

# Talent Transfer Through the Eyes of Two Danish Elite Sport Athletes

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of two Danish elite athletes who successfully transitioned from one sport (donor sport) to another (transfer sport) through the process of talent transfer (TT). TT, defined as athletes shifting from one high-level sport to another, is an emerging focus in sports science, yet remains an underexplored area in academic literature. Utilizing narrative inquiry, the research delves into personal stories of two athletes, revealing the complex interplay of adversity, identity, and relational support characterizing their transitions. The athletes' narratives highlight that adversity within the donor sport can serve as a catalyst for TT and are furthermore marked by significant support from key characters, who played pivotal roles in guiding them through the transition. These stories underscore the resilience and adaptability of athletes, as well as the critical role of relational support in the success of TT. The study suggests that TT allows athletes to maintain their elite sports identity while offering an alternative to the narrative wreckage that can occur when sports careers end prematurely. This research contributes to the scant literature on TT, advocating for its recognition as a legitimate pathway in national elite sport strategies, especially for smaller nations seeking to enhance their medal potential.

**Keywords:** *Talent Transfer, Athlete Transition, Elite Sports, Narrative Inquiry, Sports Psychology, Athlete Identity*

In Rio de Janeiro on August 13, Anna Emilie Moeller tied the shoelaces on her spike shoes and found her spot on the start line. She was about to compete in the 3000 meters steeplechase event as the youngest ever Danish track and field athlete to qualify for the Olympic Games. She was only 19 years old. She finished six in her heat improving the Danish junior record. Only two years prior, Anna tied the shoelaces of her basketball shoes getting ready for a basketball match against England in the under 18 European championship, a championship that would turn out to be her last in Basketball. Anna was in the middle of a talent transfer process that started with her running a 10 km race as part of a for-fun school event, soon followed by her smashing the Danish Junior 10km record in her only third ever race on the distance. Needless to say, this talent transfer process would have a huge impact on Anna's life and identity.

Talent Transfer (TT) describes the transition from one sport, called the donor sport, to another, called the transfer sport. While international consensus on a more precise definition is yet to be reached, there is general agreement in the literature (Harten et al., 2021) that TT

requires the athlete to have competed at a high level in their donor sport, then leave this sport and subsequently reach a high level in their transfer sport. While it is not easy to define "high level" considering the unique nature of each professional and elite sporting context (see Swann et al., 2015), this definition sets TT apart from related concepts such as sampling and late specialization (Storm et al., 2012), where athletes engage in multiple sports and later invest and reach a high level in one of them. Talent transfer is also referred to as talent-recycling because the idea is to re-use the talent which an athlete has demonstrated and acquired in one sport within another (Collins et al., 2014). There can be multiple reasons why an athlete may desire (or even be required) to transfer into another sport, including burnout, recurring injuries, being unable to reach their ambitions within their donor sport because of anthropometric factors, or incompatibility of personal identity and values with those within their training environment (Henriksen et al., 2014 & 2019).

While examples of athletes who transition from one sport to another are likely to be found throughout history, a review of seven specific studies (Harten et al., 2021)

concluded that TT is a relatively new focus in scientific literature and TT can be distinguished as either unstructured or structured. Unstructured TT describes a process where an athlete or a coach takes the initiative for the transition, often following a more or less haphazard introduction to the new sport. Conversely, structured TT describes a process whereby sport organizations design programs to identify candidates and guide them through a successful transfer. As an example of the latter, UK sport have since 2007 identified athletes from other sports to enter a fast-track program aimed at Olympic performance (UK sport, 2007) and a total of more than 7000 athletes have been signed up for these programs. Such programs are often motivated by the opportunity to keep dedicated athletes in elite sport, who for some reason wish to leave their sport, by offering a route to international top performance rather than waste the significant investment that both athletes and sport organizations have made to develop the athletes over an extended period (MacNamara & Collins, 2015). Whether structured or unstructured, TT is part of the elite sport landscape, and the 2012 London Olympic Games highlighted that 8% of American and 7% of Canadian athletes could be characterized as unstructured TT athletes while 8% of UK and 7% of Australian athletes represented countries with structured TT programs (MacNamara & Collins, 2015).

