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The years after retirement: How do athletes cope with this life-changing transition?

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Sammendrag:

Innledning: I denne artikkelen vil jeg vil se hva idrettsutøvere har gjort etter sin idrettskarriere og se hvordan de har taklet overgangen fra toppidretten. Problemstilling: Jeg ønsker å finne ut om det er en sammenheng mellom hvordan deres karriere har vært, hvordan det har dannet sin identitet og hvordan det har påvirket pensjonisttilværelsen sin. Videre vil jeg se hva som gjør noen utøvere bedre egnet til å takle overgangen enn andre, med fokus på identitet. Metode: Jeg har valgt å gjøre en kvalitativ studie, fordi det gir den type svar jeg er interessert i i forhold til mitt problem. Jeg har gjort en kvalitativ intervju-undersøkelse med tre pensjonerte handballspillere, kriterien er at de skal ha spilt minst 50 kamper på landslaget. Resultat: det var tre kategorier om var viktig, personlighetstrekk, ytre faktorer og erfaringer. Konklusjon: Suksessen gjennom karrieren i forhold til utøvernes egne forventninger har en stor innvirkning på pensjonsovergangen. Peter som hadde høye mål, som endte med en kort karriere og missnøye med enderlige prestasjoner i forhold til hva han trodde han kunne oppnå. Nivået på identitet var noe som påvirket idrettsutøvernes pensjonovergang, jo større og viktig deres idrettsidentitet var, jo større var problemene med overgangen. Hobbyer og arbeid er viktig. Utøverne ser å ha overført noen av de viktigste aspektene ved sin tidligere sport til sin nye livsstil og ser derfor ut til å savne det mindre. De funnet noe som gir dem den samme gleden, utfordringen og motivasjon og en arena der de kan bruke sine erfaringer.



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1 Foreword

Working with this paper has been a good learning experience, as well as tiring. This topic is kind of relevant for me, because I trained a little with one of the elite teams in Norway at the age of 16. I see some similarities in how I have felt, and have gained some good knowledge to take with me.

I will thank Nathalie Barker-Ruchti for helping me through this paper, and thank the interviewees who have participated.



2 Introduction

"Nothing could satisfy me outside the ring," he says. "There is nothing in life that can compare to becoming a world champion, having your hand raised in that moment of glory, with thousands, millions of people cheering you on." This comes from Sugar Ray Leonard, an American boxing legend, said in an interview with BBC Sport (2012).

This paper focuses on identity and retirement in elite sport. Specifically, it examines athletic careers and how careers affect individuals once their careers have ended. Knowledge in this area is important because athletes typically experience stress when they stop doing what has been a significant part of their life. The kind of stress that is mentioned here is the feeling of emptiness inside, that there is something missing in their life. Bill Cole, a world-renowned peak performance coach based in California suggests that a reason athletes experience this profound sense of loss is that they: "identify themselves by what they do... Take that away and they feel abandoned and naked and at a loss for how to make sense of it. It's as if a major piece of them has gone missing" (Crutchley, 2012). Moshkelgoshaa, Tojari, Ganjoe and Mousavi (2012) propose that when elite athletes come near the end of their professional career, they may feel they have sacrificed themselves for the professional sports for a long time. Their family, friends and financial goals have been overlooked for this time. The costs of professional sports suddenly become apparent after retirement. Further Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler and Côté (2009) argue that failure in coping with the transition can have very negative consequences, like neuroses and alcohol/drug abuse.

Retirement from high-performance sport is well studied (Hixson, 2013; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Many of the studies have worked out that it is important to look at preventive work (e.g., Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente & Cruz, 2002). There have been studies that have looked at the topic from many different angles, but not with a retrospective view of identity and retirement on handball players from a psychological angle.

2.1 Aim

The aim of the investigation is to explore athletic identities and consider how retirement affects such identities. The study will examine how athletes saw themselves during their active careers, how they experienced the social environment around them and the kinds of social skills they valued. Potential links between athletes' self-views and social aspects will be investigated and connections between self-view and the retirement process will be considered.

2.1.1 Research questions.

- Is there a relation between career, identity formation and retirement?
- What makes some athletes cope better with the transition than others, with focus on identity?



2.2 Significance of research

My research is important because it will give an understanding of how elite sport affects athletes, from their point of view, and some negative aspects that can occur as the result of retirement. Knowledge about identity formation in sport and how affect the athletes cope with their retirement can be helpful for both trainers and the society. Torregrosa and colleagues (2002), confirm this, proposing that such knowledge is helpful in counseling top athletes so they are more prepared for retirement.



3 Background

In the following, theoretical background to the subject of identity will be introduced, first some general facts about identity and the formation from the literature, and then an overview and examples of what already is written on the subject.

