



Elite athletes' environment and their capability to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport

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Abstract

This article adopts the perspective of Sen's capability approach to examine elite athletes' environment and their capability to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. Interviews were conducted with 14 elite athletes in Canada and results from the thematic analysis reveal that discrepancies exist in the athletes' environment. Three types of environments emerged from the findings: enabling, restricting, or hindering athletes' capabilities to plan and prepare their transition out of sport to a career they value. The difficulties reside more specifically in the possibilities they have to prepare an education path of their choice while being part of the national team. The results highlight that even though support from family and teammates is essential, it is not sufficient, as the support of coaching staff was shown to be crucial. The role of Game Plan advisors varies according to athletes' type of environment and underline the importance of going beyond their role of individual counseling in certain types of environments.

Keywords Career planning · Elite athlete · Capability approach

Résumé

L'environnement des athlètes d'élite et leur capacité à planifier et préparer une transition de carrière hors du sport

Cet article adopte la perspective de l'approche par les capacités de Sen pour examiner l'environnement des athlètes d'élite et leur capacité à planifier et à préparer une transition de carrière hors du sport. Des entretiens ont été menés avec 14 athlètes d'élite au Canada et les résultats de l'analyse thématique révèlent l'existence de divergences dans l'environnement des athlètes. Trois types d'environnements peuvent être identifiés des résultats: ceux qui permettent, limitent ou entravent les capacités des athlètes à planifier et préparer leur transition hors du sport vers une carrière qu'ils apprécient. Les difficultés résident plus spécifiquement dans les possibilités qu'ils ont de préparer un voie de formation de leur choix tout en faisant partie de l'équipe nationale. Les

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résultats soulignent que même si le soutien de la famille et des coéquipier-ère-s est essentiel, il n'est pas suffisant, car le soutien du personnel d'entraînement s'est avéré crucial. Le rôle des conseiller-ère-s du programme Plan de match varie selon le type d'environnement des athlètes et souligne l'importance d'aller au-delà de leur rôle de conseil individuel dans certains types d'environnement.

Zusammenfassung

Das Umfeld von Spitzensportler*innen und ihre Fähigkeit, einen beruflichen Übergang nach dem Sport zu planen und vorzubereiten

In diesem Artikel wird die Perspektive des Capability-Approach von Sen eingenommen, um das Umfeld von Spitzensportler*innen und ihre Fähigkeit zur Planung und Vorbereitung eines beruflichen Übergangs nach dem Sport zu untersuchen. Es wurden Interviews mit 14 Spitzensportler*innen in Kanada geführt, und die Ergebnisse der thematischen Inhaltsanalyse zeigen, dass es Diskrepanzen im Umfeld der Sportler*innen gibt. Aus den Ergebnissen lassen sich drei Arten von Umfeldern ableiten: Sie ermöglichen, beschränken oder behindern die Fähigkeit der Athlet*innen, ihren Übergang aus dem Sport in eine wünschenswerte berufliche Laufbahn zu planen und vorzubereiten. Die Schwierigkeiten liegen vor allem in den Möglichkeiten, die sie haben, um einen Bildungsweg ihrer Wahl vorzubereiten, während sie Teil der Nationalmannschaft sind. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, dass die Unterstützung durch Familie und Mannschaftskamerad*innen zwar wichtig, aber nicht ausreichend ist, da sich die Unterstützung durch das Trainerteam als entscheidend erwiesen hat. Die Rolle der Spielplanberatenden variiert je nach Art des Umfelds der Athlet*innen und unterstreicht, wie wichtig es ist, in bestimmten Umgebungen über ihre Rolle der individuellen Beratung hinauszugehen.

Resumen

El entorno de los deportistas de élite y su capacidad para planificar y preparar una transición profesional fuera del deporte Este artículo adopta el enfoque de las capacidades de Sen para examinar el entorno de los deportistas de élite y su capacidad para planificar y preparar una transición profesional fuera del deporte. Se realizaron entrevistas a 14 atletas de élite de Canadá y los resultados del análisis temático revelan la existencia de entornos divergentes entre los atletas. A partir de los resultados se pueden identificar tres tipos de entornos: los que permiten, limitan o dificultan la capacidad de los deportistas para planificar y preparar su transición fuera del deporte hacia una carrera que les guste. En concreto, las dificultades residen en las oportunidades que tienen de prepararse para un itinerario de formación de su elección mientras siguen en la selección nacional. Los resultados destacan que, aunque el apoyo de la familia y de los compañeros de equipo es esencial, no es suficiente, ya que el apoyo del personal técnico resultó ser crucial. El papel de los asesores del Plan de Juego varía según el tipo de entorno de los deportistas y pone de manifiesto la importancia de ir más allá de su función de asesoramiento individual en algunos tipos de entorno.