While TT programs have been systematically embraced in countries like Canada, UK, and Australia, Denmark's sporting culture has yet to be developed in this way despite high potential to benefit from TT. Danish Olympic sport is organized in federations that operate autonomously but are overseen by Team Denmark, the Danish Elite Sport Institution, which provides significant financial funding and expert support. Denmark has a track record at the Summer Olympics of being among the most successful nations under 10 million inhabitants (Nielsen & Storm, 2023). Additionally, Danish sports clubs are democratic, member-based organizations primarily driven by volunteer workforces (Ibsen et al., 2010), ensuring that most people in Denmark have sport facilities nearby their homes. This high proportion of youth sport club memberships and the central role of organized sports in Danish families' cultural experiences (Green, 2016) likely creates a fertile ground for TT, allowing athletes to transition smoothly between sports and maintain their elite sports identity.

In an effort to understand the preconditions for successful TT, researchers have investigated psycho-behavioral aspects (MacNamara & Collins, 2015), support from the environment, and the similarity between the donor and transfer sports (Rea & Lavalley, 2015). A recent review (Harten et al., 2021) concluded that similarities between the donor and transfer sport may aid the process but are not a necessary precondition for successful transfers, which is supported by the fact that found no less than 177 different combinations of donor and transfer sports across four countries and two Olympic Games (2012 summer and 2010 winter). Rather, generic athletic skills as well as psychological characteristics were important.

### Career Development and Transitions of Athletes

A recent ISSP (International Society of Sports Psychology) position stand on career development and transitions of athletes (Stambulova, et al., 2021) highlighted the progression of five decades of research leading to the formation of the athlete career sport psychology discourse (ACD). Within the ACD, three stages have been identified as shaping the field, evolving from a narrow focus on athletic retirement in the 1980s to the whole person (Wylleman, 2019), whole environment

(Henriksen et al., 2010), and culturally informed (Book et al., 2022) research and practice seen today. The theoretical foundation of the ACD includes conceptualizations of (but not limited to): 1) athletes as whole persons, 2) athletes' developmental and relevant environments as holistic, 3) the athletic career as one dimension of a person's life, and 4) career transitions as being capable of changing an individual's career trajectory. These conceptual foundations then support two distinct, but interrelated research strands. First, career development research focuses on describing career pathways and stages with a prediction of normative transitions. Second, career transition research aims to describe and explain career transition processes and factors involved in normative, non-normative, and quasi-normative transitions. Finally, the entirety of the ACD is informed by the cultural praxis of athletes' careers (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013) and structured to provide appropriate and contextualized career assistance for athletes as they strive for career excellence in life and sport.

Career development frameworks are based upon the idea that an athletic career is only a part of the entire lifespan (Coté & Salmela, 1994), but the early stage-like frameworks focused entirely upon the athletic career. Therefore, Wylleman and Lavalley's (2004) developmental model of transitions faced by athletes 'marked a shift to the holistic developmental perspective outlining stages in athletic and non-athletic developments' (Stambulova et al., 2021, p. 528). However, career development models such as this (now updated and named the holistic athletic career model, Wylleman, 2019) might be unable to reflect the complexity of individual athletic careers. Consequently, a stream of career research using narrative analysis as a means to highlight the varied nature of an athletic career has become more visible in career pathway research (Massey & Whitley, 2016; Bonhomme et al., 2018; Book et al., 2020). Relatedly, the origins of career transition research began out of interest for high-performance athletes as they terminated their sporting career (i.e., retirement) and were thus required to enter a more traditional work life in which they may have been less familiar. For instance, Rosenberg's (1984) conceptualization of athletic retirement as a 'social death' highlighted the focus of research four decades ago. However, much has changed since then and more current transition frameworks (i.e., the integrated career change and transition framework, Samuel et al., 2019) seek to examine the transition process and how different factors combine to produce diverse pathways and outcomes. Importantly, current career transition research is divided into the taxonomies of where the transition was initiated (e.g., athletic domain, non-athletic domain, or dual career) and predictability (normative, non-normative, and quasi-normative).