3.1 Identity formation

Personal identity is to be true to yourself, there is me-identity and there is self-identity (Egidius, 2008). Me-identity is the experience of yourself, answering for your own thoughts, feelings, decisions and acts. Self-identity is the experiences of continuity, the feeling of reflect over what you have done and experienced previously and bring this back to its own person (Egidius, 2008). The athletic identity is part of the self-identity, it is defined as the degree to which an athlete recognizes him- or herself in terms of the athletic role (Brewer, Selby, Linder & Petitas, 1993).

Hwang and Nilsson (2011) say that identity relates to individuals' experiences of themselves and is made of three aspects: Biological, psychological and social identity. Biological identity is described as the part of the identity that is connected to our sex, our look and our body. With the psychological part of identity we find our unique feelings, interests, needs and defense mechanisms. The social part is about the possibilities the environment gives in way of expressing the identity, e.g. different cultures.

Identity is not static but always under construction, as new experiences emerge (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011). According to Hwang and Nilsson (2011), the development of identity is dependent and both exploration and positioning. They define four stages of identity level:

- This step is the first where the foundation of the formation is laid. The people in this group are still in a period of exploration and experimenting, and have not yet definite stand. In Hwang and Nilsson (2011), they describe these persons as more unsure. They are more sensible and tend to totter in their family relations. They switch between rebellious and compliant. This can be seen as the state before complete identity (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).
- This step comes after step one. Those who have developed a complete identity, that has tried different environments and taken their stand in what they mean about it. They reflect over their actions and goals and are ready to change these if needed. A person with completed identity do not only change for what other thinks and means, it also listen to its own considers and goals (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).
- This step explains those who do not complete the first step. People in this group have settled with their identity before there are done exploration. These people can be very determined in their view and have a strong ego. Hwang and Nilsson (2011) thinks, despite this, that they have a weak identity and are vulnerability before coming life crises. These people have often uncritically adapted values from their parent or other important people in their life. Their values can often be conservative or even rude. They are often close to their families, and hard to separate from them. They will probably create stereotypes and shallow relations (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).
- This step stands for itself, those who are in this group has not been through the other steps.



People in this group avoid exploring alternative roles and perspectives. They have not found some valid values to make their own either. Some seems to float through life without worries and unengaged, others suffer from loneliness and feeling of being an empty shell. People in this group use to have weaker psychological adaption than the other three groups (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).

Hwang and Nilsson (2011) think the development of identity can be seen in three parts. The first of these three parts happens when the little child uncritically makes a picture of what his or her parents and other important persons convey. The second part comes with time, when the identity develops as the person identifies him/herself with others. But there are still, according to Hwang and Nilsson (2011), a lot of different images that are not yet integrated. The third part is in the teens, when the person more or less unconsciously considers the images of him/herself. Some of them are kept, others which fit to who he or she feels they are, will be trashed. Miller (1993) confirms this and argues that although the identity grows and changes, the early identity will always be underneath and a part of the new identity. Smith (2000) writes that the identity-formation is a very important part of the maturity process. To let go of the identification of the childhood can give a sense of loss and confusion, but is necessary to get an independent identity (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011). The key to solve the teenage identity crisis is interaction with others, both the same age and adults. Other persons work as mirrors for the teenagers which may help them get a stable image of themselves. The ideal identity development involves finding social groups that go along with the persons own biological and psychological conditions (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).

Hwang and Nilsson (2011) thought that the creation of identity through the teens is a condition for the next stage, intimacy contra isolation, where you are capable of engaging in another person. The thought that a person has to know him/herself before it is possible to love another is now publicly accepted. Many psychologists think that self-knowing and closeness to another person is close connected to each other, because you learn to know yourself through someone else (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011).

3.2 How identity might play out in sport

Brewer (1993) has shown that socialization process, the entrance into the sport, and the process of learning what is allowed and what is not, that occurs in an athlete's environment, can create a narrow social identity, because of restricted roles. The athletic role is what athletes identify with social identity, and they see their athletic role as strength (Martin, Eklund & Mushett, 1997). It can create problems because the athletes do not know of any other identities, they cannot but be athletes, and therefore have problems managing roles as being a friend or a student (Martin et al., 1997). Smith (2000) confirms this by saying that the role of athletic identity has a strong influence on social relations. The athletes with a strong athletic identity will probably be drawn to other athletes with the same level of identity compared to those with less athletic identity (Callero, 1985). Research also says that strong athletic identity has a negative effect on the motivation if the athlete is unable to participate in sport (Martin et al., 1995).

