Method:* Eighteen Finnish student-athletes (10 women, eight men) aged 17-18 participated in
11 conversational interviews. We analysed the data with thematic and structural narrative
12 analyses.

13 *Results:* The participants identified two types of role models: elite athletes and family
14 members. Whereas young men were more likely to select the most well-known athlete
15 superstars, young women were more concerned about the relationship and similarities
16 between the role model and the self, engaging in more exploration to find a role model that
17 matched their needs. Most of the youth athletes rejected the totalitarian ideologies of elite
18 sport and chose role models who could have other identities and do other things alongside
19 sport.

20 *Conclusions:* Finnish youth athletes are inspired by athlete role models whose lives are not
21 completely constituted by performance narratives of elite sport. From an applied perspective,
22 role models could be incorporated into career counselling with athletes to support identity
23 development and exploration of future selves.

24
25 Keywords: adolescent athletes, narrative inquiry, dual career, athletic identity, gender, elite
26 sport

27 **“She is where I’d want to be in my career”**: Youth athletes’ role models and their
28 **implications for career and identity construction**

29 In vocational psychology, role models have been identified as one important element in
30 the construction of adolescent identities and future careers, and a valuable asset in career
31 interventions. Through role models, we become aware of the careers options and ways to
32 overcome obstacles in our career journeys. At the same time, role models help us envision
33 what kind of people we want to become and what is possible for us. As Savickas (2013)
34 asserted, ‘the choice of role models is indeed a decision about self-construction and the
35 character one prefers to enact in life’s drama’ (p. 152). In athletic career research, it has been
36 noted that youth athletes benefit from interactions with senior elite athletes who act as
37 potential role models (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017); however, no studies have specifically
38 focused on the presence, types, and potential psychological functions of role models in youth
39 pre-elite athletes’ lives.

40 Gibson (2004) described role models as “cognitive constructions based on an individual’s
41 needs, wants, and ambitions” (p. 134). Role models differ from mentors in that they need not
42 be in any direct contact with the individual, although they can be. Research on the impact of
43 role models on young people’s career development has indicated that they have several
44 potential benefits. For example, role model exposure has been found to be important for
45 intentions to pursue a specific career (Austin & Nauta, 2016). Role models offer building
46 blocks for identity (which is the main developmental task of adolescence; Erikson, 1968), and
47 can be important for career adaptability, motivation and persistence in the chosen career
48 pathway (Garcia et al., 2019; Herrmann et al., 2016; Savickas, 2013). Gibson (2004)
49 suggested that role models are selected based on similarity and the desire to increase this
50 similarity (of skills, characteristics, social behaviour, achievements and so forth). If we
51 believe that we can become like our role models, they can offer inspiration and motivation to

52 our daily lives. In contrast, superstars whose successes are perceived unattainable might
53 actually provoke self-deflation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Furthermore, role models who
54 are not related to adolescents' career aspirations might have low or no benefit in relation to
55 career development (Valero, Keller, & Hirschi, 2019). Therefore, it appears that certain types
56 of role models – that is, those who have pursued a similar educational/career path, who are
57 perceived to be similar, whose pathways the participants know well enough, and whose
58 achievements are considered attainable – are more beneficial from a career development
59 perspective than others.

60 Many researchers have argued that women in male-dominated fields (which sport
61 arguably is) may especially benefit from female role models because they convey the
62 message that success in this field is possible (Faucett et al., 2017; Herrmann et al., 2016).
63 This said, young women pursuing executive positions (a typically masculine domain) might
64 be unable to identify with senior women (their potential role models), perceiving them mean
65 and competitive and thus incompatible with their own identities (Ezzedeen, Budworth, &
66 Baker, 2015). As such, young women who pursue atypical careers face challenges in
67 negotiating their career identities and identifying exemplary narratives that 'work' for them.

68 Studies into role models in sports have predominantly focused on the motivational impact
69 they may have on children's and adolescents' physical activity, rather than on their role in
70 athletic career development (e.g., Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Dunn, 2016; Vescio et al.,
71 2005; Young et al., 2015). While researchers have generally found that role models have a
72 positive impact on young people's physical activity, a concern has been raised that young
73 girls and women have few sporting role models and are much less likely to have them than
74 young boys and men. For example, Vescio et al. (2005) found that young Australian girls
75 most often chose a family member or celebrity role model, and only 8.4 per cent chose a
76 sports role model. Furthermore, although it has been found that girls predominantly identify

77 with female role models, they might find it difficult to identify female sporting role models
78 because they can appear ideologically contradictory (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008). That is,
79 the characteristics of ‘an ideal’ woman (as caring, relational and kind) and ‘an ideal’ athlete
80 (as tough, aggressive and competitive) might not easily fit together.

81 In one of the few studies on role models in relation to athletic career development,
82 Fleming, Hardman, Jones and Sheridan (2005) found that male, youth rugby players chose
83 exclusively male athlete role models and their reasons of admiration revolved around
84 technical skills and competencies, decision-making in the game, physical characteristics, and
85 character (e.g., aggression, fearlessness and professional attitude). The identified qualities
86 were instrumental in athletic success, and very few non-instrumental or moral qualities were
87 identified. At the same time, elite female athletes’ choices for their career role models are
88 largely unknown. Over 40 years ago, Greendorfer (1977) explored women’s sporting role
89 models across the lifespan and found that female athletes were not significant role models for
90 female athletes. Also more recently, female elite footballers in the UK reported that when
91 they had grown up, very few female sport role models had been available (Dunn, 2016).