### Integrating Talent Transfer into the Athletic Career Sport Psychology Discourse through Narrative Analysis

While the ACD has expanded significantly over the decades, the process of TT has thus far not been integrated into this discourse. This omission is indeed understandable as the consideration of this distinctive transition of high-level athletes from one sport to another remains limited, and any contextualized exploration of TT via narrative analysis is non-existent. Consequently, and acting upon a recent call (Henriksen et al., 2023) for researchers to probe into the ecology of a transition environment, we believe that narrative analysis offers an appropriate foundation to do so. Narrative analysis as a methodological framework resists definition but has been used repeatedly within sport psychology to expand our understanding of the human

experience (Book et al., 2024). Human beings tell stories, we use these stories to infer meaning and structure our experiences, and when researchers want to understand the depth of a phenomenon, analyzing these stories provides such an opportunity. For example, Smith and Sparkes (2009) suggest that as meaning makers, humans use stories to communicate their experiences, but the stories are 'never simply a personal production but derive from the fabric of society and culture' (280). Importantly, narrative researchers are interested in 1) the stories people tell, and 2) the broader narrative structures available in which these stories are shaped and molded. Despite the scarcity of TT research in general, and individual case examples using narrative analysis in particular, that does not mean that narrative exploration has not offered a great deal to the ACD. For instance, narrative investigations have enlightened researchers concerning career pathways (Carless & Douglas, 2012; Book et al., 2020), athlete to coach transitions (Chroni et al., 2019), identity and career construction (Bonhomme et al., 2018), or career pathways of athletes from marginalized groups (Massey & Whitley, 2016). Researchers have also made substantial narrative contributions to career transition research in such topics as the junior to senior transition (Franck & Stambulova, 2018), cultural transitions (Ryba et al., 2016; Book et al., 2021), dual career transitions (Ryba et al., 2015), injury as a career and life transition (Smith & Sparkes, 2005), and gender specific career transitions (Ekengren et al., 2019).

### Aims

In consideration of the above review and our contention that empirical experiences of talent transfer within elite sport warrant significant attention, the aim of this study was to use narrative to explore how two Danish elite athletes experienced their successful talent transfer process, how it was initiated, and how it contributed to their athletic career pathway.

### Methodology

The foundation of this study lies within a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology (Papathomas 2016), and we acknowledge that reality is not a fixed entity, but rather varies and is contingent upon individual perspectives, experiences, and cultural contexts. Complementing this ontological stance is a social constructionist epistemology, which asserts that knowledge is not discovered but actively constructed through social interactions, language, and cultural frameworks. From this perspective, we embrace a holistic and context-sensitive view of reality, and also accept the fact that our own experiences, biases, and interpretations are woven into to the fabric of the research process. In the context of the study, we recognize that the participants' realities are not objective truths but are instead the products of myriad experiences and social interactions over time. This philosophical framework encourages an exploration of the athletes' experiences and accepts the role of societal and cultural influences in shaping the athletes' stories.

### Participants

Upon ethical approval from the first author's institution, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit two elite (Swann et al., 2015) athletes to participate in this study based on the following criteria: 1) having successfully completed a TT, and 2) having participated at the elite level in their donor and transfer sports. Two athletes agreed to take part, and communication was established with the athletes through various means,

including text messages, emails, and phone calls, to explain the study's purpose, address ethical concerns, and build rapport. Both athletes were Danish citizens and currently active in their respective sports at the time of the interviews. The first athlete Inga was 23 years old at the transfer. Her donor sport was football, and her transfer sport was track and field. The second athlete, Emma was 20 years old when she transferred from her donor sport, kayaking, to her transfer sport, rowing. Since both athletes are publicly known and their stories are unique, it was difficult to provide full anonymity without omitting crucial information about their donor and transfer sports, so the athletes were informed about this before the interview started. The athletes were also informed that they would be given pseudonyms, as well as any persons or clubs they mentioned. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that a select few people with in-depth knowledge of Danish sport might be able to identify the athletes, but the athletes were all informed of this possibility and wished to continue with the interview.

### Procedure and Data Collection

In seeking to understand the experiences of Danish athletes transitioning from one sport to another, our research adopted a narrative inquiry approach, which allowed us to delve deeply into their unique experiences and uncover rich, detailed narratives about their transitions. Following the guidelines of Smith and Sparkes (2016), we developed a semi-structured interview guide comprising three major sections: an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. The introduction was designed to provide a general overview of the athlete's career, using descriptive questions to help us understand their initial journey into elite sport. The main section of the interview focused on their experiences throughout the transition process, and questions were developed to explore various aspects of their transition, such as their motivations for considering a transfer, their personal decisions, and their feelings during the transition. The concluding part of the interview encouraged athletes to reflect on their transitions and identify key factors that contributed to their success. Throughout the interviews, we maintained a flexible approach, using probes such as "What was it like being there" and "Can you help me understand what that means" to encourage deeper storytelling and clarity.