Athletic identity is a relevant psychological construction to look at, because of the potential consequences on psychological, social and behavioral aspects (Martin et al., 1997). The role-identity can be defined as a particular social object (Martin et al., 1997) that represents a dimension



of the whole identity. As a social object, a role-identity must necessarily be shared, socially recognized, and defined by action. In this sense a role-identity serves as a link between the individual self and society. Role-identities differ from traditional conceptualizations of role in that they are not limited to societal expectations. They differ from a psychological identity, or personality, in that they stand for objective social positions, and cannot be pure subjective experiences. Callero (1985) writes that salient role-identity is important, because of the correspondents with general self and self-definition. Think of a person who has the role-identity of a baker, chess player and a sportsman. And the role as a sportsman is more important than baker and chess player, and then the self-definition should reflect the sportsmen role-identity. Then the general self, should be influenced by the role of sportsmen and the two should be closely correspondent. He says that successfully performance in the salient role-identity gives positive self-esteem (Callero, 1985).

McCall and Simmons (1978 cited in Callero) use an example to explain how the role-identity affects the daily life. A mode-blogger who drives down a city street, most probably sees the stores and wonders if there has come some new clothes she has not seen, a bodybuilder looks at other people to see if there is someone bigger than himself, while a longboarder maybe studies the tarmac and wonder if it's a good cruising street or not.

Research shows that athletes lower their self-investments in sport if they feel the risk of something threatening their athletic identity (Brewer, 1993). Brewer et al. (1999) found that American footballers tended to reduce their athletic identity because they were dissatisfied with their performance, while those who were satisfied did not do that.

3.3 Identity formation in sport

Results in Hixson (2013) shows that sport activities have an effect on young people's identity development. Identity begins with the society that provides people with roles as basis of identity and self (Hogg et al., 1995). Role identity can be multiple self-definitions that people see as a consequence of the structural role position they have and from the social category they are in, an example of category can be sports (Hogg et al., 1995). Role identity gives people a meaning for the self. Role-identities imply that we do something, action (Hogg et al., 1995).

One of the most critical stages in identity formation is by many considered the adolescence (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This is confirmed in (Hixson, 2013) who suggest that some of the most important years in case of noticing changes in terms of their physical appearance and emotions are the aged of 16 and 17. Stryker (1987) thinks that we have different identities for each role we have in the society. Simon (1992) says that from an identity theory perspective, it is what other sees as appropriate that creates the set of expectations that is a role. This indicates how being part of sports team can form the identity, where all the members of the team, have more or less the same goals and expectations, which then forms the identity to best fit to the team and forming an athletic identity. Combining this with the youths seeking independence from parents and the growing importance of spending more time with their peers, even interacting with various peer groups, helps the establishment of their own personal identity (Hixson, 2013; Shakib & Dunbar, 2004).

The social environment that the sport provides lets young people learn skills and things about themselves, to form their identity (Hixson, 2013). The participants in Hixson's (2013) study,



thought their sport to be part of their identity. As a main interest, the sport was very important to the participants, and they had a sense of social belonging with the other who had the same interests (Hixson, 2013). The sport was influencing the identity development more if the participants felt it fitted them from the start (Coatsworth, Sharp, Palen, Darling, Cumsille & Marta, 2005). A link between identities and participation in sport has also been confirmed in other studies (Arnon, Shamai & Ilatov, 2008). When establishing their identity and the sense of self, the association to the sport can be very important (Hixson, 2013). The study also shows that the more frequent the participation is and the more it meant to them, the more effect it has on the formation of the identity.

3.4 Retirement in sport connected to identity

Some researchers believe that the person's degree of athletic identity is the most important individual factor affecting adjustment to retirement (Moshkelgoshaa et al., 2012). Moshkelgoshaa et al. (2012) extended the work of Chamaladis (1995) and found that there are more risk of experiencing problems related to retirement as an athlete, if the athlete highly value there athletic identity (Moshkelgoshaa et al., 2012). Just calling a person an athlete is in itself a big reason for the retirement problems (Moshkelgoshaa et al., 2012).

In a study on professional retired gymnasts, Lavallee, Gordon and Grove (2013) say that the stronger the athletes identified themselves with the sport, the more serious they experienced the problem with leaving it, partly because it was a central source of their self-definition. Another result of strong athletic identity is the duration of the adaption process, which will be longer (Stambulova, Stephan & Jäphag, 2006). A study from Grove, Lavallee and Gordon (2008), shows that those who, up until retirement, have kept their athletic identity are more vulnerable to the difficulties with the transition. There are strong relations between the time needed to make psychological adjustments to retirement and athletic identity (Grove et al., 2008). These relationships were more apparent for the social and emotional, than for the occupational and financial aspects of the adjustments. Those athletes with high role identity in the sport, who struggle more with the retirement, tends to frequently seek others for assistance and/or emotional support (Grove et al., 2008).

Another consequence of high identity-retirement problem is that the athletes also have a tendency to not suppress low-priority activities to better cope with the retirement (Sommerfield, Curbow, Wingard, Baker & Fogarty, 1996; Grove et al., 2008). Martinet al., (1997) shows that social support and career counseling might help against problems with transition out of sport, as a result of strong athletic identity.

