Seeing the field well in career management: Autoethnographic research on a handball player's career

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ABSTRACT

The present study utilises an autoethnographic research methodology for introducing, from a handball player's point of view, the culture in which her career unfolded (from the beginnings to the first few years after her retirement), and the most important characteristics that shaped her professional years in the Hungarian first league. This topic was chosen not only as sports economics considerations are important with regard to the career of a handballer, but also to highlight how an individual athlete experiences the processes occurring in such a sports culture. Moreover, this study addresses the gap in scientific literature on career management in handball. Utilising autoethnography in the field of sports is somewhat unique, therefore this study can also pave the way for future research work in this domain. The following five pillars in career management were identified as a result of the research: Significant Others, Local Grassroots, Star Position, Roller Coaster and Rebirth. This study can be valuable for future researchers in the area of career management, and it can also provide practical information for athletes, sports federations and sports businesses.

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1. INTRODUCTION

While sports have long played a significant role in the social sphere, they have gained substantial importance in modern societies also in economic terms, to the extent that in the 20th century they turned into a unique industry being a business service. This also generated a need for the economic analysis of sports, and increased the body of professional and scientific literature on the topic (András 2003b). If we take a closer look at the relationship between culture and sports, we can see the benefits of sport (as a game) being capable of building communities, at the same time also offering the joy of socialising with other people. Nowadays we can also see that business considerations (e.g. sports sponsorship, brand equity) and satisfying the special needs of the media (e.g. modifying the rules of certain sports) can also have an impact on the popularity of various sports – especially on those that are important on the international stage. Due to the effects of these economically motivated factors, sports may lose some of their humane elements, among others human relations become less intimate, and athletes are treated as machines or commodities. The present study aims to introduce that besides economic and social aspects, it should also be understood how the individual (athlete) experiences the different processes occurring in sports culture.

András (2017: 4) speaks in greater detail about sports economics, claiming that it is

> a field of social activities where people generate, provide, share and consume sports services, in an active or passive fashion, in order to satisfy their need for such services. People taking part in sports services can be active (leisure sports) or passive (those consuming professional sports: right there where sports are practiced or from the media), plus sports can matter to them indirectly of from an economic perspective.

This definition covers the following domains: professional sports, leisure sports, youth sports (nurturing talent), sports schools (school sports), sports facilities, sports events (major tournaments).

Chikán's business economics theory (Chikán 1997, updated in Chikán 2021) is used in the study of András (2003a), which introduces sports businesses, interprets the stakeholder approach and sheds light on the peculiarities of the market of players in great detail. As for sports businesses, it must be emphasised that athletes, the stars, play the role of both resources (and in many cases investments) and employees in an organisation. This means that they are internal stakeholders as well, and their objective as workers is to assert their own financial and non-financial interests; consequently, several types of value definitions may apply. The goal of a sports business as an employer is to get a good performance from players. Obviously, motivational strategies are important, because they can contribute to keeping athletes and maintaining their motivation level, and they can even improve the professional skills of players. At the same time, it is also a great challenge for employers to take into consideration the characteristics of different individuals, when selecting such strategies. We need to acknowledge the fact that human resource management is of utmost importance in the field of sports, and the intangible values of athletes also play a role in this.

Athletes generate value for themselves (image, growing transfer value), the team (good results, increasing revenues) and society (community building, promoting values) alike. Thus, in the case of a team sport, success can be interpreted from the perspectives of sport as a profession, economic considerations, and sports businesses (András 2003b). For this, it is essential to assign

the right kind of tasks to employees, and this works the same way in the world of sports as well. Teams are fighting for signing the biggest stars for the different positions (for instance rising transfer fees mean business success for the selling party, and it also qualifies as success if a team can exploit the quality of a group of players). We can say that human capital defines how successful organisations are, together with the profitability of economic processes, as it is the knowledge and skills of the organisation's members – and the experience and motivation rooted in these – that build up collective value, which is sometimes called intellectual or knowledge capital (Karolinyné et al. 2010; cited in Dajnoki et al. 2015).

Havran (2017) lists the main tasks of human resource management in professional football, underlining the importance of activities related to individual development and career support. The author provides answers to questions such as who is responsible for successful career management, who should finance its costs, and who produces direct (tangible) results in player development. Besides Hungarian results and research work, valuable research has been conducted on sports economics on the international level too, relating to human resource management (Andreff – Szymanski 2006; Byers et al. 2012) and career research (Stambulova – Ryba 2014; Ekengren et al. 2018; 2019).

Often during her handball career, the author of the present study thought that having a career in professional handball is not a substantial challenge, but when she looked around in her own environment (observing the players who were the same age as her), she found that in a certain sense it is actually very difficult to become a professional handball player. In numerous cases a player comes to a halt on their career path, even if they are talented and there is a firm basis on which they could build a professional handball career. It is also true for the author that her career would have developed faster if certain factors worked out differently than they eventually did. The nature of these factors has hardly been studied in social sciences, let alone the relationships and interplay between them, the prerequisites for making a breakthrough and the peculiarities of the actual environment. Analysis like this would not only assist the individual athletes in achieving their goals, but would also offer an important insight for those working with youth teams. For those sports organisations that want to invest in the players of the future, and are trying to find out from the many players going through the club's value creation system who can be those young players at a club who have the necessary potential for going professional –– this knowledge is paramount. The author wishes to introduce those steps and processes in a career's history that can manifest in a successful career, from the analogous perspective as athletes "see the field". They know it well why their teammates are moving in a certain direction in a given situation on the court; or why and how the centre back can pass the ball to the player in the corner without looking in that direction: they simply see the field.