To enhance the accuracy and authenticity of the narratives, all interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants for their reflections and approval. This iterative process allowed for a co-construction of knowledge, aligning with our relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology. The interviews, conducted via Skype by the first author, lasted between 54 and 69 minutes. The process began with a brief introduction to the study, information about semi-anonymity, and an opportunity for the athletes to ask questions, followed by their verbal consent to proceed. Overall, this approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the athletes' experiences, enhanced our understanding of the complexities involved in their TT, and helped to capture their motivations, emotions, and the broader context of their sporting experiences, including relationships with teammates, coaches, and family members.

### Data Analysis

Our analysis was fundamentally guided by the notion that analytic techniques serve as "complementary resources", aimed at sparking imagination, fostering curiosity, and generating unexpected insights (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014) that shape our understanding of the data. We embraced Frank's (2010) view that studying stories

focuses more on understanding their function and impact on human life rather than merely identifying themes. As Smith and Sparkes (2009) highlight, there is no definitive method for narrative analysis; researchers must navigate complex decisions to choose an analytic framework that best suits their specific study.

In our research, to honor the essence of narrative inquiry, we initially employed analytical bracketing (Smith, 2016) to alternate between examining the content (i.e., what stories were told) and structure (i.e., how the stories were told) of narratives. We conducted a thematic narrative analysis to identify central themes and relationships within the stories. In parallel, a holistic analysis of form (Lieblich et al., 1998) was used to construct a typology of life stories, recognizing that narrative content is integral to forming story structure. This iterative and cyclical process involved revisiting steps and techniques to maximize their utility. We began by identifying central themes and patterns (e.g., characters or adversity), understanding that the content provided essential insights into the narrative structures. Through this method, overarching themes were attributed to each athlete, which informed our subsequent holistic analysis of form. This approach acknowledged that structure, like content, reflects the storyteller's identity, perceptions, and values, revealing their evolving life experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998). By constructing a life course timeline and reflecting on the available narratives, the dominant meta narrative would be that of quest, whereas the narrative type emerging for each athlete is the relational (Book et al., 2024). The stories were then reconstructed and presented in a realist tale, co-authored and supported by relevant quotes and a lifespan timeline. The quality of the data was ensured by sharing the results with participants and engaging in continuous discussions with co-authors.

## Findings

### Narrative 1: From Football to Track & Field: "A happy Inga is a Good Inga."

Inga's story exemplifies the significance of prioritizing her mental well-being for optimal performance. Moreover, it highlights the pivotal role played by a particular individual in making all the difference for Inga. She simply needed someone to take care of her.

During her formative years, Inga played for various football clubs, steadily progressing through the ranks as she grew older, competing at increasingly higher levels. Regardless of the team she played for, she consistently stood out as one of the key players. When Inga is asked about her early football career, she expresses rather bluntly, that success came easily to her. At the age of 15, she made her first appearance on a youth national team, accumulating 37 national youth games by the age of 18. Despite her achievements, she did not consider her abilities to be extraordinary, and she believed that anyone who could pass a ball could be part of the team.

*I was selected for a U16 training camp with the national team, so everyone there was like 14-15 years old. I remember coming there and thinking: Everyone can play along here" I did not think anything special whatsoever, about playing with the best girls in Denmark" .... "From U17 I was pretty much a permanent fixture on the team and did not think much of it. Everyone could be a part of it if they could pass a ball.*

Inga is generally a cheerful individual, radiating a charismatic persona. She explains that her motivation throughout her career primarily stemmed from the joy derived from the activity itself, rather than the prospect of joining the national team or participating in the Olympics. Inga acknowledges that she was privileged to receive a significant amount of attention and be treated differently than other girls. One youth national coach allowed her to skip training camps or other activities if she did not feel like attending, stating, "A happy Inga is a good Inga." This phrase resonated with Inga and recurred throughout our interview. To understand its significance, we must delve into Inga's senior career, where things took a downturn. The transition to adult football marked the beginning of her challenges. Despite her remarkable success as a junior player, leading prominent Danish clubs to express interest in her, the move to a football club in the capital city proved to be a difficult transition for Inga. She encountered numerous injuries and felt insignificant within the finely tuned machinery of the football club. For the first time in her life, she found herself at the bottom of the hierarchy.