Research from Stambulova et al. (2006) shows that athletes which retire voluntarily and has planned their retirement feel better about the retirement process and has higher self-efficacy regarding the adapting to the transition.

3.5 Consequences in relation to identity

Moshkelgoshaa et al. (2012) have shown that individuals are less likely to seek answers in work, education and lifestyle related choices, if they have been highly committed to the sport. Another research has shown that among college athletes, the professional maturity level was inversely related to athletic identity and limited identity (Moshkelgoshaa et al., 2012). If the athletic identity



is strong, it can lead to overtraining (Martin et al., 1997). A self-concept established from a strong athletic identity rest on the athletic role, and therefore, there are some athletes who struggle with participating in none sport events (Martin et al., 1997). Brewer (1993), shows that people whom self-worth rely mostly on their role-identity as an athlete, run a huge risk of depression after experiencing an athletic injury.



4 Method

In this part I will explain and show the methodological and theoretical framework I have used to make this paper, and some personal considerations of the advantages and disadvantages of my methods.

4.1 Design

It is a qualitative case study, which gives the type of answers that are interesting in relation to the aim. It is an interview-study where three retired handball players participated. A qualitative study is a research strategy that normally focuses on words and not quantifying data, where the focus is on generating theories (Bryman, 2011). A qualitative study takes distance from the nature-science model norms and approach, and focuses on how the individuals see and interpret their social reality (Bryman, 2011). Further, this kind of study houses a picture of the social reality as a continuously changing property that belongs to individual's creative and constructional abilities (Bryman, 2011).

4.1.1 Data production method

Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson and Wängnerud (2010) say that the purpose of an interview is to obtain descriptions of the interviewee's world in order to interpret the described phenomenon sentence, the researcher should strive to understand the world as the interviewee sees it. In my study, the interviewees were allowed to express themselves freely, much because of a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix). This openness gave room for free expression about the topic at hand, but also to elaborate and bring up other topics directly connected to the main subject (Bryman, 2011). Denscombe (2011) confirms this and says that you can get much more commentary and detailed answers. Esaiasson et al., (2010) says conversation-interviews give good opportunities to register unexpected answers, and it gives the opportunity to follow up on something that seems interesting, and also later (Bryman, 2011).

4.2 Sample and recruitment

My criteria were that those who were interviewed had to be handball players, have played at least 50 matches for the Norwegian national team, and that they are retired now.

To find these, I had to ask people I knew in the handball community, if they could help with some names that could fit. Then I checked their statistics at Handball.no (2013), to be sure. To get interview participant, I sent out an email to some athletes that matched my criteria. I did not get any response, so I called them up and told them who I was, a little about the study and asked if they were interested to help me. I ended up with three persons, one woman and two men, whose names have been changed in this paper.

"Fiona", has played 202 games for the national team, and during that time was the captain when her team won a bronze medal in women's world championship, and a silver medal at the Olympics, she was active for on the national team for 11 years and stopped playing on the national team in 1990. One of the men, "Peter", has played 54 games for the national team, been active in the Norwegian top division for 8 years and stopped playing in 2007. The last man, "Tom", has played 54 games for the national team, been active in the Norwegian top division for around 12 years and stopped



playing in 2000.

4.3 Instrument and gathering data

The study was done using an interview schedule as a guideline (See appendix). This schedule was adopted from a study on Olympic athletes (Barker-Ruchti, Barker, Lee & Rynne, 2011). Please see the methods discussion for further explanations in this regard. The order of the questions was not important, as long as the interviewees spoke freely. I just saw to it that I guided them further with the topic or to the next, when they stopped talking. All of the interviews were done face to face, one was conducted in a local handball arena and the other two were held in the interviewees' offices. I used a voice-recorder and later transcribed the recordings. The interviews were only done on one occasion. My first and shortest interview was done as a trial to see if the questions worked, which they did, and the data from this trial were used together with the data from the later interviews. The length of the interview varied from 12 to 28 minutes.

4.4 Analysis

I have analyzed my interviews according to the relevance of my research objectives. I coded my data to generate categories and concepts, which in turn will help to give a structured view of my data (Bryman, 2011). The way I did this was to start marking words when I read through my transcripts, words that seemed important and relevant to my aim. Afterwards I gathered the codes, some were thrown away because they did not fit in with the overall aim, the rest I gathered in categories, where those relevant to each other were together. The categories were then connected to a concept that I could use in the result and discussion. See the table 1 in the result.

4.5 Ethical concerns

- Information requirement: All participants were informed of the interview before we started the interview. They got information of who the answers were going to be used by and that all participation was voluntary.
- Acceptance requirement: The participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they had to choose themselves how they wanted to answer.
- Confidentiality requirement: The participants are anonymous because the questions in the interview do not concern any private information about them. Nothing can be traced back to them because I do not write anything about them that are traceable. No information, names or personal achievements that can point them out among the population is mentioned in this paper.
- Exploitation requirement: The data from the interviews will only be used in this study and not for anything else.
- All these points had to be accepted before the data could be used.



