

Who Am I Outside of Sport ... Maybe Nobody: Disrupted Identity Narratives in Young Female Athletes Following Severe Injury

Lars-Petter Moss¹, Noora Ronkainen² and Reidar Säfvenbom³

¹Norges Idrettshøgskole, Oslo, Norway, ²University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland, ³Norges Idrettshøgskole, Oslo, Norway.

Corresponding author: Lars-Petter Moss

E-mail: lars.petter.moss@gmail.com

Norges Idrettshøgskole, Sognsveien 220, 0863 Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This study explores how sport participation contributes to female adolescents' identity development, and how injuries may disrupt that development. Using a narrative approach, we investigated how the participants chose to present themselves and tell their stories, and how severe injuries impacted these stories. Five Norwegian female athletes aged 16-18 participated in two interviews each, and we analysed the data using thematic and narrative analysis. Our results indicated that the athletic identity was prominent in participants' stories, with other identities (e.g., as a student) relegated to a secondary position. The injury experience seemed to challenge, and for some, starting to alter their identity narratives and their future projection of a successful return to sport. For others, their identity as athletes seemed unchanged and even strengthened following the injury. Our findings contribute to an understanding of the role of sport in adolescent girls' identity development, and how this relationship can change over time due to injury.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Narrative Analysis, Female Athletes, Meaning-making*

Adolescence is considered an important life stage for identity formation through the dimensions of exploration and commitment (Arnold, M. E., 2017). Furthermore, from a narrative perspective, developing a narrative identity is achieved by telling stories to and with others, which enables processing and reinterpreting experiences to produce a more coherent story of the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In exploring who they are and wish to become, adolescents increasingly rely on their peer group, such as teammates, for relational support and guidance (McLean, 2005).

The significance of athletic identity for athletes' sporting experiences, broader development, well-being and performance has been a topic of numerous studies since the 1990s (e.g., Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993; Sparkes, 1998). Studies have reported that athletes with stronger athletic identity experience the benefits of higher enjoyment in sport, goal orientation, and performance outcomes (for a review, see Edison et al., 2021). Baumert, Henderson and Thompson (1998) also reported that adolescent athletes were more likely to have a healthy diet and were less often feeling hopeless or bored than their non-athlete peers. However, sport researchers also note the potential dangers of an exclusive athletic identity, as it may lead to "... insufficient career development, enhanced role conflicts, adjustment difficulties during transitions, and a greater chance of using performance-enhancing drugs" (Chun, Wendling and Sagas, 2023, p.12).

Sport injuries can disrupt athletes' identity and pose a threat to their psychological wellbeing (e.g., Brewer, Cornelius, Stephan & Van Raalte, 2010; Manuel et al., 2002; Sparkes, 1998). Strongly and exclusively identifying as an athlete has been found to be related to higher psychological distress and mood disturbance during injury (Brewer et al., 2010; Manuel et al., 2002). Some scholars have found that adolescent participants' self-identification as athletes could decrease over time after experiencing a severe injury, and the changes were particularly pronounced with those athletes whose rehabilitation process was the slowest (Brewer et al., 2010). Summarizing key findings from extant literature, Brewer and Petitpas (2017) suggested that athletic identity tends to increase from childhood to adolescence but then decrease in anticipation or when encountering the possible end of sport participation, whether due to personal choice, an injury, de-selection from a team or poor performance.

Despite the significant research efforts to understand identity development in youth sport participants, the intersections of gender and athletic identity are still under-studied. However, researchers have started to provide more nuanced analyses of how athletic identities are gendered and shaped by socio-cultural contexts. In the UK, Gledhill and Harwood (2015) reported that the key socialising agents in former youth female athletes' lives (teachers, coaches and parents) had emphasised the lack of professional career opportunities in

sport and the importance of education, thus contributing to 'under-loading' their athletic identities and overloading their adolescent female identities. Studies in the Nordic context have also demonstrated gendered patterns in how athletes construct their identities – in sport, studies, and broader life – with young women more likely to invest in multiple identities alongside sport than young men (e.g., Ekengren et al., 2020; Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2020; Skrubbeltrang, 2018; Ronkainen, Watkins & Ryba, 2016). Nielsen and Olesen (2014) also found that while professional athletes appeared in the top 10 list of dream jobs for boys in Denmark, it was absent from the girls' list. A similar finding on the gendered pattern of sporting ambition was reported by Eriksen (2021) in Norway in 12–13-year-old adolescents. In contrast to the boys, girls very rarely expressed going "all-in" for a professional athletic career.