92 In sport, the lack of media visibility of women’s sport has been previously connected with
93 the lack of female athletic role models for young girls and women (Meier, 2015). Despite the
94 occasional increases in women’s visibility in sport in major events such as the Olympics
95 (McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015), the overall TV coverage of women’s
96 sport continues to be dismally low (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). This gender difference
97 in the access to career role models in sport might potentially contribute to the difference in
98 student-athletes’ career orientations, with young men more likely to invest more exclusively
99 in their athletic careers whereas young women also often strongly committing to academic
100 achievement (De Brandt, Wylleman, Torregrossa, Defruyt, & Van Rossem, 2017; Ryba,
101 Stambulova, Selänne, Aunola, & Nurmi 2017; Skrubbeltrang, Karen, Nielsen, & Olesen,

102 2018). These findings are also congruent with research on gendered processes of career
103 construction and identity development, which has indicated that young women explore more
104 their vocational identities than young men (Negru-Subtirica, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015).

105 Despite some recent encouraging findings of growing opportunities for women in sport
106 and their placement as positive role models for the younger generation of female athletes
107 (Dunn, 2016), many scholars have stressed that elite sport remains dominated by the
108 masculine discursive practices that celebrate aggression, dominance over others, risk-taking
109 and mental toughness. They have argued that mere increase in women's participation does
110 not, in itself, produce a more gender-equal culture (Cooky & Messner, 2018; Fielding-Lloyd
111 & Meân, 2011; Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, & Ryba, 2018; Kavoura et al., 2015). In elite
112 sport, women's presence has primarily grown as athletes, but less so as managers, coaches, or
113 athletic directors. In addition, the key socialising agents for young women in sport are often
114 fathers and other men (Cunningham, 2008; Kavoura et al., 2015). Although an extensive
115 body of literature already exists on gender inequality in sport (Cunningham, 2008), girls' and
116 women's identity tensions in sport (Krane, 2001; Kavoura et al., 2015) and media
117 representations that work to sustain the gender order (Daniels, 2012; Trolan, 2013), less is
118 known about how today's youth pre-elite athletes construct their gendered career pathways
119 and what resources they draw upon to look towards realising their ambitions in sport and life.

120 Given the paucity of literature on the potential impact of role models in youth athletes'
121 career development, the present study invited these talented adolescents to tell about their
122 role models and the qualities associated with these exemplary individuals. Our study extends
123 previous literature on athletic career and identity development by scrutinising the patterns of
124 the selection of role models and the narrative maps these role models provide for self-
125 construction. As a secondary objective, we explored whether there is a gendered pattern in
126 the selection of role models. The following research questions guided our inquiry: (1) Who

127 are adolescent student-athletes' role models? (2) What qualities are important in the selection
128 of role models? (3) What are the gendered patterns in the selection of role models?

129 **Methodology**

130 Several scholars have recently argued for the benefits of narrative inquiry on studying
131 athletes' identities and experiences (McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Ronkainen, Kavoura, &
132 Ryba, 2016). More specifically, narrative inquiry has become an increasingly favoured
133 methodology in offering an avenue to understand how identities, motivations, thoughts and
134 emotions are fashioned within a pre-given cultural world, thus offering a balanced
135 perspective on structure and agency (McGannon & Smith, 2015). In addition to its analytic
136 benefits (e.g., offering contextualised, temporal and emotional portraits of individual lives),
137 narrative inquiry often produces research reports that are accessible to a broad readership
138 (Smith, 2010). Narrative inquiry is typically participant-led in that the focus is on their story
139 construction, and therefore aligns with recommendations to use open and inclusive questions
140 with adolescent participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In the present study, we draw on a
141 narrative approach from a realist philosophical position. The fundamental assumption of
142 realism is that reality, including social reality, exists independently of researchers'
143 conceptions of it (ontological realism) while maintaining that our knowledge is always
144 theory-laden, concept-dependent and fallible (epistemological constructionism) (Wiltshire,
145 2018). While sport psychology scholars have often associated narrative methods with
146 relativism, a realist perspective on narrative, identity and discourse is increasingly been
147 applied in other social science fields (Mahoney 2012; Roscoe, Carson, & Madoc-Jones,
148 2011).

149 For the study, we have conceptualised role models as providers of 'narrative maps' for
150 youth athletes' career and identity development. The concept of narrative maps was
151 introduced by Pollner and Stein (1996) who argued that, when people try to think of an

152 unknown future, they draw knowledge and guidance from experienced others who have
153 already been there. The narrative maps offered to people – whether from familiar people,
154 autobiographies, or ancient tales – can be influential in shaping how they imagine their
155 futures, approach obstacles, and engage in actions in preparing for the future (Monforte,
156 Pérez-Samaniego, & Devís-Devís, 2018; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006; Sparkes & Stewart,
157 2016). For example, Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) used the concept of the narrative map to
158 analyse how youth athletes imagined embodied ageing. They suggested that young athletes
159 were only familiar with narrative maps drawn from family members, older teammates and
160 sports sciences that projected ageing as a process of decline and withdrawal. As such, young
161 athletes had little guidance on how to find positive meaning from ageing and look forward to
162 it. That is, the less variety we have in the narrative maps that are at our disposal, the more
163 easily we get ‘locked in’ a specific storyline that limits our ways of being and becoming.