On the one hand, this paper aims to point out those main factors and situations, which are characteristic of the professional athlete's career and the related experiences in the given sports culture, through the method of autoethnography. On the other hand, the study uses the athlete's point of view to analyse the various career management related features. This perspective might raise the question of how athletes "manage" their own sports career, how they control it with their conscious or subconscious decisions, and how they handle the situations in which they end up (sometimes just by accident).

In this introductory part of the study the motivation for discussing the topic has been presented and placed in its academic context. Two main parts follow this: the first describes the

methodology used, and the second presents the results of the autoethnographic research. Finally, the conclusions of the research are drawn.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses the methodology of autoethnography, which is a type of qualitative methodology that has both literary and ethnographic characteristics. One of the differences between ethnography and autoethnography is that the latter deals with a known topic (the self), while the former researches something unknown (others). According to the theory of analytic autoethnography, combining the elements of auto (the self), ethnos (culture, in my case sports culture) and graphy (the research process) results in embedding my personal experiences in culture (Reed-Danahay 1997). Furthermore, it recommends the following to researchers: "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson 2006: 378), in order to point out that there is a wide range of practices beyond the data, while theoretical development and refinement are also taking place.

Researchers using this methodology tend to emphasise that by placing the self (as an independent being) in culture, this method focuses on analytic and interpretative processes (Chang 2008). The relationship between culture and personality manifests in different layers of one's consciousness (Ellis – Bochner 2000). The experiences developing in the course of one's life are uncovered in many different ways, utilising various aspects. At the same time, placing the events that happened in context, a relationship is established with the audience and this produces a reaction from the community (Jones et al. 2016).

Appealing characteristics of autoethnography are: (1) a friendly instrument for researchers and readers alike; (2) contributing to the better cultural understanding of the self and others; and (3) inspirational not only for writing autoethnography, but also in the work of others, in the form of instigating self-reflexion or self-examination (Chang 2008). Thus, autoethnographic research can be used as a tool for understanding the viewpoints of others and myself better, and it is also one of the method's goals to be lifelike and realistic, as opposed to being objective (Ellis 2004).

Numerous researchers have turned towards the inner self and used this method in both elite and leisure sports (Humberstone 2011). In the former case, McMahon and Penney (2013) used the "voice of their body" as the primary data for the research. There are innovative solutions in sports management, for instance in women's football (Cox et al. 2017), and in the method for introducing the experiences of sports fans (Kerwin – Hoeber 2015).

The author has chosen autoethnography, because she reckons that her career experiences from sports culture can contribute to the professional literature in the area of career management, and also due to the fact that this method offers the opportunity to her to be both the subject and the researcher of the topic. Thirdly, the auto- and ethnographic types of writing make it possible to use a combination of the descriptive-realistic (experience that gives the most accurate description possible), analytical-interpretative (Anderson 2006) and confessional-emotive writing styles (Chang 2008).

During the research work, subjective personal introspection is applied (Wallendorf – Brucks 1993). It is the author that serves as the primary source, and she shares her experiences from her

own point of view. She has selected a strategy for building a personal database (Chang 2008: 74), in which data collection and interpretation are the essence of autoethnography. The analysed period lasts from the first meeting with handball to the end of the professional career. Personal experiences were put on paper with systematic self-observation, and the author set no boundaries for herself. Therefore, she granted access to cognitive processes and the deepest emotions (Rodriguez – Ryave 2002). Several re-readings shaped the material in the next phase, where valuable thoughts supplemented the text. The end result is an authentic 13-page document that serves as a database. Finally, the author supplemented this with related articles and book chapters from the period of her professional handball career.

Analysing and interpreting the data is greatly influenced by the research method applied, as the behaviour of "the self" needs to be interpreted in the context of its cultural relationships. Chang (2008: 131) recommends ten strategies for this:

> (1) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyse inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyse the relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly; (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories.

From these, the author picked the first one for analysing the database, because the focal point was exploring and understanding areas and processes related to career management. Besides, due to the lack of professional literature, there is no similar research, data or framework theory available for getting accurate answers, so the author wanted those topics to spring to the surface, in an abductive way, which can be important in relation to an athlete's career. Finally, she systematically arranged the recurring topics and patterns into five vignettes, which appear as the main topics and facilitate the better understanding of connections and narratives extracted from the autoethnographic data (Reay et al. 2019).

3. RESULTS

The results extracted from the autoethnography are visualised in Table 1, which illustrates the five areas, shown as vignettes with analogies in the first column. Each level is further broken down into the concept concerned and its explanation, with an associated quotation. The labels with analogies are presented in detail in a separate subsection, where the author first briefly explains what the analogy means to her, followed by a search for the personal experience collected from autoethnography (*all in italics*) in the literature.