Retiring from sport can bring athletes its own burden of difficulties, namely uncertainty about the future, a sense of loss of control, a feeling of emptiness, difficulties in defining oneself, depressive feelings, and confusion (D'Angelo et al., 2017; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Webb et al., 1998). Research shows that planning retirement and what comes next as a career after sport has a significant influence on adaptation after retirement (Clowes et al., 2015; Pearson & Petipas, 1990; Stambulova et al., 2009). Athletes who do not plan their career transition out of sport are more likely to experience moderate to severe difficulties in different areas of their life, such as education, family, and leisure (Alfermann et al., 2004; Barriopedro et al., 2019).

Planning the transition out of sport is associated with more positive emotional responses, fewer emotional difficulties in retirement, a shorter post-retirement transition period, and greater life satisfaction (Alfermann et al., 2004). Engaging in career transition planning is also positively associated with being selected to be part of the team and the number of years as a member of the team, i.e., longer retention in a sport career (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lavallee, 2019). This planning gives the athlete a sense of control over the transition, which in turn increases self-efficacy and helps ensure a successful post-career adaptation (Alfermann et al., 2004). Considering these findings, resources have been developed to help athletes plan their transition out of sport. More than 60 career support programs have been created in the last two decades (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). More specifically in Canada, elite athletes (national team members) have access to various resources through the Game Plan program from the moment they make the national team until 2 years after retirement. These resources, divided in five pillars (career, education, skill development, networking, and health) aim to provide athletes with tools to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport, and offer them support when they retire from sport. These resources, available free of charge to 2,500 eligible active and retired athletes (Game Plan, 2020), are delivered by a team of advisors (one per province) that all have expertise working with elite athletes.

But it appears that it is not enough to make career support resources available in order for athletes to use them. In fact, research shows that many athletes refrain from engaging in retirement planning (North & Lavallee, 2004). This is also true in Canada where, despite the availability of career support resources and the significant efforts made to promote them, the Game Plan program showed a resource utilization rate of only 36% by eligible athletes in 2019. Among possible factors driving this lack of engagement in career transition planning are the disparities in athletes' environment. For example, in Canada, elite athletes receive a national bursary in the form of "carding". Canadian athletes that receive this national bursary are called carded athletes. Carded athletes declared an average annual income of CA\$28,858 and average annual expenses of CA\$52,800 in 2018, leaving them with an average shortfall of CA\$21,900 per year (EKOS Research Associates, 2020). But there are disparities among athletes in regard to their income and their expenses. For example, winter athletes and Paralympic athletes declared a higher income (CA\$33,031 and CA\$33,073) (EKOS Research Associates, 2020). Federal carding is also distributed regardless of where the athletes live and their personal economic situation. These disparities in the economic situations of athletes are also reflected in the

support they receive to pursue school. Even though all carded athletes benefit from CA\$5,500 in tuition support for every year they receive carding¹ (Government of Canada, 2022), the amount covered by this tuition is the same regardless of the institution in which one wishes to study or the cost of the chosen program of study. As for their location, all athletes are affiliated with a training center and can access their center's training facilities and services. When a sport is centralized, it means that all members of the national team have to be training at the same center, with the same coaching staff. In a decentralized sport, athletes train in different places with different coaches and come together at training camps or for competitions. This is important because an athlete joining the national team of a centralized sport might have to move out of province and change training clubs, coaches, and school.

Finally, all sports have their own culture and provide different levels of support to their athletes regarding the planning and preparation of their career outside of sport. Each one has a different set of rules and regulations regarding the time athletes are required to invest in their sport and number of weeks they have to be away for training camps or competition. These disparities in athletes' environments can create unequal opportunity to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport, despite having the same formal access to career support resources.

Multiple studies have explored career planning and preparation over the years. More specifically, research has focused on the main constructs associated with a positive career transition out of sport (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Knights et al., 2019; Lally, 2007; Lavallee, 2005; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Stephan, 2003; Torregrosa et al., 2015), the influence of career planning on sporting performance (Lavallee, 2019), the influence of organizational support and dual career on retirement planning (Surujlal, 2016; Tshube & Feltz, 2015), and coping strategies employed by athletes during the pre- and post-retirement periods (Clowes et al., 2015). Few researchers however have addressed the real opportunity athletes have to plan and prepare for their career transition out of sport by accounting for disparities created by the context in which they train and compete (sport environment). This gap in research was raised in the International Society of Sport Psychology's latest Position Stand on career development and transitions, which suggested that further research focus on successful and less successful athletes environments (Stambulova et al., 2020). Within the scope of this research, *career planning* is referring to process of gaining insights into work and education possibilities, discovering one's interests, values, and skills in order to find what to pursue as a career after sport. To prepare a career refers to preparing, via education or other means, for a transition into the career they have planned.

