

Title: Exploring Career Experiences of Swedish Professional Handball Players: Consolidating Firsthand Information into an Empirical Career Model

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Aims: The study used the holistic athletic career model as a template to create an empirical career model of Swedish professional handball players by means of exploring their career experiences in athletic and non-athletic developments. The study is considered as a basis to facilitate development of career-long psychological support services in Swedish handball to promote a sustainable sport involvement with performance, personal development, mental health and well-being in foci.

Method: Eighteen players (9 men and 9 women) volunteered to take part in the study. At the time of the interview, female players were 28-34 years old and had represented Sweden on the average of 89 matches. The male participants were 28-38 years old and had represented Sweden on the average of 131 matches. Participants had to have competed in (1) a professional international club for at least 5 years, (2) played over 40 senior international caps and participated in at least one senior championship and (3), had to be at the end of their career or have ceased playing competitive handball not more than four years ago. The semi-structured interview guide involved questions which encouraged participants to talk about their career experiences from a holistic perspective (i.e., including

both athletic and non-athletic developments). The interviewer also suggested to the participants to draw a lifeline and beginning their story from the current time point: “Please tell me about your current day living.”

Results and Practical Implications: The empirical model describes careers of Swedish professional handball players as having four athletic stages – initiation, development (with three sub-stages; early youth, youth, and junior), mastery (with four sub-stages; semi pro to professional, professional abroad, and maintenance of professional status), and discontinuation – complemented by stages in five layers, including pathways relevant to Swedish handball settings, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial developments. With reference to a dual career context, the initiation stage was described as an “active childhood” with handball as a part of the athlete’s sampling of several sports. In the youth development stage, players talked about applying for elite sports school as a first major career choice. Some players denied the opportunity and stayed at a regular school close to their home, where several players moved away from home to begin independent living and also enter a dual career development environment supporting both educational and athletic development. Players also shared dual career difficulties relating to “time pressures” and a “lack of a balance between ambitions and workload in handball and school.” Mastery stage athletes mentioned that they had to adjust to senior handball which required balancing it with other spheres of life. Players described dual career benefits “as having other things to think about besides handball”, “receiving study allowance”, and “earn an income”. The costs of the dual career were described as stressful living with a lack of time for rest and recovery. During the discontinuation phase, some participants had an education and begun to search for a corresponding job. Others lacked education and work experiences and tried to convert their athletic capital into vocational capital to support their transition.



The empirical model can serve as a basis for developing career-long psychological support services in Swedish Handball. Sport Psychologists can use the model to guide their work in several directions. For example, working with individual players or teams, they can position them at a certain career stage and consider (based on the empirical model) what usually happened to athletes at this stage, what are the challenges experienced in sport and non-sport life, and the types of psychological support they might need (e.g., career/transition planning, life skills workshops). Coaches and parents may also benefit from learning the empirical model to facilitate players' preparation for forthcoming events and transitions in advance.

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<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1612197X.2018.1486872>