Aims of the Study

The aim of the study is to extend understanding of how female adolescents in the Nordic context develop an athletic identity over time and how their narratives are affected following a severe injury. The narrative analysis and the study's design of two interviews allows for an in-depth understanding, highlighting both the formation of an athletic identity through their childhood and adolescence, as well as examining how their experiences with an ACL-injury affects their narratives as female athletes.

The research questions that guided the study were:

- 1) How do female athletes develop athletic identities and express them in their stories?
- 2) How do the young women maintain or reconstruct their identities following a severe sport injury?

Theoretical framework

In the present study, we approach the construct of identity through a developmental narrative perspective (McAdams, 1985; McAdams & McLean, 2013) that builds on Erikson's (1968) seminal work on identity development while also applying the central tenets of narrative theory. As McAdams and McLean (2013) suggested, "through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future" (p. 233). Importantly, from a narrative perspective, the developmental tasks are also considered to be culturally infused and shaped by cultural life scripts about the life course (Savickas, 2013). Similar to work-life, sport cultures have dominant cultural narratives about what constitutes a good career and what kind of stories (e.g., about dedication and focus) athletes 'should' tell about their experiences and identities (Ryba et al., 2021).

McAdams (1985) suggested that a narrative identity emerges in the years of late adolescence through selectively engaging with narrative resources that are available in the socio-cultural context. In other words, while narrative identity is a personal construction, it always relies on collective stories (of sport, gender, nationality, 'the good life' and so on) that transcend the individual. In the case of adolescents with an athletic identity, many of them have parents who provide them narrative resources surrounding sport and physical activity and act as role models. Adolescents can create several stories of the self (e.g., in the contexts of family life, school, friends and sport) that

could exist in harmony or in conflict. Specifically in the sport context, however, it has been noted that athletes construct their identities within the so-called 'performance narrative', where total dedication to sport at the expense of other interests and identities is understood as the only way to succeed (Douglas & Carless, 2006). And while the potential harmful effect of an exclusive athletic identity is widely recognized, the processes by which adolescents develop this athletic identity is less explored (Carless & Douglas 2013).

Methodology

Participants

The research presented in this article is based on 10 semi-structured interviews with five sport-active young women between the ages of 16 and 18, each of whom has suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). We requested information about potential interview participants from sport programmes and sport schools in the counties of Oslo and Akershus, and they put us in touch with five potential participants who had a torn ACL. In the following, we provide a brief description of them.

"Anne" is experiencing her second severe athletic injury (torn ACL in each knee), with a full year of sport participation between the first and second injuries. She plays football and was interviewed three and six months after her operation. Before the first injury, she got a few games in the youth national team while playing in 3rd division senior at club level as well as a getting a single game in 1st division senior.

"Celine" had her first severe athletic injury (torn ACL) and plays handball. Celine was interviewed three and six months after her operation. Before her injury, she played on a foreign national handball team for her age group and 3rd division senior in Norway.

"Kristine" had her first severe athletic injury (torn ACL) and plays football. Kristine was interviewed 11 and 14 months after her operation, and at the time of the first interview, she was more or less back to normal training. Before her injury, she played 1st division senior and on the national football team for her age group.

"Emma" had her first severe athletic injury (torn ACL) and plays football. She was interviewed six and eight months after her operation. Before the injury she played for the national football team in her age group.

"Hannah" had her first severe athletic injury (torn ACL) and plays football. She was interviewed both one and three months after her operation. Before her injury, she played junior football on a club team.