3.1. Significant others

The group of people who influence a handball player's career in sports can be diverse. There are those who accompany the athlete throughout the journey, and there are changes in the intensity of their roles (parents, siblings), and there are others who are only present at one stage (teammates, coaches). However, they are important both because they can offer support, motivation and purpose for the athlete, and because humans are fundamentally social beings and are influenced by different communities.

Table 1. Interpretation of vignettes

Vignettes	Concepts concerned	Explanation
Significant Others: Role of influential people for a handball player	Parents	pillar, supporting role (material and emotional)
		decision-making role (in the youth system)
	"In any case, I didn't want to leave home as a child, because I was a bit influenced by the external environment. But my parents saw something in me. They gently asked the question when I was 14: Do you want to stay at home and play handball a little, study and then work, or give yourself the opportunity to break away and leave? They knew I wanted to play handball."	
	Coaches	individuality, good teaching character – in the early years
		individuality, coach, coach's eye for selection, need to perform, trust
	"I owe a lot to him because he was the one who trusted me and saw something in me.The club didn't bring in an experienced goalkeeper, and I was able to play in important games at the age of 20-22, and had a stable one or two years of coaching in the adults."	
	Sibling	partner, teammate and sometimes opponent
	"It is an interesting situation, when your sister is beaten on the court or you want to help her, but she intentionally doesn't pay attention, or she needs to take a penalty when you are at the goal and it goes 2 m wide, while you were praying that she shoots to the left corner."	
	Peers – teammates	love of play, friendships, competition
	"(…) I got to know people my age as opponents, and then over time, through further studies or other situations, they became friends, then teammates and teammates in the national team as adults."	
Local Grassroots: Youth system – the importance of local sports culture and identity	Sports culture	tradition, community
	"I think for me the possibility presented itself to get to know handball, as my hometown has always had a successful sports environment and sports culture, which overwhelms schools, teachers, coaches, parents, people and last but not least the children."	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Vignettes	Concepts concerned	Explanation
Star Position: Randomness – or else what is the factor of luck?	Luck	a concept that concerns athletes
	"Being in the right place at the right time!" and "Preparedness meets opportunity." – These sentences bring me back to those memories. It matters in which city, in which club, with which coach and also in which year you are there where you are. Then it is also necessary that someone sees some extra potential in you, in comparison with other selected players. Then it is up to you to live up to the opportunity, to show what you got."	
Roller Coaster: Struggle in victory and in defeat	Injuries	pain, focus on return, support from family and teammates
	"I started to get the rhythm and the victories kept coming, along with good individual performances, and towards the end of the season during a warm-up game I stepped so badly that a surgery was needed for my knee. It was a trauma, because I had to skip an international cup final, which we couldn't win at the end. I really missed that glory."	
	Studies	time management, role of communication between stakeholders, awareness, external help
	"After a lost game they say it is a problem that other activities distract your attention from the games. 'Why do you need a degree anyway?' I hear from the coach. I was crying throughout the training in my inexperienced years, I wasn't prepared for this. But I know that a sports career will not last more than 10-20 years."	
	Conformity pressure – successes and low points	pressure to perform, pressure from the environment and from yourself
	"I always wanted to show that I am here, too, I am good, don't forget about me! So I fought a lot even with myself. (…) Fluctuations in your performance mean you are unpredictable, you aren't reliable and the club won't be able to build on you. A player with a good steady performance can get everything, they are the ones the club can always count on."	
Rebirth: When the bubble bursts – Civilian life.	What's next?	new beginnings, uncertainty, seeking new goals
	"Towards the end of my career my ego was becoming more important than sport. I felt that something was not like in the old times, but I could never really phrase it. New feelings came to the surface, and I didn't want to be only a player anymore!"	

Source: author.

"My parents have always been my pillars of strength, whereas my siblings have been my partners throughout the years, for which I can't thank them enough. They always protected me, cared about me, but they also always reminded me to be down to earth when I needed it. Without them I would be a different person. […]My parents never forbade me to go to my trainings, but they didn't encourage me in the first few years either. Their only condition was that I had to keep up with my grades. Then one day they stayed for a whole day of a tournament and then for the next day as well, because they enjoyed the atmosphere so much and mainly because they were proud of me, seeing the value in my playing. Ever since they have supported me 1000% and came to see me at my every game. […] I learned so much from the coaches […] then they saw the potential in me, and they thought I was able to deliver and be successful at that young age among adult players in the national league. Needless to say, this opportunity wasn't easy and my career wasn't always smooth during my academy years, which presented many conflicts between my coach and me, and caused downhill periods as well. […] The players in my age group could also influence my career, by dropouts e.g. injuries, by the possibility to become the prominent player, or by being part of a good community, which is valuable. During my career there have always been people who doubted me, sometimes my own competitors with whom we had a healthy competition on the court, and I also made many friends throughout the years.