4.6 Method discussion

In this section there will be discussed parts of the method, to clarify aspects that can impact the answers and the result of the study. The points I will explain are: (1) retrospective study; (2) time since retirement; (3) the length of the interviews; and (4) the interview schedule.

One problem with having a retrospective study is that the interviewees can have forgotten some of the problems they had, and that it would seem very positive today, compared with how it really was. But then again, my goal is to see how it is today.

The time since retirement is one factor that is important to aware of. Peter only retired 6 years ago and Fiona for almost 20, the extra time she has have given her more time to reflect on the situation. This gives some difference in the sample, which is a good thing since I am not going to generalize.

Regarding the short interviews, the interview that only lasted 12 minutes was my first and a trail to test my skills and the questions. I did not get the interviewee to talk as freely as I wanted. I still used the data from that interview because it was good data. The next lasted about 19 minutes and the last for 28 minutes, so I was getting better. Another factor is maybe that the first interview was right before the interviewee had a match with the team he was coaching. Some may think, why do not just do another interview. Well when I transcribed the interviews, they seemed to have what I needed.

The reason I used an adopted interview schedule was that it related to what I had in mind for my study. The article I adapted it from had many similarities with mine, so I just translated it to Norwegian and used it to hold the tread through my interview.



5 Results and discussion

I will now show a short summary of the interviews, the results I have gotten from the analysis and discuss them up against my theory.

5.1 Summary of the interviewee's

“Tom” is in his mid-40's. He is a former electrician who now works as a team-leader, acting as coach for his daughter's handball team. He grew up with football, and did not try handball until he was 16, then played for some years in the 3rd highest league level. At the age of 19, a friend asked him if he wanted to come to train with the top team in the area, because they struggled with sickness and injury. He says it was a little cool to train with that many good players, and it was not long before he set his mind to beat them and be the best. From there he went right to the national team in few years. He has been retired for a little over 10 years, with 12 years in the top division and over 50 national team matches. The work ethic and discipline is/was an important factor for Tom, he saw that as one of his good characteristics. Tom did not start playing at a high level until he was around 20, but he said that he always saw himself as an athlete. For him the social part was not the most important part, but the competition the teammates gave was a good motivation. But he says he has learned a lot from being part of a team. The coaches were important persons because they had a lot of knowledge to share. Tom worked as an electrician all through his time at the top level.

“Peter” is in his early 30s. He is a sport-teacher at an elite sport high-school and coach for a local youth-team and sometimes takes the regional age talent-teams. He grew up when his club was the best in Norway, and says that it is part of why he chooses to stick to handball instead of football. He played with his friend from a young age, they even played in the breaks at school. He had his idols in his own club, and says it was huge when he was able to train with them. He has always been one of the best, and was selected to national youth team from the beginning. But because of the high level in the club at that time, he did not have the feeling of control until he was 21 years old, then he had his spot on the top national level, and had gotten his debut on the national team. He has been retired for 6 years. The work ethic and discipline was an important factor for Peter, and associated himself with it. The social part was an important part of why he played handball. Like the experiences from travels with the team and being part of a team. The ability to care for other teammates was important for Peter. The social environment in his handball team has been a crucial part of his youth. He was the team captain, who made him proud, because that meant someone thought he had some good social qualities. Peter says that both other players, especially the older ones, and the different coaches have had a big impact on the formation of his identity. Peter also said that as he got better he saw that his ego, his focus on himself got bigger, he still cared for his teammates and appreciated the social part. But he sat aside most of his social life outside the sport, and focused on training, food and sleeping. Peter is educated psychiatrist, but now works as a teacher. He has learned that you do not always end up as you think. But he knows that whatever he had ended up as, it would have been something that has to do with teaching. One of the most important things he brings with him from the handball is the self-knowledge. He says the things he got from the other players and coaches in his career, is very useful in the situation as a teacher. He has settled with a good job that he likes and as a father. But he did not seem to be happy with the retirement, he said that he could easily have continued for 3-4 years more, just to see how good he



could have become.