*I was used to having a good dialog with the coach but suddenly there was none. I had no idea where I was supposed to be and felt very insecure about myself. Even though I was a defensive player, I was tossed around the field suddenly playing as an attacker expected to score goals even though I haven't been trained for that. I felt this as a kind of emotional terror because I had no idea how to handle these things, and with the fact that I was not part of the team (red. because of injuries) I started feeling that I changed as a person. Normally I am a happy and talkative girl, but here I got quiet and introverted.*

For the first time in her career, Inga faced significant adversity, which suppressed her natural cheerful personality and hindered her performance in training and competition. She was no longer the happy Inga. However, this period of adversity served as a precursor to her TT process. The opportunity to explore track and field arose as a direct consequence of her struggles at the club:

*I was still afflicted with injuries; twist in the knee, a sprain and something with the hamstrings. And then one winter day when I was running intervals by myself on side of the track, I was tapped on the shoulder by Mikkel (cover name) who asked me if I had practiced running before. I laughed a lot about it because who the hell actually practices running. That's just stupid!*

Inga fondly recalls her initial perception of runners with a characteristic smile, now recognizing the vast disparity between her initial impressions and reality. She considered them a peculiar group of individuals who lacked ball-playing skills. In Mikkel, Inga encountered a coach who unexpectedly took the time to see her as a person rather than just a football player. Mikkel served as the physical coach at Club X while also being one of the most distinguished sprint coaches in Denmark. He introduced Inga to sprinting at the athletics club, marking her first encounter with her new sport. Inga describes this introduction with overwhelming positivity, stating, "The moment I stepped foot on the track, I felt like I was home. I experienced a profound sense of calm. All the anxiety associated with performance vanished!" At her football club, Inga was struggling and had developed a fear of

failure. Therefore, the time spent with Mikkel became a brief respite for her. Suddenly, the focus was back on her, reminiscent of her youth career. This one-on-one relationship with the coach made her feel acknowledged as an individual rather than just another football player in the vast machinery of the club.

*Where everything just felt right, and this thing that – this might sound silly maybe – but there was a focus on me and my development, and once again someone who was interested in me and showing me trust, spending time on me and nursing me.*

Inga perceives the two environments as distinctly different. At her football club, she senses a strong results-oriented focus, with expectations for her to deliver. When plagued by injuries, she is left to recover on her own. Conversely, at the athletics club, Mikkel and Inga explore various new exercises, emphasizing her growth and learning. Through her account, it becomes evident how the environment influences her self-perception and, consequently, her identity. In the football club, she feels like an insignificant player expected to conform to the club's system and culture. On the other hand, primarily due to Mikkel's influence, she is recognized as a whole person of significance and worth at the athletics club. In this context, Mikkel's individualized and person-centered approach prove paramount during Inga's early adaptation phase of her transition.

Initially, the two of them started attending the athletics club every Wednesday, explaining to her football club that Inga needed to improve her game by becoming faster. The happy Inga is starting to appear again.

Shortly thereafter, during a football match, Inga suffered a severe concussion from being struck in the back of her head by a ball. Once again, she was left to rehabilitate herself. However, this time, Mikkel voluntarily stepped in, picking her up and guiding her through the recovery process over the following month. When Inga is describing this period during our interview, she is continuously emphasizing Mikkel's willingness and that his care for her, appears to be by his own accord. During Inga's recovery time, Mikkel witnessed how Inga was struggling at her club and officially presented athletics as an alternative option, should she ever desire an escape. Naturally, Inga was skeptical about leaving the world of football after achieving success as a professional football player, having played in two national team games and three Champion League matches. The turning point in Inga's transfer occurred when she was selected for a Champion League match while still in the midst of rehabilitation and far from ready—a glaring example of her well-being being neglected. Overwhelmed, she broke down, crying while speaking with her parents over the phone. Nevertheless, she fulfilled her commitment and played the match. Afterward, she announced her departure from football and immediately sought out Mikkel to discuss her future in athletics.