Procedures

To gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' meaning-making around their identities and the injury experience, two interviews (I1 and I2) were conducted with each participant. According to a recent review of narrative research, "... a small number of participants is not only desirable, but arguably necessary" and "... where five participants was the median amount (Book, Svensson & Stambulova, 2024, p. 585). Our five participants were chosen, due to the availability of participants matching our criteria and resources available. Since Hennink & Kaiser (2022) argue that 9-17 interviews are needed to reach such data saturation, we wanted two interviews with each participant in order to strive for greater data saturation despite our smaller sample size. The first author contacted the participants and conducted all the interviews. Interviews were carried out face-to-face by the first author in group rooms at the participants' sports

schools. The first round of interviews (I1) lasted from 40-50 minutes, the follow-up interviews (I2) from 35-40 minutes. The initial interview guide that was used in I1 consisted of six main topics: **identity-related questions** (example questions: "can you tell me about yourself?", "How do you think others would describe you?", "Is it important for you that others think of you as an athlete?"), **the role of sport in their lives** (example questions: "Can you tell me about what kind of position sports have in your life?", "What would you be doing if you weren't playing sports?", "What do you think about school and sports, is one of them more important than the other?"), **exercise** (example questions: "Is it important to you to be in shape?", "Do you feel guilty when not exercising?", **their experience with their ACL-injury** (example questions: "Can you tell me about your experience with being injured?", "What would you feel if you can't play football/handball again?"), **their plans for the future** (example questions: "What thoughts do you have about the future?", "Is it important for you to continue with sports?" and their **social relationships in sport** (example questions: "Does friends and family have anything to do with why you play sports?"). Every interview was recorded and transcribed by the first author within one week. The transcription were verbatim reproductions of the interviews, as well as containing important emotional reactions in brackets. Based on I1, the first author created a timeline for each participant's involvement in sport. The first interview allowed for identifying potential gaps in the participants' stories and was used to develop interview questions for the follow-up interview which aimed at creating a more detailed understanding of the participants' experiences. The first author tried to merge the narratives from I1 and I2. The follow-up interview served as a form of member check to ensure that we had not misunderstood what the participants had shared with us, thus enhancing the interpretive validity of the study (Maxwell, 1992). This was done by either repeating some of the same questions again and comparing the answers in I1-I2, asking follow-up questions on a topic or trying to challenge seemingly ambiguous statements from I1. In the follow-up interview, part three on exercise was replaced by questions about school and work ambitions. Examples of questions posed to each participant in I2 were: "Do you feel that sport is more important for you than your teammates?", "have you had any new experiences with your injury since our last talk?", "Do you have a clear idea about your future studies and work?".

Ethical and methodological considerations

First of all, the results and analysis in our study must be seen as constructed knowledge, created in the interdependent interaction between the interviewer (1st author) and the interview subjects. Two pilot interviews were carried out two months prior to the first round of interviews, testing out the interview questions, the role as interviewer and seeing if the questions would provide insight through narratives relevant to the research questions. As a qualitative study it is not relevant to see our results as directly generalizable to other contexts but as unique cases which can be recognizable to others (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Ethical considerations were carried out in seven phases: themes, design, the interview situation, transcription, analysis, verification and report. The themes explored can provide insight in how the relationship between sports and identity can be a part of a positive youth development. The participants' anonymity was taken care of through pseudonyms and leaving out personal information. There were episodes in the interviews with

strong emotional reactions, prompting us to be careful and understanding in how questions were posed. The transcriptions were done verbatim, and include notes on body language, both to maintain loyalty to the participants in our interpretations. To ensure our analysis are verified, we asked follow-up questions, while the second interviews act as "self-correction" (Kvale, 2007).

Data analysis

The 1st author did the analysis with a data-driven approach, where tentative themes and patterns were identified from participants' stories. As the 1st author listened to, and later read the transcripts of participants' stories, individual patterns in their relationships to sport emerged, clues that would later help us understand how they had developed an athletic identity. The 1st and 3rd author then narrowed down the six initial topics from the interview guide into four categories, after which the transcripts were divided: identity-related questions, the role of sport in their lives, their experience with their ACL-injury and their social relationships in sport. 1st and 2nd author then compared and contrasted participants' accounts to identify similarities and differences across cases.