To explore such issues related to career planning, empirical research has developed using the Capability Approach as a conceptual framework (Robertson & Picard, 2021). The Capability Approach focuses on the dimensions of the person's private and professional life, the individual situation and its contexts, as well as actual access to opportunities to act (Boboc & Metzger, 2012). But the subject has not yet been studied using this approach with the population of elite athletes. Applied to the

¹ Up to a maximum of 5 years that can be used at Canadian Educational Institutions only,

planning and preparation of a career transition out of sport, the Capability Approach can bring to light the discrepancies between what athletes value and plan as a career outside of sport, and what they choose to pursue or how they choose to prepare for it. It allows for a reflection on the constraints that weigh on people and the opportunities they have to act, taking into account both what the person is capable of doing and the opportunities available to them in their environment (Fernagu Oudet, 2012; Corteel & Zimmermann, 2007). Therefore, this article aims to characterize the capability of elite athletes to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport within the context of their environment. In other words, the article explores the real opportunity they have to plan a career they value and to prepare themselves for the transition into that career.

Sen's Capability Approach

Originating from the field of economics, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach addresses the issue of individual well-being from a human development perspective. It is a normative framework created to evaluate individuals' well-being and social context, and the design of public policies and proposals for change within a society (Robeyns, 2005). The Capability Approach is not intended to be a theory that can explain what causes inequality or well-being, but rather an approach that can provide a framework within which these phenomena can be conceptualized and evaluated (Robeyns, 2005). According to Sen (1987), well-being can be assessed by freedom of action in terms of the ways of being or doing that are valued by the individual. This definition is based on the fundamental distinction between the concepts of functioning and capabilities. Functioning refer to an individual's concrete ways of doing and being, while capabilities refer to people's actual freedom, that is, the actual opportunities they have to do or be (Robeyns, 2017). Capabilities are in fact the set of achievable functioning by the individual. Capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport refer to the possibilities the athletes have for gaining insights into work and education possibilities, discovering their interests, values, and skills in order to find what to pursue as a career after sport, and to prepare themselves, by pursuing education or other means, to transition into that career.

The goal behind evaluating what an individual has the opportunity to be or do instead of who the individual is and what they do is to incorporate the notion of freedom to act into the assessment of well-being (Al-Janabi et al., 2013) and thus develop mechanisms that could equalize this freedom as much as possible for individuals within the same community (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007). The real freedom that an individual has to lead the life they value can be measured according to the number of quality opportunities available to them as well as their real capacity to participate in the process of collective decisions and choices that concern them. The qualifier "real" is used to distinguish between what is accessible to the individual in principle and what is actually accessible to the individual according to the context in which he or she lives. Athletes' capability to choose or pursue an academic program can be constrained by the environment, limiting the possibilities to plan and prepare a career that they value outside of sport.

But in order to assess an individual's capabilities and functioning, the means and circumstances that can make these possible must also be examined (Robeyns, 2017), which implies knowing what resources are available to the individual, as well as the environment and context in which they live. By resources, Sen means the extent of an individual's personal, social, or financial capital, including their assets as well as the services they have access to. Sen also discusses formal rights, which are linked to accessible resources so that citizens can access justice, a good, or public services (Picard et al., 2015) (e.g., the right to pursue education no matter the sport or where the athlete is training). The distribution or development of resources, however, is not a guarantee of capability (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007). Two people with the same formal access to the same resources do not necessarily have the same actual freedom to use these resources. Different factors are required to convert the use of a resource into something beneficial to the individual. This transformation of resources into capabilities is possible with conversion factors (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007). Sen (1999) and Robeyns (2017) refer to the existence of conversion factors or alternatively the absence of conversion factors. The absence of adequate conversion factors may hinder the conversion of resources into actual freedom to act (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007).

Picard et al. (2015) have suggested a model of how the main concepts of the Capability Approach can be applied to career guidance. First, resources and entitlements (institutional context, public policy, social measures, and guidance services availability) are seen as means to choose a career formally available to an individual. The presence of adequate conversion factors (+CF) or factors hindering conversion (-CF) will then determine what education or career path the individual has the real freedom to choose (their capabilities). From these capabilities, an effective functioning will be chosen (educational program or employment pursued). Figure 1 illustrates the link between the main concepts of the Capability Approach applied to the field of career guidance.