The parental background is crucial in the development of a young athlete, as one's parents are always there in the background, even if they are invisible (Hellstedt 2005), supporting their child and at the same time putting pressure on them by doing so, which can be positive (e.g. love), but can hold negative aspects as well (Todd – Edwards 2020). Côté's (1999) study shows the milestones during the development of an athlete throughout their sports career, which can result in transformed roles in the family. One of the levels is the sampling years, when the parents carry the characteristics of a leader. The second level is the specializing years, when the transition begins to form with the complex interaction between parent and coach: emotional, tangible, informational support, sacrifices, pressure, relationship with coaches (Wolfenden – Holt 2005). The third level is the investment years, during which the parent's role transforms into a follower and supporter (Domingues – Gonçalves 2013). Other academic literature also mentions the different forms of the parent's roles, such as interpreter, provider, and role model (Fredricks – Eccles 2004), whilst the parent has the role of motivator and sometimes commander (Holt et al. 2009). Empowering parents (of athletes and teammates) give young athletes confidence and feedback on their performance, thus enhancing their development (Knight et al. 2011).

"Don't do this tough sport, choose basketball instead! My mom's words are echoing in my ears. She loved playing basketball, however by the time I reached my professional career, I had her full support without any comments. […] There were times when the pressure was accompanied by performance appraisal, especially during my early years in the decision-making situations, such as where to continue this sport, not to be satisfied with an amateur career, dare to change, take the opportunity, etc., which caused some sleepless nights. I really needed my parents' guidance and encouragement."

When the parents are trying to interfere in the "sports profession" too much, it can have a negative impression (sport specific advice) on players and on coaches (Barber et al. 1998), or else the parent is trying to accomplish their own unfulfilled dreams through their child's life, which can result in the child following the parent's desires and fears – reversed dependency phenomenon (Smoll et al. 2011).

Todd and Edwards (2021) analysed three different aspects in connection to the parents. One is about managing both internal and external pressure. The other is about how the parental influence and support change during the years of the child's life, and with the growing competition level: "hands on" support (active support system) is replaced by "hands off" support (the leading role belongs to the authorised coach, while the parent only supports when the child needs it). The third aspect is about the preparation for the life after retiring from the career in professional sports, when the parent is paying attention to how the child can adjust to a life other than an athlete's life.

> "I don't know enough for telling how to move your legs in a given situation or how to save a shot in the goal, but I am here for you and cheer for you! – I hear my dad's words, when he admitted I reached another level in my career."

Nelson and Strachan (2017) divided the experiences with the sibling of an athlete in the same sport into two groups. In the first case positive experiences appear, such as strengthening the relationship between the siblings, support, motivation, admiring and peer understanding. In the second case rather negative aspects appear, like comparing, rivalry, jealousy, losing the game against the sibling or fighting for the same position.

> "Go one, come on other! […] for saving I will cheer for you, for shooting I will cheer for your sister if it is not you at the goal – said my dad jokingly. My mom, on the other hand, sneakily noted that I should have let in some shots from my sister, as we were winning either way."

In Gyömbér et al.'s (2016) "athletic triangle" there are four options for a healthy cooperation between coach, parent and young athlete. In the first case every element is equal, in the second case the athlete is not integrated into this connection and the relationship between coach and parent is close. In the third and fourth cases either the coach or the parent is out of balance, depending on which relationship is stronger with the athlete. In handball the most common case is the fourth scenario, when the parent moves further away in this triangle (as a supporter) and the connection between the coach and athlete is the most significant.

> "It is unquestionable that a characteristic individual could be successful as a coach too, with a vibe that was both dignified and funny, and he taught us all the necessary basics. […] You, knucklehead, come over here! – is still ringing in my ears, it didn't matter whether I delivered a good or a bad performance. I looked up to him and these sentences didn't bother my parents either when they were rightful."

Practicing any sport can develop advantages in a young athlete's life, especially when the sporting environment and the social dynamics are appropriate (DiFiori et al. 2018). It is also clear that teammates have an effect on the social dynamics of young people and their experiences in sport (Herbison et al. 2019).

At the investment-mastery career stage it was Wylleman et al. (2004), while among professional athletes Keegan et al. (2014) who studied building up a motivational atmosphere (coach, teammate, parental behaviour), and they all stated that children in the same age group adopt certain roles (friendship, affiliation, emotional support) from the parents.

3.2. Local grassroots

This vignette summarises both how belonging to a local sports culture and a youth system are key factors in choosing a particular sport at a young age, and discusses the identification process

that an athlete can go through during their career path. Then there comes a point where the athlete can ask themselves: is it enough just to be an athlete?

> *"My hometown has always had a successful sports environment and sports culture, which surrounds schools, teachers, coaches, parents, people and last but not least the children. [...] Later I had the opportunity to play in other clubs, but when I was young, the atmosphere there was very different from the one back home – where we 'small professionals', then later as an adult player I could quickly learn the drive to win. In a broad sense the fans were part of the circle. Even today I am recognised, they remember my saves and they ask about how I am. [...] I had the opportunity to be part of a sporting community, where I could not only feel as an athlete, but as a human being."*

In the field of talent development, in many cases professional literature is dealing with the microenvironment (e.g. parents, companions, and coaches) when analysing the factors affecting the athletes' careers (e.g. Wolfenden – Holt 2005). There are others who point out that it is worth researching the career development in a broader view (e.g. Wylleman – Lavallee 2004). According to a new, comprehensive approach, the national (sports) culture also appears as an important factor during the athletes' career (not only the people who influence them or the sports world are the factors considered) (Stambulova et al. 2007).