Secondly, after a thematic organisation of the data, 1st and 2nd author worked with a structural narrative analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). With a structural analysis, it is possible to examine the plot and organisation of the personal stories, as well as 'the building blocks' that are needed to put these stories together. As Smith & Sparkes (2009) explained, using a structural narrative analysis the researcher may "focus on the story a person tells to tease out what type they draw on from the cultural repertoire available to them to put their story together" (p. 284). Since our primary interest was on understanding how youth athletes' stories are culturally infused, we focused on identifying the narrative types that gave shape to these stories. Doing so required both data-driven thinking and consultation with existing narrative research in sport in relation to identity (e. g., Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ryba et al., 2021) and injury (e.g., Everard et al., 2021). The 2nd author contributed by bridging our analysis and discussions to contemporary narrative research on athletic identity in sports.

Results

The two first sub-headings in this section aim to answer our first research question; "1) How do female athletes develop athletic identities and express them in their narratives?". The first sub-heading deals with the narrative formation of an athletic identity over time, whereas the second highlights how the participants express their athletic identities in their stories. The results on the second research question; "2) How do the young women maintain or reconstruct their identities following a severe sport injury?" is presented through the two last sub-headings, showing both the resilience and the ambiguity in the participants' developing narratives following injury. The participants' stories presented in the two last sub-headings are particularly in line with three well-known narratives from previous literature: "resilience", "merry-go-round" and "more-to-me".

The formation of a strong athletic identity: "Ever since then, I've really wanted to be truly good."

Our participants' stories about sport and growing up show how they developed an athletic identity over time in relation to their social contexts. A shared element in all the

girls' narratives is that they began playing organized sport when they were quite young. The participants started playing at the age of six or seven, and they said that sport was always significant in their lives. **Emma** told us that: "Ever since I was little, football is what I've loved, like, deeply. Like, head over heels. Really loved it". The participants described an increase in the significance of the sport in their lives around junior high school age (13-15 years old). Them being selected for the best teams gave them confidence and being called up for the national team for the first time was highly motivating for **Kristine**. **Hannah** similarly described eighth grade as a turning point. She was selected for regional teams on a higher level, and for the first time she realized that she could play on a higher level than most of her peers: "Ever since then, I've really wanted to be truly good." By playing sport, the participants were able to become part of a social network that provided validation for their identity narratives as athletes. The most decisive reinforcement of their athletic identities seems to have happened when they got selected for communal teams or the national team at 13-15 years of age.

The participants in our study displayed a strong and relatively exclusive athletic identity. All the participants said that they found it difficult to find a good alternative to sport as a focus for their lives. This may suggest that they have not fully explored other life domains. One indication of this was the combination of a strong commitment to sport and a corresponding lack of any concrete plans for higher education or finding a job. The different stories presented by the participants in our study could suggest that they are differently prepared for possible identity changes following their severe injury. These are in line with three narratives found in previous studies: "resilience", "merry-go-round" and "more-to-me".

Being an athlete: "Sport really defines who I am, so I don't really know what I'd be without it".

In sharing self-defining stories, our participants clearly located themselves within the world of sports. **Anne** confirmed the centrality of sport in her idea of herself, saying "I play football, I love it. I practice a lot. And I got injured. Long term injuries, two times. I don't know. I'm a happy person, really, haha". **Celine** answered in a similar fashion: "I'm a happy person and I care a lot about sport, I play a lot of handball. That's really what's most important to me". We tried again to get our participants to tell us about who they were, this time in how others would describe them. **Hannah** thought that other people might think of her in different ways: "Maybe kind of absentminded, haha. I think nice, yeah. I take care of my friends, try anyway. Very interested in football at least, very serious [about that]. Yeah, that's how I think people see me".