*Because I did not want to go from being a future star in football with the potential of a great career, to being number 50 in athletics. Then I would rather be miserable and expel at something than be bad a stuff. And then he (Mikkel) told me that he would promise me that I would be top 5 in Danish sprints within a year. And with that, I terminated my contract with the football club in the beginning of December and right away started doing athletics.*

After leading a double life, with a growing interest in sprinting and a diminishing joy for football, Inga finally bid farewell to the world of football nearly nine months after Mikkel first introduced her to the athletics track. She successfully transitioned into a new sport, entering her post-transition phase. She began investing in her transfer sport, affirming her decision by demonstrating that it was not a poor choice. During the ongoing indoor athletics season, Inga quickly participated in two indoor races in Sweden in January, thereby qualifying to run the 200m for the national team later in the indoor season. As of now, Inga has competed in World Championships, the Olympic Games, and, just 5.5 years after her initial athletics encounter, she earned a bronze medal in the 2022 European Championships.

## **Narrative 2: From Kayaking to Rowing: "Don't Quit, Turn Around!"**

*Back then, I wondered, 'What am I doing with this?' Training three times a day for no reason? But over the course of three weeks, I met new people in a new environment who sat me down, made a plan, and set new goals for me. I joined a new club, saw new faces, and looked at the lake from a different perspective, with my back turned in the rowing direction. During that time, I was highly motivated, which led to another 7 years in elite sports.*

Emma has had a long and illustrious kayaking career, securing four world championship titles in the non-Olympic marathon distance. As a long-distance kayaking athlete, the Olympics was never an option for her. However, the dream of the Olympic experience becomes the turning point in her story, explaining why she chose to turn her boat around and pursue her dreams with the stern facing rowing instead of the bow.

While Emma excels in the marathon distance, a new national coach joins the team and believes that Emma, along with another rower, should focus on shorter distances to have a shot at the Olympics. For three years, Emma and her partner dedicate the first half of each year to intensive training for the short-track season, followed by the marathon training in late summer. Every year, they win the world championships in the marathon discipline. Unfortunately, their hard work does not pay off as they fail to qualify for the 2008 Olympics. This setback leads to Emma's partner retiring, leaving Emma uncertain about her future in the sport.

As a kayaker (and rower) like Emma the loss of a partnership obviously is a huge setback, and the theme about partnership, and what it means to Emma's chances of reaching her dreams, is a returning matter in our conversation.

In the following years, Emma tries different solutions, including teaming up with a younger partner and participating in world and European championships, but only achieving secondary placements, which she reminisces with bitterness in her voice. Competing both with her new partner for the Olympic distance, competing individually, and competing with her marathon distance partner, Emma describes as a frustrating period, not being able to reach the potential she feels entitled to.

*For my own sake, it was all about being with a new partner and realizing that we had a long way to go before we could row as fast as I did with my old partner. The entire rebuilding process became an insurmountable mountain for me, draining my motivation because I felt like I was starting from*

*scratch. I wasn't building on something existing; I had to walk the entire road again.*

Failing to qualify for the 2008 Olympics marks the beginning of the end of Emma's rowing career. This period of adversity serves as the initiation of her transfer process. She believes that making it to the games is unrealistic and decides to let go of the Olympic dream, and the life of elite sports for good. Instead, she reflects on her fulfilling career, which concluded with a world championship title. However, fate has other plans for Emma. A journalist finds her story worth sharing and decides to write a lengthy article about her career and its conclusion. Fortunately, a rower searching for a partner reads this article and sees a glowing opportunity. Let's call this rower Mette. Mette had just lost a partner after reaching the B-final at the 2008 Olympics. The national kayaking and rowing athletes train on the same lake in Denmark, sharing facilities and dressing rooms, so these girls were somewhat familiar with each other. Mette takes a chance and sends an email inviting Emma to try rowing.

*I received that email in October, at a time when I hadn't been kayaking for about a month. I thought to myself, 'Okay, that's fine. We can give it a try.' I knew it was a longshot when she mentioned the Olympics and said, 'Do you want to try this? I'm looking for a partner with the intention of going to the Olympics.' But I thought to myself that she saw something in me. She was extending her hand, and I had nothing to lose, so I took it.*

Emma vividly recalls her first experience in a rowing boat with Mette, which involved encountering two respected coaches, one from kayaking and one from rowing. They both observed the two girls with awe and commented that this project could be very interesting. In this initial phase of the introduction to her new sport, it had a significant impact on Emma, as the project she and Mette embarked on was acknowledged by influential figures within the environment.

The first encounter with rowing immediately captivates Emma, and she easily taps into her elite sport personality. She feels seen, wanted, and appreciated for the qualities she brings to the new environment. The positive influence of the people around her, combined with her natural talent in the rowing machine, instills a sense of belonging.