“Fiona” is in her late 40s. She works as a teacher on a county college and coaches local youth teams. When little, she was competing in orienteering, and did not start with handball until the age of 13-14. She soon felt that the social part and ball handling was something for her. She has always been good in handball, had her debut at the national team at 19 years of age, but did not have her breakthrough until some years later. She says her career has had a very good progression. She has been retired for around 20 years. She has had a very successful career if you look at what she has achieved, she has played over 200 matches for the national team, won a bronze medal in women’s world championship, and a silver medal in the Olympic. She saw herself as a serious athlete that had the ability to push herself hard and also train on her own when needed. She always saw herself as an athlete from a young age, but played competitively in different sports until the age of 18, she even was at a national level in orienteering before she quit. So she did not focus 100% on handball before that. She says she is a very curious and caring person and appreciated the social part and says that it was an important factor for her participation. She was captain of her team, and says she hopes it was because of her social skill and abilities. She saw the coaches as important persons for her throughout her career. Fiona also mentioned her friends outside the sport, as a formation factor. She says they made her remember that there was a life outside the sport, and that it was important for her to do that. Fiona speaks of the education she took besides the handball, she was done with it before her breakthrough, but she did not work full time as long as she played national team handball. After Fiona's career as a player ended, she has had different jobs relating to handball. Like been in the board of directors at some handball federation, been part of a high level coach team, been in the sport coordinator team for the Olympic Games, and more. She seems happy with the way it has turned out with work and family, and said that her career was one important period of her life, but now she has other things. There is a time for everything she says. She meets the other players she played with on the national team, around to times a year on arranged veteran competitions, and she lives in the area where her main club is, together with many of her old teammates. But it is not that important for her, the friend that where there before she won the silver, when she won it and still is there now that she’s not winning anymore, are more important.



5.2 Results of the analysis

5.2.1 Table: 1.

Categories:	Codes:	Similarities
Characteristics	Work ethic	Winner mentality is a good characteristic for giving it all on training and matches.
	Discipline	Discipline is needed to do what is needed to be the best.
	Care	Care is an important ability if you are going work as good as possible in a team.
	Social	To pay attention to others in a group and know how to work with them in the best possible way.
	Sense of justice	Sense of justice is good to have for it to be fair to everyone in a group.
	Commitment	To whatever it takes to succeed.
Contextual Factors	A team	Cohesion of a team, other players, is important for the feeling of being part of something.
	The environment	The atmosphere expectations and people with a common goal.
	A goal	Having a goal to work towards, gives meaning in everyday life.
	Being captain	Being a captain learns what responsibility is.
	Coach	A person that is important and gives them important values.
	Other Friends	Friends outside the handball that has other identities and focuses.
	Age	There are differences in how much the identity is formed depending on the age.
Experience	Leader	The ability to be a good leader that people respect and listen to.
	Work	Important part of people's life.
	Hobby	Important part of people's life.
	Communication	The ability to communicate with different kinds of people in the best possible way.

Table 1: This table shows how I have arranged my codes, which are in the middle. I have arranged them in categories, to the left and explained them, which can be seen to the right.

5.2.2 Characteristics

The *characteristics* are a theme that relates to personal identity characteristics that the interviewees saw as important to succeed and fit into the sport.

The three former handballers saw themselves as athletes and there were some similarities in the characteristics they saw as an important part of their identity. Everyone seemed to have seen themselves as hard working, disciplined with a winner mentality. Tom said:

“The way I am made, whatever environment I am introduced to, I don't settle with being the second best, I do whatever I can to be the best.”

While Peter says.

“I was engaged, had a lot of temperament and bad loser, and I think it is important. Should you succeed in handball, football or whatever it is, you have to have that little madness in you, you may well be nice and caring, but not when playing a match. I think you have to have the little madness, the winner instinct, to be the



best.”

Fiona and Peter saw themselves as very social and caring, while Tom was more interested in his own success than the social part. He said it like this:

“It is important to have sharp elbows, I didn't care very much for those around me, I just wanted to show that I could be the best.”

The sense of justice was something that Fiona mentioned, that it was a characteristic that was important for her as a captain. They were all very committed, they did what was needed of them to be as good as they could. Peter said that he could not prioritize the social life outside the handball that much. Same with Fiona who says it was seldom she had the opportunities to go to weekend trips with her friends, there was always something to do related to handball. Tom even nearly missed the birth of one of his children, because of one of their weekly games.

There seems to be some similarities and some differences. The ability to work hard and willingness to win was important for all three. Peter and Fiona appreciated the social skill. Fiona mentioned sense of justice. And everyone saw commitment as important.

5.2.3 Contextual Factors

Contextual Factors are a theme that relates to the factors that affected the formation of identity. Factors that they mentioned to have had an important impact on themselves.

The team and the environment seems to be the biggest factor of formation, confirmed in (Hixson, 2013). As Peter mentioned it like this.

“I played with national team relatively early, 20 years, and you learn very much, you look at different personalities, characteristics and different kind of people, and at is clear that you get formed by that.”

But there are some differences in how their careers have developed. They have all been players at the top level, but Peter was the one who started at the youngest age and retired earlier than the other two, who started at a later age and kept on longer. This means that of all the time Peter played handball, it was only 1/3 of the time he played at the top level, while with the other it was the other way around. 2/3 or more of their time as handball players, they played at the top level. If we look at Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), one of the most critical stages in identity formation is by many considered the adolescence. Further Miller (1993), says that the identity-formation is a very important part of the maturity process. Hixson (2013) says in the study that athletes thought their sport to be part of their identity. So what these three studies are saying is that handball has affected Peter in his critical part of the identity-formation. Then maybe it has had a bigger impact on his identity than the other two, who had other aspects that also affected them when forming their identity. When asked what was the most negative about handball Peter answers that he regrets quitting so early.