An environment that makes resources available to an individual while allowing them to use it is said to be enabling (Fernagu Oudet, 2012). An enabling environment is favorable to the development of individuals' power to act, i.e., it allows them to expand their possibilities of action (Corteel & Zimmermann, 2007; Falzon, 2005a, 2005b, 2008), in this case related to athletes' capability to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. An enabling environment not only makes resources available to individuals, but also helps them to mobilize and use these resources (positive conversion factors) so that they become opportunities for action that they value (capabilities) (Fernagu Oudet, 2012).

Method

To characterize the capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport using the Capability Approach, a qualitative methodology was used, as suggested by Robertson (2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with active elite athletes. This type of interview is conducted using an interview guide that includes themes to be addressed.

Participant and recruitment

Participants were recruited among the respondents to the Game Plan program annual survey who agreed to be contacted for a qualitative interview. This web-based survey was sent to all active elite athletes across Canada (1,788 athletes from all summer and winter disciplines). Seventeen athletes agreed to participate in a subsequent qualitative interview, and fourteen managed to free up time to participate (five males and nine females). They were competing in twelve different sports, eleven from a summer discipline and three from a winter discipline. Five interviews were conducted in English and nine interviews, in French. The interviews lasted from 40 to 120 min.

Procedure and measure

A three-part interview guide was developed. The first part documented the moments of choice, turning points, and changes that had an influence on the planning and preparation of the athletes' career transition outside of sport, which the athletes were asked to indicate on a timeline, starting from when they first joined the national team. In the second part of the interview, the athletes were asked, for each of the choices listed on the timeline, about the existence or absence of other possibilities at the time of the choice, the decision criteria preceding the choice, the options they would have liked but that seemed inaccessible, and what facilitated or hindered the decision. The third and final block was used to collect information on their career transition out of sport and their use of career support resources. In addition, information was collected on the characteristics of their environment.

Data analysis

French interview transcripts were translated into English and all transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 software, according to the main concepts of the Capability Approach: resources, conversion factors, capabilities, and functioning. The support or lack of support in regard to the athlete's career transition planning and preparation was also coded. The thematic analysis focused on the athlete's environment and their capability to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. All of the participants' names have been changed to ensure their anonymity; therefore, fictitious names are used in "Results" section of the article.

Results

The results show three different types of environments: (A) one enabling capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport, (B) one restricting capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport, and (C) one hindering capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. A table summarizing the 14 participants' profiles is presented in Table 1 of Appendix 1. The results are presented

according to the three previous types of environments, with a description of a case vignette underlining the presence of adequate conversion factors (+CF) and factors hindering conversion (−CF) on their paths followed by a portrait of the participants categorized in that environment.

Environment A: enabling capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport

In this type of environment, all athletes were able to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport, choose a career they valued and pursue their academic program of choice during their sport career. Jeremy's case is a good illustration of this type of environment.

Jeremy had been a member of the national team for 12 years at the time of the research interview. He is a full time carded athlete (+CF) and competes in a summer sport. He was in college when he joined the national team and had to move to train with the group. He remembers feeling supported in this transition. He explains: “When I moved to Montreal, it was my national sport organization that helped me enrol in [a pre-university program]. They told me, there is a college there, it's francophone, it's not far. I was more than encouraged, I was kind of helped” (+CF). He says he always felt close to his family, friends, teammates as well as his coach with whom he has a very good relationship (+CF). “My coach follows up, cares about me”. By the time he enrolled in a pre-university program, Jeremy already knew the career he wanted to pursue and enrolled in his program of choice. He felt supported by his loved ones, teammates and coach to pursue school (+CF). He also reports benefiting from additional funding from his NSO (+CF). Jeremy is now completing his studies in a graduate program and wishes to be actively involved in his sport organization after his sport career. He never used career counseling resources because he felt he didn't need help.