Behind the achieved success, we can identify key factors in connection with the professional (elite) level. The study of Henriksen et al. (2010) points out that it is essential for the coaches to focus on the broader environment as well (not only on the quality and quantity of the trainings) if they want to support the successful transition of young players into adult players. On the other hand, the author says that every athletic talent development environment is unique, therefore it is crucial to analyse these separately. "From this perspective an 'athletic talent development environment' (ATDE) is defined as a young athlete's social relations both inside and outside the world of sport – social relations which have a sports club or team as their core but also include the larger context in which the club or team is embedded" (Henriksen et al. 2010: 213). Lastly, the results could motivate the environment to achieve better results in the future by identifying the blind spots. Henriksen et al. (2010) also mentions the environmental success factors, which show the prerequisites for daily processes in a given environment (individual development and success, team performance, organisational progress and culture). The authors also describes the processes involved in the actual activity of doing sports (trainings and competitions), and last but not least highlight the organisational culture, which is at the centre and has three levels: cultural artefacts (stories, myths, traditions, clothing, building); espoused values (the organisation leads and it is committed to these values: social values, norms, objectives and standards) and basic assumptions (subconscious reasons behind actions, consisting of beliefs and assumptions, which members take for granted; see Henriksen et al. 2010). The listed elements affect the success of the environment, as I heard it many times from my competitors:

> *"It is easy for you to be selected for the national team! It matters in which city, in which club, with which coach and also in which year you are. Everything can affect the outcome in positive or negative ways. Being in the right place at the right time!"*

The social engagement and community outreach of the given club can influence an athlete's career (educational and health programmes, activities of sports organisations promoting increased participation in sport (Walker – Kent 2009), although that has not always been the case (Babiak – Wolfe 2006)).

Walker and Kent (2009) describe the community outreach of the clubs in the sports sector. Firstly, it may differ from other organisations partly in its geographical scope, in the influence on stakeholders and in its business activities. Secondly, when a new facility is built or expansion occurs for the local people as a "secondary value" (besides their basic product: the matches), it also impacts local youth development.

3.3. Star position

A successful handball player can be a star if they are given the opportunity to emerge and are put in the right position, at the right time and place. Because nuances decide whether you make it to the adult team – from among the other talented young players (because those who are there had all been selected, with similar skills, knowledge levels and sometimes better physical abilities). Luck (fate, chance) in everyday life differs from luck in sports (or in the world of art), in that an athlete (or actor) is on show (as a public figure). The breakthrough opportunity is sometimes an important match (or premiere), where it becomes clear immediately whether the young person is on the verge of a successful career or not. This is what Barabási (2018: 28) has to say in connection to success: "success is never about you, or even about your performance. Success is about us and how we perceive your performance." Therefore, success is a collective phenomenon. For experienced handball players, luck (a vague coincidence) is an important factor in becoming an elite athlete, because you need the leap to eventually reach a level.

> "I first experienced the manifestation of coincidence when I was still in high school, when […] at the age of 16 I could already train with the adult team, preparing for the national and international cup tournaments. […] Maybe my preparedness back then could cross paths with a possibility then and there. Every important first success – possibilities in your hand – is still in me, through which I could become better in my own and in others' eyes. Was it a coincidence or a crossroad or the act of fate? Everyone can decide for themselves which one. I have come to the conclusion that this was luck. Of course, it should not be forgotten that there is a selection process involved, too. Do you need luck for that as well…?"

"Nevertheless, self-perceived chance events are almost completely unexplored territory in life course studies, and they may well be a 'tool' with which many people come to understand their lives." Shanahan and Porfeli (2006: 117) summarise their research work, in which they describe four categories for how a chance event (the authors also specify its characteristics) can be defined. First of all, chance events are unlikely (luck is usually positive, whilst fate is usually connected with negative outcomes), which can hardly be defined by researchers or its subjects. Secondly, they bring changes in one's life (although cause and effect may sound speculative), which means that it is hard to state as a researcher whether there could have been a different outcome if the event had happened differently. Thirdly, they are not deliberate, and lastly, they are occasions that require explanation because of their social significance and specificity.

The expressions "luck" and "coincidence" are not really of scientific nature, and this presents some difficulties. However, there have been many realisations about how coincidence could affect a course of life, and specifically a career. Statisticians (based upon the law of large numbers) imply that prevalence can be estimated for larger populations, i.e. random events can be expected (Shanahan – Porfeli 2006). Those who believe in chaos theory claim that it is possible to analyse the impact of random events on one's life course (career) with statistical accuracy by using dynamic system models (Vallacher – Nowak 1997). However, there are also

those researchers (e.g Krantz 1998) who believe that coincidence is not a scientific phenomenon, and there is a need for new methods for completing standard forms of testing or keeping the traditional methods and completing them with a different model.