Even though the participants seemed to be trying to find other ways of describing themselves, they ended up confirming sport's central position in their lives. **Celine** said, "Handball defines me pretty much," while **Kristine** explained that she was proud to be a football player:

Because [football] is kind of a big part of who I am, and I spend a lot of time playing. It's something I want to be good at, anyway. Yeah, it's a big part of who I am.... I've played football for a really long time, so it's like, it's like made it a part of my identity... I'm proud of it, that I'm really pretty good.

Being an athlete seemed to provide the central narrative thread in the lives of our participants. We also

found that peers were a central point of reference when participants were storying their identities (see also McLean, 2005). When we asked **Emma** if she thought people saw her first and foremost as a football player, she answered "Yes. At least in junior high, which wasn't a sport school. There I was like 'Emma who plays football.' Yeah, but here [at my sport high school], everyone is a football player, so it's not so... [pause]." **Celine** also believed that sport would be central to the way anyone described her: "Everyone who went to primary school with me would probably say the same, that sport is what I really care about."

A strong athletic identity seems to give adolescents a feeling of safety and a plot around which they tell the story of their lives, but it simultaneously excludes them from exploring alternative identities. **Celine** said: "All I've ever really done is play handball, I haven't really done a lot of different activities. Handball is really the only thing I care about." Even though athletic identity didn't completely overshadow everything else for all our participants, they could not come up with equivalent alternatives to take its place. **Anne** thought it was difficult to imagine an alternative to her sport, saying "if I don't have football, then I think... [pauses and laughs briefly]. Then... I don't know... there's really only football".

After **Celine** was injured, she took some time to think about who she was outside of handball and realized that she didn't quite know the answer. "I don't know," she told us. "It's so strange when... sport really defines who I am, so I don't really know what I'd be without it". For **Anne**, being generally physically active was seen as the only real alternative:

That's like if I didn't have football, right, so it's kind of a boring life really. Because football is like, that is what I always do. But I think if, like it is now, if I couldn't play football again then I would have been at the gym almost every day (Anne).

The emphasis on "keep on going"

Most of the participants initially experienced strong negative emotions in their rehabilitation process. **Hannah** told us that she felt depressed at times after her injury, while **Celine** had trouble dealing with the day she got injured. "All I have to do is think about the day I tore my ligament, or when I had my operation," she told us, "... and I start crying. It's so emotional for me". The participants' injuries seemed to make them aware of how central sport were to their lives, and to a certain extent prompted them to start thinking about alternatives. At the thought of never being able to play again, **Emma** said: "I don't know what I'd do, I'd have to be a whole other person, I'd have to find something else." The participants found it difficult to see themselves outside of their sport and seemed at first to be holding on tightly to their roles of being an athlete.

Kristine said that she had never really considered her injury as a permanent barrier. **Hannah** similarly said that "the thought of stopping has never crossed my mind". **Hannah** felt irritated when her school nurse mainly focused on preparing her for life after football. All the participants stated that finding an alternative to sport was not a real option. They told us that they still dreamed of becoming professional athletes and playing on the national team. A paradox is that our participants simultaneously also stressed the fact that female athletes should not rely on playing sports as their living. The participants said that girls must move abroad to be professional athletes or that they also should pursue academics. However, all of them were still pursuing their athletic goals and admitting that school comes second.

Especially for **Emma**, **Hannah** and **Kristine**, their goals and ambitions in sports had not undergone any significant change after their injuries. This is in line with the well-known narrative “resilience” found in previous studies. **Emma** and **Hannah** described a somewhat surprising effect of being injured. They both said that they had the same goals for their athletic careers, and that their injuries had in fact made them more motivated. When we asked **Emma** if her injury had affected her desire to be a professional football player, she said “No, it hasn’t. Really it’s just made it even stronger. I’m more motivated, and like, willing to sacrifice even more, I think.” She confirmed this when talking about how all the strength training has made her stronger and ready to become a top player.