164 **Participants**

165 The research participants were 18, Finnish adolescent athletes (10 women, eight men)
166 aged 17-18 from a longitudinal mixed methods study exploring risk and resilience factors in
167 the construction of dual career pathways (i.e., the combination of sport and education). The
168 project was approved by the university ethics board and the participants were identified in
169 collaboration with the Finnish Sport Academies and Sport Federations to include the most
170 talented youth athletes across the country. At the beginning of the study, the participants were
171 informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures (e.g., the audio recording of the
172 interviews) and their rights (e.g., confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study at any
173 time). The participants provided written informed consent (in Finland, young people aged 15
174 and older can provide the consent independently). The data presented in this study is from the
175 third wave of interviews with the participants.

176 At the time of the interviews, the athletes were considered elite in their age group, and a
177 few had already transitioned to the senior sport. The participants mostly came from middle-
178 class families and were ethnic Finns, but lived in different parts of Finland and competed in
179 team (football, basketball, ice hockey and artistic group gymnastics) and individual (judo,
180 cross-country skiing, swimming, tennis, artistic gymnastics, alpine skiing, ski orienteering
181 and athletics) sports. In a previous interview, all participants had indicated that they aspired
182 to become elite or professional athletes. The study protocol with a full description of the
183 participants and methodology is published elsewhere (authors, 2016).

184 **Procedure**

185 Aware of the power relationships that exist in research relationships and especially when
186 interviewing young participants, the interviews were conducted using a conversational
187 approach where the researcher and participant collaboratively constructed the discourse (Eder
188 & Fingerson, 2002). The interviews were focused on the theme of identity, with a visual task
189 which is described elsewhere (authors, under review), and the role models as another topic of
190 conversation. A few weeks before the interviews, we sent the participants a message: “Who is
191 your role model? She or he can be anyone and relate to any area of life. Please send the name
192 before the interview”. The participants were then invited to take part in the conversational
193 interviews where the interviewer (the second or the third author) explored the role models
194 with them. In these interviews, we focused on exploring the (gendered) qualities of the role
195 models and the perceived similarity between the participant and the role model. We started
196 the dialogues surrounding role models by asking the participants to tell a little bit about them.
197 When participants started telling about the role models, the interviewers followed up with
198 questions that tapped into different qualities of the role models (e.g., “What kind of qualities
199 does she or he have? What do you value in her or him”), the perceived similarity between the
200 self and the role model (e.g., “Are you like that? Can you do that, too?”), and the desired

201 similarity between the self and the role model (“What qualities does your role model have
202 that you would also hope to have?”). We also asked about the relationship between the
203 participant and the role model (“How did you get to know your role model? Have you met
204 him or her? How do you follow him or her, or how do you keep in touch?”). However, in
205 keeping with the conversational approach, each interview unfolded differently and some
206 participants spontaneously developed a long uninterrupted story about the role models,
207 whereas with others the researchers were asking more questions to learn more about the role
208 models and their perceived importance. The interviews were audio-recorded and they lasted
209 between 27 and 71 minutes with an average of 47 minutes.

210 **Narrative Analysis**

211 After the interviews were transcribed, we read the transcripts several times, made notes
212 and discussed their content and form in the author team meetings. The first author inductively
213 coded the interview passages that were relevant to the research questions, seeking to identify
214 repeated patterns and themes that run through the stories. We then worked with thematic
215 narrative analysis which focuses on identifying patterns within the specific discourse of
216 stories (Smith, 2016). We first focused on one case at the time, trying to understand the
217 internal logic and patterns within each person’s story (Tod, Hardy, Lavalley, Eubank, &
218 Ronkainen, 2019). In line with Smith’s (2016) recommendations, we were cautious not to
219 ‘overcode’ and fragment the data and remained mindful of how the themes gained meaning in
220 the broader context of the person’s story. After working on each story separately, we
221 compared the findings across cases, identifying similarities and differences in the patterns of
222 story construction. The developing narrative themes were interpreted against previous
223 literature and relevant contexts (of elite sport, youth culture and national culture) to trace the
224 resources that shaped the story construction.

225 As a second step of the analysis, we worked with a structural approach to narrative,
226 seeking to identify the key plot(s) and types of narratives in the data (Smith, 2016). We paid
227 attention to the level of complexity of the stories, the ambitions expressed by the storytellers,
228 and the overall messages the stories contained about an ideal life course and personal identity
229 (in other words, what kind of narrative map was being developed). From each individual role
230 model story, we listed the narrative themes forming the story and started identifying overall
231 storylines that bind the themes together. We wrote short descriptions of each participant's
232 role model and then started clustering them together to a set of ideal types. After working
233 inductively to identify ideal types, we then analysed the building blocks of these stories in
234 light of previously identified narrative types in sport (e.g., performance, discovery and
235 relational elite athletic career narratives; Douglas & Carless, 2009; contrapuntal, monophonic
236 and dissonant dual career narratives; Ryba et al., 2017). We then developed concise names
237 for each narrative and sought to identify disconfirming cases to challenge our initial
238 interpretations and to revise the typology. Throughout the process, the second author acted as
239 a critical friend, offering feedback and her interpretations of the emerging themes.