In modern society, if people's systematic orientation is threatened by an unfavourable random situation (risk), it warns them to increase their awareness level (Beck et al. 1992). The factor of risk is distributed throughout the course of a life (career), due to which the future becomes completely unpredictable (impossible to control or foresee). Probably risk and coincidence have always presented themselves in different ways throughout history, providing people with subjective experiences during their course of life (Shanahan – Porfeli 2006). Some researchers and their analysed subjects, who were asked about the process of decision-making during their careers, said that chance (coincidence) had had a meaningful role in their educational and professional careers (Betsworth – Hansen 1996).

Among others, behavioural psychologists have also studied the processes of making decisions in uncertain situations, which results in people systematically falsifying the estimates of the probability of events (Kahneman – Fredrick 2002), Moreover, this can be taken a step further by adding the fact that they falsify the story of their life when telling it, depending on the storyteller's actual circumstances and on the social context of the narrative (Ross 1989), which can be entertaining or shocking. However, those contexts during which a sequence of related events occurs are ignored, they are not considered random. There is also an aspect that the literary elements permeate the narrations, highlighting the narrator's positive characteristics and uniqueness (Bruner 1994). The personal and situational factors that interact to produce random events are usually important for the person, therefore they consider them to be prominent, while for others they do not mean anything and seem insignificant (Shanahan – Porfeli 2006).

> *"I became an elite player even though some said that I will never be a top goalkeeper. Why was I selected from the youth team? There were other goalkeepers besides me, even older and more experienced ones. Preparedness meets the opportunity. There are many situations like this during a long career."*

3.4. The roller coaster

Throughout our careers we, athletes, are all on a roller coaster ride, because we quickly learn as an early experience what it means to be up and down. Injuries, studies, performance and overconformity in varying degrees sometimes come simultaneously, sometimes separately. Success is followed by defeat the next day, i.e. you fall from the top screaming, and then slowly crawl back up again. There is struggle in success and struggle after defeat, and sometimes defeat is experienced as a loss (and vice versa). Sometimes you can see the next turn, sometimes the direction is obscured. By the time you get used to the pace, you get out and the next one comes.

> *"I always wanted to prove that I can become a professional goalkeeper, even though I was shorter and curvier than the standard used to be […]. I was given playing time in adult games without adequate experience. In my very first game I could perform very well, but not in the second. I took notes, I observed. Then I was better, and then again, I wasn't. I think I was tense, and my expectations were high towards everyone. Then I got injured, but after 2 months I was back on the court. […] During the*

rehabilitation I built up strength in me (although there was crying, laughing, disappointment and disillusion), so that later I got an invitation to the adult national team. […]. After that I didn't settle for some 'handball girl' role, I wanted to study. It was very hard to find a balance between university and sports, but I won the championship. Then I moved abroad to a foreign team which was a bad decision, but at the same time I successfully earned a degree […]. Then we were queens in the eyes of one of our coaches at the national team, I can say he knew something besides trainings and preparation, and led to us winning a medal. […] Then I took it very hard that I didn't get an invitation to the national team anymore. In my almost 10 years in the national team there was pride, proving my worth, fighting, showing my best performance even in bad times, success, guilty conscience, shame, victory, feeling I was the best in the world, winning a medal and then bidding farewell. I am very sorry after all this that I couldn't handle the pressure better, and that I was often tense."

3.4.1. Injuries. For those who get into the bubble, sport comes first (focus on performance: no family holidays, etc.). If it was not the case, they would soon be out. Then the athlete gets injured and thinks about not playing in the cup final, which the team reached for the first time in its history. Not accepting that, sometimes they decide to play with pain, getting injections, and then resting afterwards hoping there is no serious problem after the match. For them life is sport and sport is life, and this entails that they accept pain, sacrifice and dedication (Douglas – Carless 2006).

Everard et al. (2021) revealed the typologies of socio-cultural narrative (Resilience, Merry-Go-Round, Longevity, Pendulum, Snowball, and More to Me), which shape the experiences of the injured athlete, thus extending the practice of sports injury psychology to include the socio-cultural processes that influence the well-being, behaviour and feelings of athletes, throughout their careers. An example for Resilience:

"I didn't give up because the new season was already starting in September, and I wanted to return to the court as quickly as possible. This required 6 months of hard work (including the summer break), but it was worth it, because I was hungry for more: I saved every shot and I got back on the national team as well."

This may be in accordance with the idea that performance pressure and the related effort is the key to success in sports (Carless – Douglas 2012). Hard work is precious, so there is a possibility to accumulate social capital and to retain community orientation (Dohlsten et al. 2021).

3.4.2. Studies. Unfortunately, not many athletes can earn enough throughout their sports career (McCormack – Walseth 2013). In recent years many studies have addressed the dual careers of athletes (Ryba et al. 2015), in order to be able to make a transition later on, during the process of holistic development (Stambulova – Wylleman 2015). This way the athlete does not have to struggle with the transition from the sports world to the labour market (International Olympic Committee 2014).