I'm maybe a bit bitter at myself, for not taking it further, that it I quit so early, I regret it a bit today, I should have known better, 28 is no age, you can play the handball until 40, so I could go on a 3, 4, 5 year in any case.

The trainers were also mentioned to have an impact. It looks like both Tom and Peter's identity and focus grew stronger through their career, Fiona seemed to keep hold of an identity outside the sport. Something that can be to her advantage as Brewer (1993), has shown that socialization in sport can create a narrow social identity, because of restricted roles. Another factor is the expectations and



responsibilities of being captain, which both Peter and Fiona were. Fiona also mentioned her friends outside the handball environment, and says that they were important for her.

“My other friend has been a good counterpoint, it was good to have someone there when we lost a game, to remind me of the fact that winning a game is not the most important thing in life, there are other important things in life to.”

A little summary show that the team and the environment were important in the formation process of all three. There are some differences in how their careers looks like. Peter played relatively short at top level compared with his time as a junior, while the other two had long senior careers compared with junior. The trainers were important for everyone. Fiona was the only one that mentioned an identity outside the sport. Peter and Fiona mentioned being captain of their team as important.

5.2.4 Experience

Experience is a theme that relates to the things they have learned through their career and where they have had use of it. This theme shows which experiences the interviewee's has gotten from their career and which of those they have used in coping with the retirement.

There seems to be some similarities in how they have coped with their retirement, it looks like all of them has found a way to transfer some aspects of their athletic identity into the retirement. The way they did it seems to be by using their experience together in work and hobby. All of them have hobbies or work that has something that relate to their handball career. Tom work in an electrician company, but his tasks at work is much the same as he had at the handball field. He says that it is actually the most important skill he has gotten from the sport, the ability the make people work towards the same goal, which he uses on daily basis at work. He says that getting the team at work to perform is much the same as getting 14 players to perform together on the field. This can be linked to Lavallee et al., (2013) who says the socialization process in sport, the high-level competitions the athletes participate in, can play an important role their development of life skills. Peter is teaching young students to play handball, these both relate to his role as a captain and a team player. It is much the same with Fiona who also teaches and relates it to the roles she had as player, such as a caring person that helped everyone to participate and the captain communicate with everyone. And everyone has ended up as some sort of leaders.

5.3 Discussion

There seems to be three points that look interesting: 1) Level of commitment in relation to performance. 2) Education. 3) Gender. If we look at what we got, there seems that Fiona is the one who has coped best with the retirement, Tom do not seem to bother that much either, but Peter said he regrets quitting so early when asked if there was something negative with handball. This can relate to the stronger the athletes identified themselves with the sport, the more serious they experienced the problem with leaving it, part because it was a central source of their self-definition (Grove et al., 2008).

5.3.1 Level of commitment in relation to performance

One factor that looks pretty clear is the relation between commitment or the athletic identity and the



level of performance. If we look at Tom, who was very committed, but his athletic identity was not necessarily attached to handball until a few years before he had his breakthrough (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011; Miller, 1993). Peter seems to have the most handball-influenced identity and he is the one with the fewest years on top. But Fiona who did not quit orienteering until the age of 18, and then she says she still thought it important to become educated, she had friends who always reminded her of other things than sport. She is also the one with the most identities to lean back on. She has achieved the great performances and she is the one who seems to be the most relaxed about the retirement. So it looks like she always had something other than sport to relay on if needed, which is good because there are more risk of experiencing problems related to retirement if the athlete highly value there athletic identity (Moshkelgoshaa et al., 2012; Stambulova et al., 2006). And she has achieved something that very few in the world would ever dream of, much more than her expectations. It seems they all had strong athlete identities, but those who meet their expectations seemed to cope better with the retirement. This makes sense if we look at an earlier study (Callero, 1985), who say that the role identity must be socially recognized, and defined by action, that it serves as link between the individual self and society. Another important thing to consider, is that the length of their sporting career, that it can be seen as success just as much as the results and medals, which again gives Tom and Fiona an advantage in coping with the retirement.

5.3.2 Education

Another factor that sticks out is their education. Tom was done with the trainee time before his breakthrough, and says that his experiences from handball have helped him to get promoted at work. Peter is educated as a psychiatrist and as he said, if not for the handball he would have worked as that, but now he is a teacher. Fiona is educated a sport-teacher, and had a part-time job, the last part of her career. This shows that all of them had something to go back to when ended their career. Fiona even did some years work for the handball federation, which seems to have helped the transition.