*I was invited into this new training environment, and I immediately felt that spark of training reignite within me. My motivation was restored. Suddenly, there was someone who saw something in me that they could utilize. I met new people in a fresh environment who asked, 'Can you do that? Can you row like that? Achieve those numbers on the rowing machine without training?'*

Emma passionately discusses the cultural shift she experienced, finding the new environment highly motivating because it offered opportunities for development and learning. Everything was new and, therefore, interesting. Each time they were on the lake, they incorporated new skills, with the Olympic qualifiers serving as a guiding beacon only 1.5 years away. The duo worked tirelessly every day, in stark contrast to the stagnating development Emma had experienced in previous years.

Throughout the interview, Emma speaks fervently about the dedication she feels from Mette. Even in the late

stages of pregnancy, Mette joins training camps and spends her time in the coaching boat, providing Emma with technique advice. Mette not only reignites Emma's elite sports career but also becomes a key figure in helping her fulfill her long-lost dream of making it to the Olympics. When asked about the expectations and pressure to perform exceptionally well and quickly, Emma describes them as positive stressors that foster her development. Excelling on the rowing machine allows the pair to focus on technical aspects without being overly concerned about physical abilities. Meeting new people in a refreshing environment serves as a tremendous motivator for Emma, as they genuinely acknowledge her strengths, something that may have been stagnant in her previous environment.

Throughout her career, Emma has been a team player, deeply influenced by her partner. It was her former partner's decision to retire that forced Emma to end her career, and it was her new partner who reignited her passion for the sport. Reflecting on the cultural differences between the rowing and kayaking environments, Emma notes some similarities, such as shared dressing rooms and the use of the same lake. However, she emphasizes the long-standing rowing tradition of excelling as a team, while kayaking is primarily seen as an individual sport. Emma's daily life has been turned upside down twice. First, with her decision to leave kayaking—a choice she describes as difficult. On one hand, she appreciated the daily structure that elite life provided, but on the other hand, she welcomed the newfound freedom after quitting. For the first time in many years, she could live her daily life as she pleased and even skip training if she didn't feel like it.

*It was a tough decision to make! But what if I had continued kayaking for just one more year? If I had dragged it out longer? Then I wouldn't have gotten this chance. So, I remind myself that when one door closes, a thousand new ones open.*

She had only one month to adapt to her new lifestyle before being thrust back into the elite world, working with some of the best coaches, equipment, and athletes. As she describes, the girls work relentlessly toward their goal, and Emma considers herself highly dedicated during this investment period, fully committed to excelling in rowing. On the way to the national team and the top level, Emma gradually establishes equilibrium between herself and society. She participates in training camps and World Cups, adapting to her rowing identity and situation while gaining visibility among other rowers.

*I participated in the Danish championships in 2010 and won the women's lightweight division, beating the other rowers who were on the national team and were considered favorites. I was selected for a World Cup in July with two other Danish women who expected to be chosen for the national team. I beat them. I competed in a Dutch regatta. I beat them.*

In 2011, they qualify for the World Championships, securing second place in the B-final, which directly qualifies them for the 2012 Olympics in London. Finishing fourth at the Games, Emma's dream finally comes true.

## Discussion

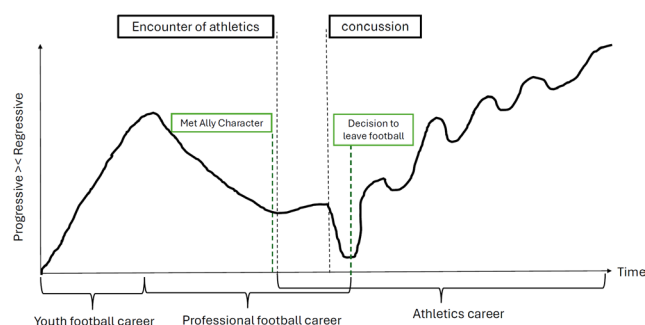
The aim of this narrative inquiry was to explore how two Danish elite athletes experienced their successful TT process, what initiated it, and how it contributed to their further career. This study marks a novel contribution to the

scant literature on TT, employing a narrative analysis approach to uncover and articulate the rich, individualized experiences of athletes who have undergone this TT.