240 **Validity**

241 From a realist perspective informing our study, validity "is not a matter of procedures, but
242 of the relationship between the claim and the phenomena that the claim is about" (Maxwell &
243 Mittapalli, 2010, p. 158). As such, validity pertains not primarily to the design and methods
244 (although they are important, too), but the quality of inferences that are made from the data.
245 Although it is not possible to test our accounts against objective reality, we can scrutinise
246 these accounts against other evidence about the studied phenomenon and try to identify how
247 we might be wrong.

248 In our study, the authors had several meetings to discuss the participants' perspectives
249 and meanings they gave on role models (interpretive validity; Maxwell, 2017). In identifying

250 narrative types, we constantly sought for negative cases that did not fit the categories, and the
251 second author acted as a critical friend highlighting features of participant stories that did not
252 seem to fit the developing categories. We also consulted the previous interviews conducted
253 with the participants to explore how our understanding of role model narratives ‘fits’ our
254 analyses of the previous data, while being aware that the young participants’ identities and
255 content of life design constantly evolve and shift. We also spent time discussing the interview
256 situations, how participants’ stories were co-constructed with the researcher, and how that
257 potentially affected the performance of the stories (Maxwell, 2017). To address theoretical
258 validity we discussed our explanatory account in research group meetings with other
259 researchers working in areas of developmental psychology and sport psychology to gain
260 feedback on the credibility of our account and to invite alternative theoretical explanations.
261 For example, the gender differences in role models were discussed in relation to different
262 conceptual frameworks and ideas (mindfulness skills, hegemonic masculinity scripts, cultural
263 discourses sustaining the marginalisation of women’s sport) to identify plausible
264 explanations. The formal peer review acted as a further ‘test’ to our account.

265 **Results**

266 The adolescent athletes identified 25 role models, with everyone except for one
267 participant identifying at least one role model. The participant who did not name a role model
268 had decided to terminate her elite athletic career in the months preceding the interview which
269 is could explain the lack of (athletic) role models. From the 25 role models, 15 were
270 international elite athletes, nine were family members (parents, an older brother and a
271 grandfather), and one was a coach (see table 1). In the following sections, we explore the
272 narrative types associated with the role models and gendered patterns in the selection of these
273 role models.

274 [Insert table 1 here]

275 **The abstract athlete hero**

276 Four young men told 'athlete hero' stories where the selected role models were the
277 superstars (e.g., Olympic champions, world champions or team captains) of the young
278 athletes' own sport. These hero stories aligned with notions of hegemonic masculinity (tough,
279 competitive, and independent) and generally included very little complexity, reproducing the
280 dominant constructions of ultimate success in sport (e.g., winning the Olympic gold medal).
281 Marko, an aspiring gymnast, described his role model:

282 *Well, yes, it's Kohei Uchimura. He has done very well, or well, he is a world champion*
283 *and an Olympic champion. So almost everything he does in the competitions is almost*
284 *perfect. And I just try to model him, and even I'm not able to do the same, I still try to do*
285 *my best.*

286 The participants often struggled to identify other qualities beyond the athletic success that
287 were attractive in the role model:

288 *Interviewer: can you tell me why this player [Pavel Datsyuk] appeals to you?*

289 *Teemu: Well, maybe because he is so skilled and can do good things on the ice. That is*
290 *why I have followed him a lot.*

291 *Interviewer: do you know anything about his background? For example, if he came from*
292 *a poor background, or how he got into ice hockey?*

293 *Teemu: No, I do not really know about his background*

294 *Interviewer: yes. And do you have any other athlete or person or an imaginary figure, or*
295 *anyone who has the kind of qualities that you could admire?*

296 *Teemu: Well I do like Bolt, the sprinter*

297 *Interviewer: right*

298 *Teemu: well, he has dominated the sprints, and so I do like him.*

299 These storytellers generally had little background knowledge of the role models'
300 biographies, personal characteristics, or lives outside of sport. As such, these narrative maps
301 provided the young men with very few resources for navigating dilemmas or setbacks (e.g.,
302 injuries, choices concerning education/other career, relationship issues, teams and coaches)
303 on the pathway to success. The exemplary athletic identity was constructed within the
304 performance narrative plot, and other stories were omitted either because the participants
305 were not aware of them, or because they were irrelevant. Most likely, the performance
306 narrative plot worked to omit relational identities, athletic failures and emotions, because they
307 are not part of culturally privileged stories of what it means to be a successful athlete. When
308 some qualities were mentioned, they were performance-related and included the ability to
309 produce a top performance in an important competition, focus on training despite distractions,
310 'being talented to train' (work ethic), and self-confidence. The stories provided the young
311 men with a sense of control because the role models conveyed the message that success
312 depended on self-determination and not social support or other conditions beyond the
313 individual. However, the stories contained little advice on how these individual qualities
314 could be obtained (or whether they were considered innate). When anything beyond sport
315 was mentioned, Timo explained that Teemu Selänne (a Finnish ice hockey star) was also 'an
316 amazing' and 'reasonable' person. Notably, the athletes struggled in explaining any
317 similarities between themselves and their role models, beyond trying to become as successful
318 as the role models were or had been. In other words, these stories depicted very few resources
319 available for connecting the present self with the desired future self to guide identity
320 construction.