Like Jeremy, all athletes in this type of environment felt supported by their friends, teammates and family (six athletes involved in a summer sport). It is interesting to note that two of these six athletes had taken part in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) circuit before joining the national team, where school is mandatory. One had already completed her bachelor's degree when she joined the national team and the other had few courses left and was able to complete them shortly after joining the team. They were both members of the national team for part of the year (on a part-time carding) and were part of a professional circuit for the other part, which involved different coaches. Therefore, the support they perceived differed depending of the coach, going from feeling extremely unsupported to feeling very supported in regard to the planning and preparation of their career transition out of sport. They were also the only two athletes from this type of environment who mentioned having to work to be able to make ends meet. The four other athletes felt supported by their coach and national sport organization staff members in terms of planning and preparing their career transition out of sport and didn't report financial difficulties. One athlete struggled pursuing school when he joined the national team and had to transfer high schools because he was told he would fail to graduate

if he did not have the required class attendance, which was not possible due to the increased training hours and competitions. He was then able to study in his pre-university program of choice, where it was easier for him to reconcile his sport and school activities. Three out of the six athletes met with their Game Plan advisors to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport.

Environment B: restricting capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport

Athletes in this type of environment struggled to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport due to an unfavorable environment, but were able to do so by overcoming multiple factors that hindered their capabilities, such as a non-supportive environment or difficulties regarding school adjustments.

The story of Brian, a member of the national team for 11 years at the time of the interview, is typical of this kind of restrictive environment. Brian is a full time carded athlete (+CF) competing in a winter sport. He recalls having no plan for a career outside of sport when joining the national team. According to him, in his sport organization, activities outside of sport are seen as a distraction that can jeopardize athletic results (−CF). Brian says that when athletes discuss a project outside of sport, this is looked upon as a sign that they are not engaged enough (−CF). “They’d be like, you’re either part of the team or you’re not a part of the team”. After suffering a major injury that left him facing potential retirement from sport, Brian felt out of options. He explains what went through his mind: “Okay, what am I doing with my life? Like, you know, I may as well keep competing because what else am I going to do, right?” Brian was also then experiencing financial difficulties at that time and explains that he was afraid of not finding a job quickly enough if he left sport (−CF). Following this, he decides to pursue his athletic career, feeling like he has no other choice. Brian says he had always felt supported by his teammates, family, and friends (+CF), but has a difficult relationship with his coach and the staff members of his national sport organization (−CF). He feels that they make choices strictly to win medals in order to secure their salaries. When resources are discussed, Brian recalls his meetings with his Game Plan advisor: “It was just another one of those times when I needed to talk to someone and I needed help and, so, she was that person because she was always there in the house and, and she’ll always be” (+CF). When he reaches another point in his career where he have to decide whether to continue in sport or to retire, he decides to meet with his Game Plan advisor to develop a career transition plan out of sport. After discussing options, he choose a profession he values and begin a training program (+CF). He then decides to continue sport while pursuing his vocational training. When asked if he felt it was the first time he had a choice whether to pursue sport or retire, Brian answers: “Yeah. And I think that’s a huge difference”. Talking about the support from his coach regarding his plan and preparation outside of sport, Brain said: “they don’t know what is going on in other people’s lives” (−CF).

Three of these athletes were carded full time. The other athlete was no longer carded because of an injury and was only supported by a small private sponsorship.

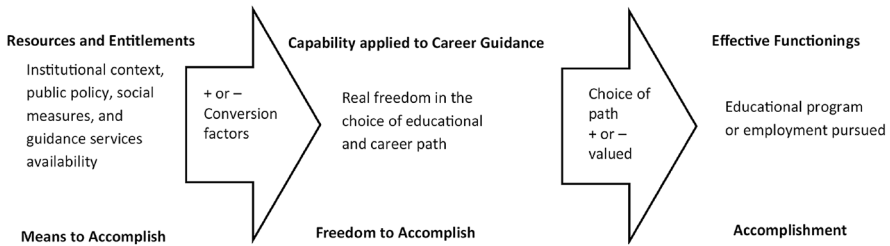


Figure 1 The usefulness of Capability Approach to career guidance (Robertson & Picard, 2021)

All athletes interviewed who were faced with such a restricting environment felt unsupported by either their coach or staff members of their national sport organization (or both) in regard to planning and preparing their career transition out of sport. For one athlete, this lack of support was also reflected in the lack of communication regarding available resources. Although it is not denigrated, the use of career support resources is not encouraged or even mentioned. This athlete described feeling like she had to make choices without knowing what options were available. All of them reported facing significant difficulty when came the time to prepare for the career they had chosen, and having to negotiate with professors and/or their coach to pursue their academic plan, or having to hide it or study full time in a virtual setting, which was not desired. All of them also reported having financial difficulties due to the expenses from their sport. Three of these four athletes were involved in a summer sport and one in a winter sport. Three of these four athletes had meetings regarding the planning and preparation of their career transition out of sport with a Game Plan advisor.