“More than an athlete” and “growing ambiguity”

Anne was the participant who most clearly started to tentatively construct an alternative story where elite sport might not feature in her future life. She was in a different situation from other participants in that she was recovering from her second ACL injury, and in her story this second injury was constructed as a trigger to change. Reflecting on the period after her first injury, compared to the second injury, Anne offered: “It [*being able to play again*] meant more for me then, than it does now.” Anne’s thoughts about her future had become more ambiguous, but as she says: “football is what I do, and what I like to do.” She still says that she has never considered quitting her sport, but now “I don’t know how good I want to be, or how far I want to go.”

Anne also said that she had never aspired to be a professional football player, but shortly after she says that maybe that was the goal when she felt at top of her game. However, she also mentions that after the first injury her goal was to go straight back to the national team. The ambiguity in her stories seems to be an example of narrative work to find a new story of the self that aligns better with her evolving situation and the threat that has been posed on her athletic future. **Celine** was also uncertain about the road ahead, and like **Anne**, she seemed to view her injury as more of a threat to her identity than the other girls. **Celine** said that handball defined much of who she was as a person, and after the injury, she said: “I’ve thought a lot about who I am outside of handball.... Maybe nobody. So, I just must figure that out.”

In our study, the injury and its possible threat to the girls’ athletic identity seems to have affected their stories in different ways. **Hannah**, **Emma** and **Kristine** were actively maintaining their role as athletes by their story “**keep on going**” and emphasised that they had not considered stopping. The injury seemed to have strengthened their athletic identity, or at least they refused to let go of it. On the other hand, **Anne** and **Celine** underwent more change than the other girls, drawing on the stories of “**growing ambiguity**” and “**more than an athlete**”, respectively. This suggests that a strong, relatively exclusive athletic identity is very robust, but for **Anne**, two consecutive ACL-injuries seemed to destabilize her athletic identity. For **Celine**, her narrative seemed to be more affected by both the extensive reflections on who she is after being injured and her stated heavier investment in areas outside sport, like schoolwork. She says she is a perfectionist in both school and sports, although school is an area “... she must excel at, compared to sport where she wants to be good at it”. She also says that she is “unsure about her academic plans for the future” and that these choices depend on her development as a handball player.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that the young women were in an active process of maintaining or reconstructing their stories. While Brewer and Petipas (2017) suggested that athletic identity tends to increase into adolescence and decrease in anticipation or when encountering the possible end of sport participation, some of our participants held tightly on to the role as athlete with the story “**keep on going**”, focusing on maintaining or increasing their athletic identity, and neglecting the risk of ending their careers. In contrast, **Anne’s** story “**growing ambiguity**” or **Celine’s** “**more than an athlete**” seemed to decrease their athletic identity and were in a more active process of reconstructing their identities. These stories seem to be in line with some of the narratives presented in Everard, Wadey and Howells (2021); “resilience”, “Merry-Go-Round” and “More to Me” respectively.

It was striking that all the young female participants talked about the lack of professional opportunities in women’s sport and the need for a dual career, but at the same time were strongly storying sport as the most important aspect of their self. These findings are slightly contradictory to previous studies in the Nordic countries that have indicated that female adolescents often equally invest in their student identities (e.g., Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021), and (even though some age differences in samples) are hesitant to go all-in in their sport (Eriksen, 2021). While we only had a small sample and some of our participants were perhaps exceptional in coming from families with exceptionally strong attachment to sport, the findings could be taken as a starting point to investigate whether the narratives surrounding women’s sport, and the ways that young women story their athletic identities in relation to other narratives of the self, are in a process of change, levelling out gender differences.

Despite the small number of female participants in our study, our rich descriptions can hopefully lead to a naturalistic generalizability and a useful transferability (Smith, 2018) to sport contexts involving female adolescent athletes. Thus, people can through qualitative studies gain insight by reflecting on the details and descriptions presented in case studies. The main limitation in our study is the time frame, because we did not follow the participants into their identity struggles when facing poorer performance or stagnation in athletic development, or possible retirement due to their injury. A longitudinal study with more participants could follow the development of those who reach their goals and those who do not, perhaps contributing to a better understanding of narrative development, athletic identity, and the role of sport injuries in the process.