321 **The athlete hero who is also a ‘good guy’**

322 Another narrative map, constructed exclusively by male participants, similarly
323 emphasised the heroic qualities of elite athletes. However, the two young men offering these
324 stories also tapped into broader cultural resources to tell about their role models’ lifestyle and
325 other social identities. Jani offered:

326 *Jani: Roger [Federer] has always been my role model and probably will be. He does*
327 *things well, and at least now, he is enjoying what he does. Even if he had an injury and*
328 *he was away for half a year, he came back and won everything again. I guess he did*
329 *what he felt the best for himself, took a break for half a year when the game did not go*
330 *well, and then he returned with a positive mind.*

331 *Interviewer: have you met him or followed his life or...?*

332 *Jani: well not especially, but I know that he has a wife. And he is a father while playing*
333 *tennis and he is also a humorous guy. He is joking and so on.*

334 Jani’s story demonstrates a more multifaceted narrative map than the previous story, with
335 some importance given to the role model’s other identities and life contexts that were not
336 instrumental to athletic success. Other indices of ‘a successful life’ were further explained by
337 Antti, an aspiring gymnast:

338 *Well, Louis Smith, he got a silver medal in the 2012 Olympics on the pommel horse*
339 *which is also my favourite, so that is the first thing that relates to my life. And you can*
340 *see that he does not take sport too seriously even if he has succeeded. He has done those*
341 *things well that he wants to do. And so he has a fancy Nissan GT-R and so on, and it*
342 *looks like everything is well in his life. And other than that he looks like a person to look*
343 *up to. We visited the UK 1, 5 years ago and we had a training camp at their gym, and I*
344 *got to meet him. And he seemed like a nice guy!*

345 *Interviewer: And do you have other things that you admire about him than being relaxed*
346 *and yet trying his best?*

347 *Antti: well, I heard he had done some modelling and things, he has had a lot going on,*
348 *like his clothing brand, and different businesses besides gymnastics.*

349 Antti's admiration of the attitude of not taking sport too seriously develops a counter-
350 narrative to the dominant performance narrative where single-minded dedication to sporting
351 excellence is the only way to succeed. The narrative map accessed by these young men offers
352 a view on the future where it is possible to become a successful athlete and keep the sport in
353 perspective, while also developing other identity narratives while pursuing an elite athletic
354 career. However, similar to the abstract athlete hero stories, these stories are thin in terms of
355 how the young athletes have come to identify with these great athletes and how the non-sport
356 related qualities resonate with their own lives. As such, they offer only limited guidance on
357 how to navigate from the present to the idealised future, or how their own identities can be
358 connected with their ideal self in the future.

359 **The successful athlete who is like me**

360 While young men's stories more often started from selecting one of the most well-known
361 contemporary sport stars and then, upon the researcher's follow-up question, trying to
362 identify similarities between the self and the role model, young women were more reflective
363 of the self and matching the role model with the story of the self and their own specific needs.
364 Six athletes (five women) selected role models that had some biographical similarities or
365 specific qualities that they also had. The role models were, again, all highly successful in
366 what they were doing, but not necessarily the contemporary stars of participants' own sport.
367 However, the type of personality and perceived similarities were also important factors in
368 choosing the role model. Riina (gymnastics) explained:

369 *[Maddie Ziegler] is a dancer, so she is doing something very close to what I am doing.*
370 *She is also my age. Maybe the biggest reason for her being my role model is her*
371 *personality; it touches me. She always does things and gets involved in new things even if*
372 *she has never done them before.*

373 *Interviewer: Do you see any similarities in her personality and your personality?*

374 *Riina: Yeah I think we may have small similarities in our personalities. We are both*
375 *spontaneous people.*

376 Three athletes also described their role models as people who had succeeded against the
377 odds. 'Katri' a short swimmer, chose a role model who was also a short swimmer but had
378 become an Olympic champion in the late 1980s by developing her unique style of swimming.
379 In contrast to athlete hero narrative maps, this map also offered some guidance on how to
380 overcome potential barriers to success. The story of the role model ensured the young
381 swimmer that despite having a 'deviant' swimming body, it was possible to succeed if she
382 focused on developing a specific style of swimming.

383 The participants also admired role models who had succeeded despite the lack of
384 resources and institutional support for their sport in their home countries – partly reflecting
385 their situations in their own sports. As Unto (Judo) explained: "previously Finnish people
386 haven't been that great in skating, [but] he has been able, as an individual skater, to become
387 successful internationally. It's the same thing in judo – there is the connection." Collectively,
388 these role models offered the young athletes narrative maps that assured that success was
389 possible even if they would not have the ideal environmental or physical resources for
390 achievement.