Environment C: hindering capabilities to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport

Athletes in this type of environment were not able to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. They all had to make choices they did not value in regard to their preparation for the transition plan they had developed.

The story of Peggy, a member of the national team for 4 years at the time of the interview, is typical of this kind of environment. Peggy is a full time carded athlete (+CF) and she was in her final year of her pre-university program when she joined the team. She explains that education had always been important to her and that she knew she wanted to go on to university. She feels supported by her parents (+CF); however, Peggy feels that her coach does not support her in her academic career (-CF). She reports feeling that the coach was even discouraging her from pursuing school (-CF). In her view, the coach seems to think that any other activity outside of sport is a distraction (-CF). She recalls being questioned repeatedly after sharing a personal activity she had planned: “That’s when I realized that you basically can’t say something to a staff person without everyone knowing” (-CF). Despite all this, Peggy decides to apply to her

university program of choice and receives an offer of admission. Seeing that it would be impossible to study without the support of her coach, she declines the program and turns to another program she feels is easier to pursue in conjunction with sport (–CF). She explains the impact of her coach’s lack of support on her decision:

Anyway, in the end, he’s still the one making the decisions. So if he says ah, in the last 2 years of the (Olympic) cycle, I recommend that you don’t go to school, you do like okay, do I go to school, so I kind of alienate him. But now he’s the one making the decisions, so he’s less likely to send me.

It is at this point that she makes an appointment with her Game Plan advisor to develop a career transition plan that she values. Talking about the guidance counseling process, Peggy explains, “It became clearer (+CF). And then, you know, there are things that are added, but I feel like the direction is still there.” Peggy decides to continue the program she has enrolled in until the end of her sport career even though it is not a program she values, and to apply again to her program of choice once she retire.

Out of the four athletes in this type of environment, two were competing in a summer sport and two in a winter sport. None reported facing financial difficulties and all of them were receiving a full time carding. On the academic side, none of the four athletes were able to pursue their program of choice at a pace they felt happy with. Three out of the four athletes felt that their coach and staff members of their national sport organization did not support them in regard to planning and preparing for their career transition out of sport. The other athlete felt supported but could not pursue her academic program because of her training and competition schedule and a lack of adjustment on the part of the school. Three athletes reported that their coach strongly discouraged them from pursuing school. According to one participant, although the resources are presented, they cannot be used without proper support from the national sport organization. As one athlete explained, although they were encouraged to use resources to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport, it felt as though they were not given the time to actually prepare (e.g., the time to pursue school or other training). In addition, one athlete noted the importance of this support coming from people who have a direct impact on their career, such as a coach or teacher. One athlete had to transfer high schools to be able to train the required number of hours to stay on the team, which meant transferring to a high school an hour away from home. These difficulties are also present at the pre-university and university levels. Two of the participants had to deny their offer of admission to their program of choice because no accommodation was possible on the part of school or sport, which resulted in one athlete pursuing another less valued program and one athlete dropping out of school. The other two athletes (one enrolled in a university program and one in a pre-university program) were pursuing school and only able to take few courses per year (two to four) which was less than what they would have liked in order to graduate within a timeframe they felt was reasonable.

Discussion

The different types of environments that emerged in the results show that not all athletes can plan and prepare for their career transition out of sport, equally. Although necessary, support from teammates and family does not seem sufficient to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. Athletes raised the importance of the support of their national sport organization. A lack of support from the coach appears to have a large impact on the athlete's capability to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport. These results echo those of previous research showing that athletes who received support from their coaches when retiring were less prone to negative emotions and difficulties and succeeded better in the transition, whether the retirement was voluntary or not (D'Angelo et al., 2017; Park et al., 2013; Surujlal, 2016). The results also underline the importance of taking into account the coach-athlete relationship as it has a large influence on the transition process (D'Angelo et al., 2017; Park et al., 2013; Surujlal, 2016). This raises the question of the role of national sport organization staff members in regard to their athletes' career planning and preparation for a career transition out of sport. Many researchers suggest that supporting athletes outside of sport is the responsibility of sport organizations and that it is imperative to put programs in place to assist them in planning and preparing for their life outside of sport (Sinclair & Hackfort, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2007). Support from the national organization is necessary in order for the athlete to experience a flourishing transition out of sport (Knights et al., 2019).