5.3.3 Gender

The time when my interviewees were active was from the late 1970's, Fiona, to some years into the 2000's, which was Peter. The important thing here is that women's handball was not much known at the time, which means that the pressure from the surroundings was not as big on the female athletes as on the male athletes, and that they probably had less resources. Which in turn affect the athlete identity, and once again to Fiona's favor because she did not rely very much on her identity and she did not have that much pressure from the surroundings, she actually was part of the generation that raised the bar of expectations for female handball to a higher level then the men's.

The women handball in Norway had their breakthrough in the period from 86 – 88 with a bronze in the world championships and a silver in the Olympic Games. Since then they have gathered as many as 9 gold medals and 11 silvers and bronzes in the European championship, world championship an Olympic games (Handball, 2013)



6 Conclusion:

In this study, I aimed to:

- Is there a relation between career, identity formation and retirement?
- What makes some athletes cope better with the transition than others, with focus on identity?

It looks like the performances through the career compared to the athletes own expectations have a big impact on their retirement. Fiona and Tom performed as good as they seemed to expect while Peter had high goals, but ended with a short career and not that satisfied with his performances compared to what he thought he could achieve.

The level of identity was something that affected the athletes' retirement process, the bigger their Athletic identity was and the more important it was, the bigger was the problems coping with the retirement.

It looks like the three interviewees are grateful for their work and hobbies. They seem to have transferred some of the important aspects of their former sport to their new lifestyle and therefore do not seem to miss it that much. To better cope with the retirement they have found something that gives them the same joy, challenges and motivation and a thing they can use their experience.



7 Further research

Further research could be good, examining more participants and be shure that all of them have settled completely and find out how they have coped with retirement. An idea could be to get several interviewees from the same club and period of time, to get a better comparison of the environment in relation to retirement. Other factors to compare could be performance, gender, education and how long they were active.



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9 Appendix

Inngang til sport:

- Kan du beskrive hvordan du begynte i din sport?
 - ↳ Hvorfor denne sporten?
 - ✦ Med hvem?
 - ✦ Hvor gammel var du da du startet din sport?

- Karriereutvikling:
 - ↳ Hva skjedde da?
 - ✦ Hvordan fikk du fremgang gjennom karrieren din?
 - ✦ Hvordan endret din deltakelse over tid?

(Relasjoner, folk som var viktige, reise, konkurranse, utvalg)

- ✦ Hvorfor endret din deltakelse seg og hvordan?
- ✦ Når følte du at du hadde en sjanse til å bli en olympisk idrettsutøver?

- Sosial læring:
 - ↳ Hva trengte du å lære for å gjøre det bra i denne idretten?
(Her kan det være nyttig å liste med penn og papir og gå gjennom individuelt i neste spørsmål)

(Mulige områder: arbeidsmoral, selvinnsikt, selvregulering, kunnskap om systemet, identifisere personer som var viktig)

- ✦ Hvordan fikk du vite disse tingene?
- ✦ Hvem lærte dere disse tingene fra?
- ✦ Har du endret deg som person? Hvis ja, på hvilke måter og hvordan tror du at du endret som person gjennom hele din karriere?
- ✦ Var det aspekter som du ikke ønsker å adoptere eller som du ikke vil identifisere du med?
- ✦ Om ikke du hadde toppidrettsmiljøet, hvordan ville det ha påvirket dem som menneske?
- ✦ Hvordan fikk toppidrettserfaringene (i form av år opplæring som toppidrettsutøver) påvirke deres ferdigheter i sport?



- Kontakter med andre:

- Kan du si hvem du har hatt kontakt med regelmessig?

- ✦ Hvem var viktig for deg i din sportslige sammenheng (i vid forstand)?

(Igjen, kan det være nyttig å liste med penn og papir og gå gjennom individuelt for å finne ut hvorfor / hvordan hver av disse menneskene var viktig).

- ✦ Hvorfor ble disse menneskene viktig?

- ✦ Hva ga disse menneskene deg?

- ✦ Hvordan formet disse menneskene den du er i dag?

- Hvordan sammenligner du deg med andre idrettsutøvere?

- ✦ Hvordan var du den samme eller annerledes enn andre idrettsutøvere?

- ✦ Er dette bra / dårlig? På hvilke måter?

(Også be intervjuobjektet til å gi eksempler: f.eks Hvordan folk tilnærming trening og / eller konkurranser?)

- ✦ Føler du at du gjorde det samme som andre idrettsutøvere?

- Sport-spesifikke aspekter

- Hvilke aktiviteter innenfor sporten like og mislikte mest?

- Hva er i dine øyne, mest verdsatt av andre innen denne sporten?

- Hva gjorde deg en vellykket idrettsutøver? Hvorfor tror du at du ble en toppidrettsutøver?

- Hvorfor er det noen som ikke slår igjennom?