Practical implications

The most important potential impact of the discussions and results presented in this study is to increase our understanding of how athletic identity and narratives revolving around sports can develop and change over the course of adolescence. Thus, it can be easier to recognize patterns in adolescents’ identity development. This insight can help facilitate positive youth development by enhancing the understanding of the identity process when dealing with severe injuries. A strong and exclusive athletic identity has its benefits but may lead to emotional difficulties when opting/dropping out or changing their participation in sports, especially for females (Edison et.al, 2021). With its qualitative approach and by focusing on youth athletes, the study adds to a field of limited

knowledge. Understanding of these different available stories can help coaches and health practitioners in guiding young female athletes dealing with injuries. One way to support a positive identity development in youth could be by not just aim at in-depth exploration in their sport but also support exploration of alternatives and present diverse role models (see Arnold, 2017). Another way is presented in Everard, Wadey, Day and Howells (2024), where shedding light on different narratives may help athletes in navigating their experiences with injuries. When moving beyond solely focusing on cognitive strategies for athletes, providing various narratives can strengthen the support networks around athletes, giving coaches, teachers and health workers knowledge so they can take informed responsibility in caring for injured athletes. Nonetheless, for Everard, Wadey, Day and Howells (2024), a mere presentation of multiple narratives is not seen as sufficient, as they advocate for sharing and active discussions through member reflections. In conclusion, more longitudinal research is needed to enhance the knowledge of the developmental trajectory of athletes and provide optimal assistance (Edison et.al, 2021; Chun, et. al, 2023).

Conclusion

Through narrative methodology this study explores the processes of how female athletes develop their athletic identities and express them in their narratives. Furthermore, the study aims at describing how young female athletes maintain or reconstruct their identities following a severe sport injury. Our findings suggest that the participants had strong and relatively exclusive athletic identities. These were developed through early participation in organized sports, social validation from peers, parents, and coaches, and through decisive team-selection for higher levels at the age of 13-15. Facing severe injury, some of the female participants seemed to either maintain or increase their athletic identity through

the story **"Keep on going"** or were in an active process of reconstructing their identities through the stories **"Growing ambiguity"** or **"More than an athlete"**.

Our results differ somewhat from the findings in Eriksen (2021) in that our female athletes did not seem hesitant to go "all-in", even though they underlined the uncertain professional possibilities. Our findings are also slightly contradictory to previous studies in the Nordic countries that have indicated that female adolescents often equally invest in their student identities (e.g., Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021). Anyhow, recent research on identity development suggests how youth athletes can utilize their strong athletic identity to facilitate coherence and continuity in a more multi-dimensional identity (Chun et.al, 2023).

References

- Arnold, M. E. (2017). Supporting adolescent exploration and commitment: Identity formation, thriving, and positive youth development. *Journal of Youth Development*, 12(4),1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2017.522>
- Baumert Jr, P. W., Henderson, J. M., & Thompson, N. J. (1998). Health risk behaviours of adolescent participants in organized sports. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 22(6), 460-465.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(97\)00242-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(97)00242-5)
- Book, R. T., Svensson, J., & Stambulova, N. (2024). Narrative research in sport and exercise science in the early 21st century: a state-of-the-art critical review. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 16(6), 567-597.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2024.2374822>
- Brewer, B. W., Cornelius, A. E., Stephan, Y., & Van Raalte, J. (2010). Self-protective changes in athletic identity following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 11(1),1-5.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.09.005>
- Brewer, B. W., & Petitpas, A. J. (2017). Athletic identity foreclosure. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 16, 118-122.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.004>
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel?. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*.
- Chun, Y., Wendling, E., & Sagas, M. (2023). Identity Work in Athletes: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Sports (Basel, Switzerland)*, 11(10), 203. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sports11100203>
- Carless, D., & Douglas, K. (2013). "In the boat" but "selling myself short": Stories, narratives, and identity development in elite sport. *The sport psychologist*, 27(1),27-39.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.1.27>
- Douglas, K., & Carless, D. (2006). Performance, discovery, and relational narratives among women professional tournament golfers. *Women in sport & physical activity journal*, 15(2), 14-27.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.15.2.14>
- Edison, B. R., Christino, M. A., & Rizzone, K. H. (2021). Athletic identity in youth athletes: a systematic review of the literature. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(14),7331.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147331>