Few studies have looked at the concepts of planning and preparation separately. As described above, to *career planning* refers to a process of gaining insights into work and education possibilities, discovering one's interests, values, and skills in order to find what to pursue as a career after sport. *Preparation*, on the other hand, refers to preparing, via education or other means, for a transition for the career they have planned. The results of this study show that even though career support resources may help athletes in planning their career transition out of sport, some athletes lack opportunities to prepare for their transition into their career of choice by pursuing an academic pathway or training. Therefore, while athletes are able to plan for a career transition outside of sport, some athletes are unable to properly prepare themselves for the career they choose. Discrepancies exist in the athletes' environment that sometimes prevent them from making a choice they value because of a lack of possibility to pursue school, which makes them reconsider their original plan for one less valued. In addition, the lack of possible adjustments on either side (sport or academic) led some of the participants to face the difficult decision of choosing between sport and school.

As seen in the results, the role of the Game Plan advisors vary according to athletes' type of environment. In the enabling environment, the advisors play a role when needed in the athletes' planning and preparation of their career transition out sport. In the restricting environment, the advisors can play an important role by helping athletes overcome the barriers they face preparing themselves for the career they have planned for the transition out of sport. In the hindering

environment, the role played by the Game Plan advisors helps, but is not sufficient. It is therefore important that they go beyond their individual counseling role to other actions such as advocacy. Advocacy refers to the actions undertaken by professionals to remove the external and institutional barriers of their clients (Toporek & Liu, 2001), including building relationships with stakeholders and educating them on various relevant topics to help foster a more enabling environment.

The results of our study must be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. The number of athletes interviewed does not allow to generalize the results to all elite athletes. Furthermore, self-report responses on past experiences are susceptible to respondent bias and inaccurate memory recall. However, this approach is beneficial in terms of allowing participants to reflect upon the choices they made and recall significant moments of their sport career. To minimize inaccurate memory recall, a timeline was used to situate the athletes, on which each moment and choice was positioned. Other researchers who have used the Capability Approach have also used in-depth interviews to identify the different concepts (Olympio & Picard, 2016; Robertson, 2016). Finally, the small sample size for the interviews, gender and sport category (summer, winter) restriction of the current sample delimited the study. Multiple attempts were made to recruit more athletes and thus diversify the sample, without success. Although the results of this study can enhance the understanding of other athletes with a comparable journey, future research should explore the under-represented populations of male athletes and winter sport athletes.

Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to characterize the capability of Elite athletes to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport within the context of their environment. Even though career support resources are formally equally available to all, not all athletes have the same freedom to plan and prepare their career transition out of sport. The concept of athletic career, defined as an athlete's ability to sustain a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport and in life excellence, was recently introduced by Stambulova et al. (2020). In this definition, healthy refers to resourcefulness and adaptability (i.e., coping with career demands while adding to individual resources); successful means that athletes strive to achieve meaningful goals in sport and life while meeting basic psychological needs and maintaining health and well-being; and sustainable means sustainability and longevity in sport and life (Stambulova et al., 2020). Along these lines, the latest stand on career development and athlete transitions taken by the International Society of Sport Psychology raises the need for self-exploration of athletes' multidimensional identities in order to improve the foreclosure of the athletic identity² and re-conceptualized mental health as not only a resource but also an outcome of career development

² The degree to which the person identifies with the athlete role and the degree of exclusivity that this person attaches to it (Brewer et al., 1993).

(Stambulova et al., 2020). This underscores the importance of having access to career support resources early in the athlete sport career in order to help athletes explore other dimensions of their identity, to achieve career excellence and adapt more easily to retirement from sport (Stambulova et al., 2009). But results also show that these career support resources, although helpful, are not sufficient and highlight the importance of fostering sport environments that enable athlete's capabilities not only to plan but also to prepare for their career transition out of sport.

Implication for practice

Career guidance interventions with athletes aim to make them aware of their interests, values, and aptitudes in other areas of their lives. Furthermore, they aim to convert those resources into educational and professional opportunities they value (Robertson & Picard, 2021). Two athletes wanting to study in the same program might not have the same freedom to do so and might have to choose otherwise in order to be able to pursue sport. Career guidance counseling interventions tend to differentiate a choice made freely from one made with constraints (Picard et al., 2019). The results of a study analyzing the advocacy work of guidance counselors working in a school setting reveals that the relationship they develop with the school's principal is very important (Viviers et al., 2021). Drawing from this, Game Plan advisors could work with staff members of the national sport organization, especially coaches who are at the center of the organization, to educate them on the benefits of fostering enabling environments such as better sport performance due to feeling more balanced, a greater number of years competing, and a higher level of life satisfaction (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lavallee, 2019; Pink et al., 2015), so that their athletes can plan a career transition out of sport but also prepare themselves to transition into that career once they retire from sport.

