

Title: Elite Athletic Career as a Context for Life Design

Author(s): Ryba, T.V., Ronkainen, N. & Selanne, H.

Year: 2015

Keywords: Career construction, Life design, Culture, Gender, Career identity

Sports: Ice Hockey, Orienteering

Journal: Journal of Vocational Behaviour

Main Theme: Culture

Secondary Theme: Career Trajectory

Aims: The aim of the study was to explore the impact of culture on how athletes construct their careers in sport, including whether gender plays a role in the life decisions that athletes make.

Method: Two elite athletes took part in the study, including a male ice hockey player and a female orienteer and long-distance runner. Data were collected through in-depth narrative interviews from a life story perspective. The athletes were asked to recall childhood experiences, memories of family, friends and school, their career development in (and outside of) sport, memorable achievements, challenging transitions and adaptation experiences in different cultural settings. The interviewer asked the participants to reflect on important changes in the past, ponder on what they would have done differently given an opportunity, and share plans and aspirations.

Results and Practical Implications: Results found three discourses of athletic career that the participants drew upon to construct their career stories; a performance-driven career, an integrated dual career in sport and education, and a transnational career. First, the athletes constructed their career identities as that of an athlete and made sense of life projects in connection to athletic development and improvement. When athletes become identified as “talented” and “elite”, this may become a turning point for the athlete to narrow down the

life trajectory in pursuit of an elite sports path. In addition, both athletes spoke about education in the context of their athletic pursuits and putting sport before their academic commitments. The athletes recognised that during their time in education, there were no ‘dual career support services’ and they had thoughts about dropping out to pursue full time sport, seeing education, as a barrier. The athletes felt that their families were pushing them towards more traditional life scripts, such as graduating university, getting a job, and starting a family, describing the “pressures of society”. The similarity and diversity of the participants' career pathways illustrated the ways in which social relations and cultural practices surrounding elite athletes can influence how they develop meaning and how they design their careers. Practitioners working with athletes undertaking dual careers should be aware of their cultural background and how that may impact the decisions and paths that they choose to take.

TASS have produced this lay summary. The full article is available (permissions may apply):
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001879115000093>