- Ekengren, J., Stambulova, N. B., Johnson, U., Carlsson, M., & Ryba, T. V. (2020). Composite vignettes of Swedish male and female professional handball players' career paths. *Sport in society*, 23, 595-612.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1599201>
- Eriksen, I. M. (2021). Teens' dreams of becoming professional athletes: the gender gap in adolescents' sport ambitions. *Sport in Society*, 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1891044>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: youth and crisis*. New York: Norton
- Everard, C., Wadey, R., Day, M., & Howells, K. (2024). Examining the applied value of narratives for professional practice: An exploration of sports injury narratives in action. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 37(1), 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2024.2370793>
- Everard, C., Wadey, R., & Howells, K. (2021). Storying sports injury experiences of elite track athletes: A narrative analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 56, 102007.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102007>
- Gledhill, A., & Harwood, C. (2015). A holistic perspective on career development in UK female soccer players: A negative case analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 65-77.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.003>
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social science & medicine*, 292, 114523.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Kavoura, A., & Ryba, T. V. (2020). Identity tensions in dual career: the discursive construction of future selves by female Finnish judo athletes. *Sport in Society*, 23(4), 645-659.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1669325>
- Kvale, S., (2007). *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963>
- Manuel, J. C., Shilt, J. S., Curl, W. W., Smith, J. A., Durant, R. H., Lester, L., & Sinal, S. H. (2002). Coping with sport injuries: an examination of the adolescent athlete. *Journal of adolescent health*, 31(5), 391-393.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x\(02\)00400-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x(02)00400-7)
- Maxwell, J. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(3), 279-301.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.62.3.8323320856251826>
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current directions in psychological science*, 22(3), 233-238.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- McLean, K. C. (2005). Late adolescent identity development: narrative meaning making and memory telling. *Developmental psychology*, 41(4), 683.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.41.4.683>
- Moazami-Goodarzi, A., Sorkkila, M., Aunola, K., & Ryba, T. V. (2020). Antecedents and consequences of student-athletes' identity profiles in upper secondary school. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 42(2), 132-142.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2019-0084>
- Nielsen, J. C., & Olesen, J. S. (2014). *Idrætsselevers erfaringer med idrætsklasser*. København: Institut for Uddannelse og Pædagogik (DPU), Aarhus Universitet, 2014.
- Ronkainen, N. J., Watkins, I., & Ryba, T. V. (2016). What can gender tell us about the pre-retirement experiences of elite distance runners in Finland?: A thematic narrative analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 22, 37-45.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.06.003>
- Ryba, T. V., Ronkainen, N. J., Douglas, K., & Aunola, K. (2021). Implications of the identity position for dual career construction: Gendering the pathways to (Dis) continuation. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 53, 101844.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101844>
- Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career Construction Theory and Practice. In R. W. Lent and S. D. Brown (Eds.), *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*, 2nd Ed. (pp. 144-180). New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Skrubbeltrang, L. S. (2018). Reproduction and opportunity in talent development. *A sports Sociological Study of Danish SportsClasses*. Retrieved from <https://vbn.aau.dk/>
- Smith, B. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: Misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 10(1), 137-149.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2017.1393221>
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Narrative analysis and sport and exercise psychology: Understanding lives in diverse ways. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 10(2), 279-288.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.07.012>
- Sparkes, A. C. (1998). Athletic identity: An Achilles' heel to the survival of self. *Qualitative health research*, 8(5), 644-664.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239800800506>
- Sparkes, A., & Smith, Brett. (2014). *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: from process to product* (p. VII, 279). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852187>