Appendix A

Table 1 Classification of participants by types of environments

Enabling Environment	Restricting Environment	Hindering Environment
<p>Wendy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Feels supported by her NSO and coach ● Feels supported by her teammates and family ● Is able to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Bianca:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Did not feel the need to meet with a Game Plan advisor in regard to his career planning and preparation ● Reported several difficulties pursuing her preparation because of a lack of adjustments both on the sport and school sides ● Doesn't feel supported by her coach and NSO ● Reported having financial difficulties ● Feels unsupported by her family ● Feels supported by her teammates ● Is struggling to plan and prepare her career transition out of sport ● Carded full time ● Practice a summer sport 	<p>Peggy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Doesn't feel supported by her coach or NSO and reports that they openly discourage her from pursuing school ● Feels supported by her teammates and family ● Was able to plan a career outside of sport but wasn't able to prepare for it ● Received an offer of admission in her academic program of choice and had to decline it because of a lack of accommodation and support ● She is now pursuing a program she does not want to work in ● Carded full time ● Practices a winter sport
<p>Jérémy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feels supported by his NSO and coach ● Feels supported by his teammates and family ● Is able to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport ● Did not feel the need to meet with a Game Plan advisor in regard to his career planning and preparation ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Brian:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Doesn't feel supported by his coach or NSO ● Feels supported by his teammates and family ● Reported experiencing financial difficulties at one point in his sport career ● Is able to plan and prepare his career transition out of sport but refrains from discussing it with his coach or NSO because they would not approve ● Carded full time ● Practices a winter sport 	<p>Alicia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Doesn't feel supported by her coach or NSO and reports they openly discourage her from pursuing school ● Feels supported by her teammates and family ● Had to transfer in a high school one hour away from home ● Is able to pursue her pre-university program of choice at a very slow pace (two or three classes per year) ● Reports having a lot of difficulties balancing sport and school, being only able to study during Christmas vacations ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport

Table 1 (continued)

Enabling Environment	Restricting Environment	Hindering Environment
<p>Harrison:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feels supported by his NSO and coach ● Feels supported by his teammates and family ● Is able to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport ● Did not feel the need to meet with a Game Plan advisor in regard to his career planning and preparation ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Cassandra:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a guidance counselor, also specialized in sport, working with a Partner of the program ● Reported having difficulties balancing sport and school ● Feels supported by her coach but not her NSO ● Feels supported by her teammates and family ● Reported having financial difficulties ● Is able to study in her program of choice, but at a much slower pace than she would like, because she has to do a virtual program despite wanting to be in class ● Lost her carding because of an injury ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Annabelle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Doesn't feel supported by her coach or NSO and reports they openly discourage her from pursuing school ● Feels supported by her teammates and family ● Is able to pursue her university program of choice at a very slow pace (two or three classes a year) ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport

Table 1 (continued)

Enabling Environment	Restricting Environment	Hindering Environment
<p>Gregory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feels supported by his NSO and coach ● Feels supported by his teammates and family ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Is able to plan and prepare a career transition out of sport ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport <p>Victoria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Had been in the NCAA circuit prior to the national team ● Did not feel the need to meet with a Game Plan advisor in regard to her career planning and preparation ● Opinion on the coach support differs depending on the coach she had ● Was able to graduate in her program of choice before joining the national team ● Carded Part of the year ● Had to work to be able to make ends meet while competing ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Chris:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor regarding job search ● Doesn't feel supported by his coach or NSO ● Doesn't feel supported by his family ● Reported having financial difficulties ● Is struggling to plan and prepare her career transition out of sport ● Carded full time ● Practices a summer sport 	<p>Sandra:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor for guidance counseling services ● Feels supported by his NSO and coach ● Feels supported by his teammates and family ● Was able to plan a career outside of sport but wasn't able to prepare for it ● Received an offer of admission in her academic program of choice and had to deny it because of a lack of accommodation from school in regard to her training schedule ● Has decided to quit school until her sport career is over ● Carded full time ● Practices a winter sport

Table 1 (continued)

Enabling Environment	Restricting Environment	Hindering Environment
Vivianne:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Had been in the NCAA circuit prior to the national team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Met with a Game Plan advisor in regard to her career planning and preparation ● Opinion on the coach support differs depending on the coach she had ● Was able to graduate in her program of choice the year she joined the national team ● Carded part of the year ● Had to work to be able to make ends meet while competing ● Practices a summer sport 	

This table is meant to be an appendix only, not in the text. Significance values are in bold.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from Game Plan. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study but can be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval This research involves human participants and was therefore approved by an ethical committee of the University.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained for each participant.

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