391 One of the most nuanced and detailed reflections on her role model was offered by Vilma,
392 a young basketball player:

393 *Vilma: There is not really a player whose career I would think “that’s what I want to*
394 *be” or “that’s the path she’s gone through, and I would want to go the same path”. But*
395 *Ana Dabovich is like a player, I have watched her and the way she plays... She seems*
396 *like she knows what she does on the court. She is confident about herself, but then she is*
397 *not selfish. She plays for her team. She also takes this kind of shots that I would like to be*
398 *able to do. I just feel like she is the kind of player I want to be.*

399 *Also, she is European so – she plays in WNBA, but she also has played in Europe. So she*
400 *is kind of my role model because she is where I’d want to be in my career. I don’t know*
401 *her path if she has an education, because that is the thing I want to do while I play*
402 *basketball. I want to go to an American University and get the Bachelors’ degree, but*
403 *when I come back, I want to do the Masters’ degree also, like after it. Not wait till my*
404 *career is over and then do it. But then [sighs]... I don’t know any players that have done*
405 *it.*

406 As Vilma illustrates, she considers the role model’s athletic qualities, personal qualities
407 (not to be “a selfish” player), and the broader life path including education important. Her
408 frustration on lacking the ‘right’ kind of role model illustrates that media stories may portray
409 athletes in limited ways that do not communicate what other identities they have besides their
410 athletic identities. More specifically, there appears to be a gap in narrative maps available for
411 youth student-athletes to project on a future that would include both athletic and educational
412 achievements. While only one athlete lamented on the exclusion of educational identities in
413 public athlete narratives, her being female connects with previous literature showing that
414 young women more often find it important to invest in both athletic and educational
415 identities.

416 A mentor with knowledge and the right attitude

417 From the participants, only young women chose their athletic mentors as their role
418 models. These two athletes' mentors (one man, one woman) were successful athletes who
419 were in close contact with the participants in their daily lives. The narrative maps provided by
420 these role models were much more detailed than those provided by athlete heroes because the
421 young athletes had detailed knowledge of the role models' lives. In these stories, however,
422 the focus was also on the received guidance on how to become a successful athlete, whereas
423 other identities were not included. Ulla (athletics) described her male mentor role model and
424 her ambition to become more similar to him:

425 *Ulla: I thought of him [a Finnish skier] because, he has been a kind of role model,*
426 *always. Because he is a professional skier and so the elite athlete's life has been close to*
427 *me through him. He helped me when I was younger and didn't know anything about*
428 *sport, or what you truly need to become a good athlete. I've noticed like; if he eats in a*
429 *certain way, I also want to eat that way. And I listen to advice from him. He has*
430 *competed against the very best in the world, and he has self-confidence, whereas I am*
431 *still at the beginning of my athletic career and not used to competing abroad, for*
432 *example. And through him - and I have also realised that you cannot always be very*
433 *serious, that sport is not so serious after all.*

434 Mentor role models could offer detailed narrative maps on behaviours, characteristics and
435 attitudes of elite athletes, and are likely to be more facilitative of career adaptability than
436 abstract athlete heroes. The stories illustrated that close contact with the role models had
437 allowed young women to observe their daily life and choices to understand the demands
438 associated with this ambitious life project. Katri (swimming) offered:

439 *She has had a very fine and long career, and although she has got older, she has always*
440 *had a passion for swimming. Even when things were not coming her way, she has*
441 *worked harder and changed her ways of doing things. She is a bit like a mentor in my*
442 *own career. I'm privileged to have been so close to her.*

443 Besides the instrumental qualities (hard work, dedication) and practical choices (what to
444 eat, how to train), the young women admired the role models' career longevity and the
445 broader perspective on elite sport. Their admiration of the mentors' attitude to sport—that is,
446 not being overly serious despite being elite athletes—further illustrates that Finnish youth
447 athletes do not seem to believe that a totalitarian attitude to sport is the only way to
448 international success.

449 **The parent(s) who has helped and cared for me**

450 Six participants (four women) chose parents or grandparents as their role models. None of
451 the participants specifically referred to their mothers; instead, two participants generically
452 talked about their parents, three focused on their fathers, and one chose her grandfather as the
453 role model. In these stories, the primary emphasis was often on what the role models had
454 done *for* the young athletes in giving practical and emotional support, rather than their
455 identities, achievements or other things they had done in life. In addition, the stories mainly
456 focused on the sport domain, showing that the family members the youth athletes relied upon
457 in sport-related matters were mostly men. Alisa, a pre-elite judoka, endorsed her father for
458 the help he was giving to her and her team:

459 *My father just always supports me, and he is also, in general, the kind of person I would*
460 *like to be. He just takes care, and not only of me but of everyone in our team. He is kind*
461 *of a father figure to everyone. He is interested in how well I do, and also in my*

462 *schoolwork. He is interested in everyone's schoolwork and well-being in our competition*
463 *team, and anyone from our team can go and talk to him if they have any difficulties.*

464 This narrative map offers guidance on how to be a parent for a young athlete and a
465 relational person who cares for others but is somewhat disconnected from participants'
466 personal situations and it is unclear how this guidance is important for the youth athletes and
467 their identity construction at this moment of time. In the overall interviews beyond the role
468 model story, the participants mainly focused on their current life situations and their
469 ambitions and challenges, rather than caring for and helping others. Therefore, we assume
470 that the participants with the parental role model map approached the question from a social
471 support perspective, thinking about who are the important people in their sport-lives helping
472 them to pursue their dreams. While the participants discussed a desire to become like these
473 role models (caring, a good parent), it is likely that at this moment of time the participants'
474 focus was more on receiving from them, rather than being like them. Besides caring qualities,
475 few other things were mentioned, including work ethic, 'finding one's own way' and success
476 in work.