From an athlete's point of view, it can be a cause for concern if they have to invest time in the success of both sports and studies (Ryan 2015), as sometimes this can lead to negative situations such as fatigue, lack of motivation, overload, or in a worst-case scenario, injuries (McCormack – Walseth 2013). From a social point of view their social relations are likely to diminish, as they are limited to sporting events (Miller – Kerr 2002). Moreover, the same concerns emerge during adolescence, when the burdens of both studying and competing in sporting events suddenly overload young athletes (Borggrefe – Cachay 2012), or when the level of sports

performance is reduced while the athlete is also studying, which is not the favourite period for coaches (Aquilina 2013).

There is also evidence for a positive outcome (sense of safety, transferring skills) (McCormack – Walseth 2013), furthermore, certain studies highlight the fact (Henriksen et al. 2010) that future elite athletes have a need to receive support for maintaining their dual careers before entering university (for example: tangible support with information, communication), in a way that the responsibility and role of every member of this support system is defined (Knight et al. 2018). In the past 30 years, European institutions have made great efforts to facilitate having this dual career (Aquilina 2013). Programmes supporting athletes who study as well must make sure that the people who run it guarantee a balanced lifestyle for the athletes (McKenna – Dunstan-Lewis 2004), via personal, national, or international support networks (Aquilina 2013).

3.4.3. Compulsion to conform. Heaviside et al. (2021) emphasises the role of media pressure, which poses a threat to the well-being of an athlete and the sharing of this experience.

> "At one of the major tournaments I made the mistake of reading the comments and articles after the game. I found it very difficult to get over the criticism. I always found the three most negative ones, which said the worst things about the team or me. It happened sometimes that people were texting me on Messenger and criticised me rudely, after which I had to cry in the bathroom so no one would see me. Another time my performance was worse than before, and I kind of believed what those criticising me wrote in their messages. Needless to say, I made a mistake to believe them."

Different types of expectations can form when the individual's expectations of themselves manifest (Rubie-Davies et al. 2010), as a stress factor, fear from failure or choking under pressure; another type of expectation comes from others, such as the coach.

> "Sometimes I worried too much before the games or I was too disappointed if something didn't go the way I planned it, […] later on I had to learn that I couldn't live up to everyone's expectations."

It is important to see that "development, identity, and behaviour are not simply products of psychological processes located 'within' individuals, but powerfully shaped by socio-cultural factors" (Carless – Douglas 2013: 706). In light of this, Coker-Cranney et al. (2020) suggest that in order to identify the will to win at all costs, we must understand how athletes are socialised to the performance narrative of sport ethics (Hughes – Coakley 1991), which is eventually adopted by the athletes. It also defines their future, how they become what they are (identity narrative perspective; McAdams 2019). Many studies have come to light in connection with the identity of athletes, which illustrate the construction related to identity building and performance.

Even winning can result in troughs in your life, as if your performance is at a peak, you cannot go lower, you have to push more: "a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self" (Douglas – Carless 2009: 215). This is the performance narrative which has to keep going for long:

> "You only have to do as much as you can! It is what is expected from you! Not more, not less, because that's why you are here" – advice from a professional player. […] When you are at the middle of your career, as a key player, then you need to have a consistent performance during the season. Fluctuations in your performance mean you are unpredictable, you aren't reliable and the club won't be able to build on you."

Later on, when the athlete has an exemplary career and great success, at both global and local level (e.g. playing for their club or at major tournaments), their identity is developing without interruptions and their performance is praised (Brewer et al. 1993); however, if some negative event, such as an injury, retirement or club liquidation happens and the athlete is focusing on these, then their whole world collapses and their performance suffers. Those who cannot establish their own athlete's identity, and are too performance-oriented, cannot find alternative ways to cope with the feelings of unworthiness, failure or other "ruined moments" (Douglas – Carless 2009).

"At the peak of my career I decided to change clubs after a very long period of time (new environment, more minutes to play, curiosity). At the very last minute my international transfer fell through, because the foreign club declared they couldn't afford foreign players and they needed to play with local young players instead. I had a hard time accepting the fact that I was WITHOUT A CLUB at the beginning of August! – But I was needed here, at home."

3.5. Rebirth

Everything changes. Something else has come to the forefront of the athlete's life and they are removed from sports culture as an active athlete. One chapter closes, but a new one opens, with new challenges. With a rebirth, everything starts all over again, the athlete has become a career starter one more time.

"I retired 3 years ago, and everything fell into place. Many times I didn't feel this kind of gratitude, what I feel now. Maybe the pressure was too high on everyone, and we only focused on that? Or motherhood has made me more accepting? Or perhaps with time I started to see every negative event in a new light, so I could forget about them? Was I satisfied with my career when I retired? Sometimes I feel yes, sometimes I feel the opposite. But I finished my last season with my head held high, and I wanted to become a mother and a wife. I continued my studies (a silver lining to my third injury), which I don't regret, because this gave me new purposes in life."

In the sports world a professional athlete lives in a bubble (the only focus is sport, sports culture serves as a protective shell, offering better financial circumstances, a certain level of security, a hobby, games, and a different social role). When the bubble bursts, insecurity can occur in an athlete if they are not prepared for life after sports. The worst cases are the traumatic effects, such as identity disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, the feeling of unworthiness, even thoughts about death (e.g. Douglas – Carless 2009).