477 The parental role models with no explicit link to the participants' educational or athletic
478 identities are unlikely to be significant influences from a career development perspective.
479 However, similar to the mentor role models, the participants are likely to have detailed
480 narrative maps offered by the parental role models due to their proximity, and therefore might
481 be important for youth athletes' personal development in a longer time perspective. These
482 stories, constructed within a relational narrative focused on care and connectedness, might be
483 an important counterbalance to the highly individualistic narrative maps provided by the
484 abstract athlete heroes of the sport-world.

485

Discussion

486 For adolescent athletes whose identities are arguably under construction, the access to
487 narrative maps through role models is one key resource for imagining possible future selves.
488 In the present study, the adolescent student-athletes focused on two types of role models: elite
489 athletes and parents. A key finding of our analysis was that, although the participants
490 predominantly constructed stories of elite athletes and their achievements, many of them
491 rejected totalitarian narrative maps circulating in the elite sport culture where athletes'
492 identities are constructed within a narrow performance narrative enclosing them to a single
493 narrative plot focused on athletic success. Although the performance narrative has been
494 identified as the dominant cultural storyline available for identity construction in elite sports
495 (Douglas & Carless, 2009), many youth athletes were drawn to alternative narrative maps
496 offered by the role models who did not take sport 'overly seriously' and had other identities
497 and interests in life. That is, successful athletes were the preferred source of admiration for
498 the majority of participants, but for most of them, the performance narratives were not the
499 only ingredient in the role models' identities. Therefore, through selecting these role models
500 the athletes also gained assurance that they could have other identities besides their athletic
501 identities without compromising their chances for athletic success.

502 The findings reflect the Finnish societal context, where younger generations place
503 growing value on leisure time and family, while also considering work important (Pyöriä,
504 Saari, Ojala, & Siponen, 2013). Finnish people have shorter work hours compared to many
505 European counterparts, and they report low work-life conflict (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006);
506 the youth athletes' role model choices reflect in part the broader social arrangement of work
507 (as not all consuming) and culturally valorised 'ideal' life. Albeit the work ethic,
508 competitiveness and ambition remained vital elements that made the role models admirable,
509 having other life roles and interests was not constructed as contradictory to an elite athlete's

510 life. However, we also noted that only a few youth athletes talked about their role models'
511 romantic lives, or social relationships more generally. This omission of relational identities
512 might be partly due to the lack of knowledge about this aspect of their lives, as many elite
513 athletes prefer to keep their relationships out of the public domain. In addition, because role
514 models also reflect the participants' present identity concerns, the youth athletes could have
515 dismissed the role models' romantic lives as irrelevant. Indeed, the mean age of marriage is
516 postponed in Finland to over 30 (when the elite athletic career is presumably often over)
517 (Mayselless & Keren, 2014).

518 Despite such emphasis on 'having a life' besides sport, the educational identity and
519 vocational pathways besides sport featured only in one role model story, where a female
520 participant lamented for her lack of a dual career role model. The talented adolescents' stories
521 brought forward sport as their primary career identity, whereas they did not develop stories
522 about role models for other careers alongside or after elite sport. The participants' inclusion
523 in the study because of their status as highly talented student-athletes could have partly led
524 them to tell sport-related stories because they might have assumed that this is the researchers'
525 primary interest. We also recognise that interviewee responses are performed to certain
526 audiences, and in our study, the male interviewer, who had conducted most of the interviews,
527 could have influenced participants' choices to align their stories with traditional masculine
528 narratives of sport. In addition to the performativity of the stories to prioritise athlete
529 identities, it is also possible that dual career role models were missing because they are not
530 easily available for athletes through the media that tends to focus on athletes' sport
531 achievements, and for female athletes, on their appearance (Trolan, 2013). When we asked
532 our athletes to tell about their role models' broader lives, many of them had little knowledge
533 to share. Similarly, when we searched online for the role models athletes' educations and
534 non-sport occupations, we found limited information.

535 As a second objective of the study, we sought to identify gendered patterns in the role
536 model stories. Consistent with most previous studies, young men's role models were only
537 men (except once when 'parents' were mentioned), whereas young women chose both men
538 and women (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Fleming et al., 2005; Giuliano, Turner,
539 Lundquist, & Knight, 2007). Our findings indicated that for young women it is more
540 challenging than for young men to identify role models who link with their identities as
541 young women and prospective elite athletes. Adriaanse and Crosswhite (2008) argued that
542 female athletic role models do not fit the gender dichotomy, and to be accepted as a sports
543 role model, a female athlete can hardly embody a dominant form of femininity. From a career
544 development perspective, it appears that many pre-elite female athletes lack career role
545 models who could offer narrative maps specific to a woman's athletic career, which could
546 potentially hinder the ability to envision a future pathway for themselves in elite sport (see
547 also Faucett et al., 2017). The male role models' stories (e.g., fathers, mentors) are unlikely to
548 offer guidance for the young women on how to navigate specific gendered elements of
549 athletic careers, such as the conflict between the sport life project and the cultural life scripts
550 pertaining to an 'ideal' woman's life, and questions about whether and how to combine
551 motherhood and sport.

552 While young women are generally disadvantaged compared to young men in terms of
553 availability and exposure to female athletic role models, our study also showed that they
554 engaged in more explorations of role models that connected with their identities and needs. In
555 contrast, the abstract athlete hero stories told by some of the young men were thin in terms of
556 providing guidance on how to traverse the unknown terrains of the future. Having complex
557 and multifaceted narrative maps available has been argued to be facilitative of identity
558 development and adaptability, and through their role models (who more often were mentors
559 or parents) the young women arguably accessed more detailed narrative maps than young

560 men. Therefore, while women's challenge appears to be the lack of role models that match
561 their specific needs, the young men would likely benefit from exposure to more detailed and
562 nuanced stories about athletes' lives, challenges and identities that do not exclusively
563 perpetuate performance narratives embedded within hegemonic masculinity scripts.

564 **Applied Implications**

565 Vocational psychologists have suggested that role models can offer career counsellors
566 ways to get to know their clients, help engage the clients in self-reflection, and also provide
567 tools for career intervention (Savickas, 2013). In our study, the invitation to tell about role
568 models triggered the young people to think about what kind of athletes they want to become
569 and what kind of lifestyles they would like to lead. As such, the research was already a type
570 of intervention with potential personal benefits for the participants. We suggest that similar
571 conversations around role models in applied sport psychology and athlete career counselling
572 can help athletes in developing self-awareness and a clearer understanding of their interests
573 and needs. Asking young athletes to identify role models and to find out *how* these role
574 models reached success can be valuable in increasing athletes' awareness of how that
575 pathway might look like, and what resources they might need on that journey. Furthermore,
576 we suggest that developing interventions to espouse athletes to a broad variety of potential
577 role models (e.g., in career development workshops) can be valuable given that identity
578 construction depends on the narrative resources available to the individual (McGannon &
579 Smith, 2015). The study highlighted the specific lack of dual career role models who could
580 offer young athletes with narrative templates of how to balance these two achievement
581 domains. Given that many countries and educational institutions nowadays offer structural
582 support to dual careers of athletes, these programmes could incorporate lectures or workshops
583 with former dual career athletes to provide the youth athletes with potential role models.
584 Similarly, many athletes use blogs and other social media to share their stories, and sport

585 psychologists and career counsellors could use them to expose youth athletes to various
586 stories about how to live an elite athlete's life.

587 **Conclusions**

588 The present study explored youth athletes' role models to understand what kind of
589 narrative maps they have at their disposal and what these role model narratives can tell us
590 about their athletic and gender identity construction. We found that most youth athletes
591 admired successful and highly skilled athletes with commitment and work ethic, but also
592 aspired to live a balanced life where sport does not exhaust their lives and identities. Young
593 women developed more nuanced stories and chose role models with closer proximity than the
594 young men, indicating that they might have the advantage of accessing more detailed
595 narrative maps to guide action. Helping adolescent student-athletes access multiple role
596 models and especially dual career role models would offer them valuable resources to
597 develop more multifaceted identity narratives and offer guidance on how to navigate the
598 challenging task of combining sport with education. Having a broader range of narrative
599 maps at youth athletes' disposal would be vital for adaptability, sustaining well-being, and
600 restorying personal identity not tied to elite sport if the need arises.

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| <i>Pseudonym (Gender)</i> | <i>Sport</i> | <i>Role Models</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Hanna (F) | Cross-country skiing | Father |
| Kimmo (M) | Orienteering on skis | Older brother (cross-country skier) Petter Northug (a Norwegian cross-country skier) |
| Antti (M) | Artistic gymnastics | Louis Smith (a British artistic gymnast) |
| Alisa (F) | Judo | Dad |
| Anni (F) | Judo | Majlinda Kelmendi (a Kosovo Albanian judoka) |
| Sanna (F) | Football | Neymar Jr (Brazilian footballer) |
| Timo (M) | Ice hockey | Teemu Selänne (Finnish ice hockey player) |
| Topi (M) | Football | Mum and dad |
| Marko (M) | Artistic gymnastics | Dad Kōhei Uchimura (a Japanese gymnast) |
| Katri (F) | Swimming | Janet Evans (an American former swimmer) Hanna-Maria Seppälä (a Finnish swimmer) |
| Vilma (F) | Basketball | Ana Dabović (a Serbian basketball player) |
| Teemu (M) | Ice hockey | Pavel Datsyuk (a Russian ice hockey player) Usain Bolt (a Jamaican sprinter) |
| Ulla (F) | Athletics | Martti Jylhä (a Finnish skier) |
| Jani (M) | Tennis | Roger Federer (a Swiss tennis player) |
| Riina (F) | Artistic group gymnastics | Maddie Ziegler (an American dancer, actress and model) Coach Mum and Dad |
| Nea (F) | Judo | Grandfather |
| Unto (M) | Judo | Mika Poutala (a Finnish speed skater) |

Table 1. Participants' role models

Highlights:

- We studied youth pre-elite student-athletes' role models in Finland
- Participants' role models were elite athletes and family members
- Men continue to be the dominant role models in sport
- Young women developed more nuanced stories and accessed richer narrative maps
- Most Finnish youth athletes reject totalitarian ideologies of elite sport