"A chapter in my life has closed and the feeling of the end is overwhelming, I can't find my way. My dad told me: Honey, look back on your life, the many places you visited, the many things you experienced and everything that you got! This was the moment when I started to realise the value in my life, how proud my parents were, and my sister became so motivated that she wanted to become a professional player as well, to achieve as much as I could."

Life seems pretty cold when the bubble bursts. The emotional difficulties are present in starting a new profession after the sports career, which – depending on the intervention – may differ among athletes, as regards the strategy they use (Stambulova et al. 2007).

Numerous studies demonstrate that those athletes who started to plan their future life after retirement, could make the transition more easily (Alfermann et al. 2004).

"What I feel now is that university studies give me support and purpose, so that I don't just hang around after the bubble burst. I am preparing for my 'civilian career', so I will have a lot to deal with, but I really hope that I can take those steps with ease and without being tense, and I can focus on those people who matter."

Applied sports psychology research works deal with the transition at the end of a sports career in great length, and there are statements regarding this process, which conclude that the focus of research should not only be the microsocial environment, but the macro- (country size, wealth) and mesosocial factors (such as the quality of sport-specific governance, infrastructure, media attention, public support for professional athletes) (Stambulova et al. 2007). These could function as a resource and/or a barrier. Alfermann et al. (2004) suggest using a culturally specific approach in connection to the transition, which helps athletes to integrate into the given society and culture, as nationality and culture are important factors during the multifactor processes of transition. Not only symptomatically, like negative emotions (Corlett 1996), but for instance identities, attitudes and concepts are also taken into consideration.

At the same time, if we take a step back from ending a sports career as a transition, we can see that there are several normative transitions in the athlete's life in terms of development, model and approach (Côté 1999; Wylleman – Lavallee 2004). The literature proposes different programs for managing transitions, which can develop abilities that are different from sports skills, helping athletes prepare for civilian life (Wylleman et al. 2004). These can be education (seminars, workshops), information, presentation of job search strategies and emphasising the benefits of retirement. These career change models offer the possibility to look at these pre-requisites of ending a sports career as a process (Stambulova et al. 2007).

"Somehow I still strive for more. I think there is no other way – I always have to set new goals, studying and improving, because this is what makes me move forward. In the meantime, during these struggles, I have learned that success doesn't just come to you. – This is how I function."

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of the study is to show, through the lens of the athlete's perspective, how individuals experience the processes of career development in sports culture in society. Many sports clubs are looking for the right athlete for their team (whether they are still young or adult players), and who ends up being selected is influenced by a number of factors. Of course, there are good selection practices (coach's eyes, stereotypes, etc.), but from a scientific point of view the situation of athletes is less studied when they are put at the centre of attention or when their interests are prioritised. It is time to see the field.

One of the main findings is the role of *significant others,* who are highly influential factors during a sports career. The presence of parents (especially for young athletes) is unquestioned (at the invested-professional level it appears to be declining), however, as Knight et al. (2017) highlight, there is little research on developing strategies that apply to parents, which can help their children the most in enjoying sports, and in realising their potential in the long term. Closely linked to this stage is the sense of belonging to a local grassroots community, in which the people concerned are important factors. On the other hand, the *roller coaster* ride should be mentioned, which is a short, adventurous trip. Sometimes you get to the peak quickly, and then

you are quickly falling, so that you do not always enjoy the highest point, where the view is beautiful and the sun is shining, because you have either lost a match or you have been injured, or perhaps you have failed an exam. Then suddenly you are back up in the sky, but you can see the end of all the fun, you can see the next passenger in line who is about to take your place. When the car stops, you are both pleased because it has been an enjoyable adventure and sad because you know you have to get off, it is the end of the journey. Then you have to queue up again for another uncertain adventure.

However, performance-centricity "forces" athletes to become obsessed with their sport, to the detriment of their other interests, thus jeopardising their future success in other areas of life which can come at a dear price (Aquilina 2013). On the other hand, high expectations and the *pressure to comply*, which are rooted in the performance-centric approach, make it basically unacceptable to commit mistakes. This research proves that the pathways of *sports and learning* are compatible and should be seen as complementary. Athletes need to speak out about their experiences, both positive, or negative ones (Williams 2020), as non-machines who are pulling the performance expectations bandwagon cannot afford to allow the "wreck" narrative to prevail (Douglas – Carless 2009), because sport is only one part of their whole life. It is a major responsibility for everyone involved to ensure that the athlete is reintegrated into the actual labour market and society upon retirement.

Finally, it is not possible to prove a causal relationship between a chance event and life course variations, but it can be argued that life courses have several determinants even if they are chance events (Shanahan – Porfeli 2006). Therefore, it can be stated that a star will put their career on track utilising their knowledge during a chance event (a chance to break through).

While this research presents some of the experiences of a single athlete's career path, it also contributes methodological uniqueness to science. A future research direction could be to work on narratives with other former athletes, in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the career-related processes in handball, which we know little about. There have been a lot of psychological works published on the subject, but we need to deal with career at an individual level if a sports organisation and society are to appreciate human values.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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