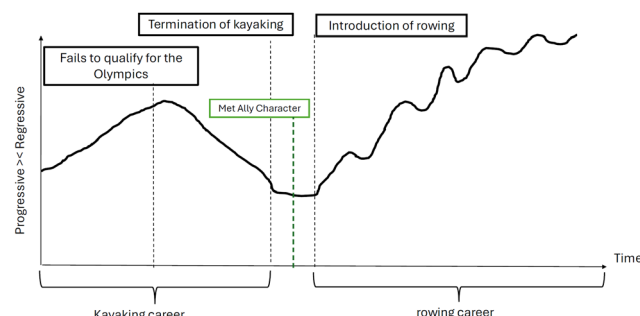
### Narrative Highlights

The overarching metanarrative portrayed by the athletes resonates with a quest narrative (Book et al., 2024), wherein the athletes persevere through obstacles and adversity to fulfil their potential as elite sportspeople (for more on narrative structures, see Book et al., 2024). Initially, the dominant sub-narrative type is that of a performance narrative type (Douglas & Carless, 2006), yet as adversity emerges something greater happens. It can be argued that both the performance narrative type and the relational narrative type (Douglas & Carless, 2006.) are visible. Inga's narrative progression, depicted in figure 1, commences with a performance-oriented structure, and has a progressive trajectory, when describing her youth career. However, a regressive line is drawn as she reminisces about her time in professional football. This regressive trend persists during her time with the football club, with various events contributing to a decline in her narrative trajectory. Notably, the regressive phase in Inga's narrative is characterized by performance-related adversities, while the progressive phase is distinctly relational, particularly in her connection with the coach who introduces her to track and field. The narrative stabilizes when she discovers athletics, serving as a refuge. Following another regressive incident during a football match, she makes the definitive decision to permanently exit football. From this point onward, her narrative once again adopts a progressive trajectory. A corresponding progression of Emma's narrative can be seen in figure 2 and the two narratives exhibits similarities. If athletes are facing adversities in their donor sport and opt for TT as a resolution, the trajectory of their careers may exhibit resemblances. However, it is premature to draw definitive conclusions about whether this is a general trend among TT athletes, and further exploration is certainly warranted to ascertain the broader applicability of such patterns.

**Figure 1: Progression of Inga's narrative**



**Figure 2: Progression of Emma's narrative**



### From Narrative Wreckage to Narrative Completion

It has been established that athletes might conclude their elite sports careers due to diverse forms of adversity (Brown et al., 2015), and furthermore that the adoption of a robust and inflexible performance narrative is identified as a potential cause of narrative wreckage (Ramos et al., 2024). However, adversity in the donor sport for the TT athletes posing as a narrative threat which might result in narrative wreckage, is also acting as a catalyst that propels the athletes toward the trajectory of TT. For the athletes included in this study, the adversity became a necessary evil to an opportunity that would turn out to be life changing. Particularly noteworthy is Inga's markedly negative evaluation during the period she played football at the senior level. On the football field, the lack of individualized attention contrasts sharply with the developmental progress she then experienced on the track. The football field presents challenges of positions shifting, and finding her focus, while the track offers a more individualized focus on personal development. Both athletes convey a sense of social despair toward the culmination of their donor sport careers; Emma due to the dissolution of her kayaking partnership, and Inga, as a consequence of inadequate care for her injuries, leaving her isolated in managing her rehabilitation.

When examining the primary factors enabling the two athletes to escape the narrative threat that drives them out of their donor sport and into their transfer sport, the importance of key characters within their narratives becomes evident. Consistent with the relational type narrative described by the athletes, the pathway to narrative completion is socially anchored, facilitated by the support and guidance of a central "mentor" or "ally" character in their narrative (Campbell, 2008). This pivotal character emerges as the solution to the athletes' despair, playing a crucial role in their successful transition. Finally, both athletes demonstrated a high sense of narrative flexibility (Ramos et al., 2024), demonstrating that they were indeed open to changes in the performance narrative in their donor sport, which opened new opportunities for both. Importantly, when people are rigid in their narratives (either metanarrative or narrative types), it could be difficult to recognize new and innovative ways forward.

Lieblich (2019) mentions that researchers can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world through studying and interpreting self-narratives. This perspective aligns with the findings in our study, where a crucial element shared in the athletes' narratives is the athletes as the main character, and furthermore a central character that is the entire reason for the initiation and completion of the TT. This character can be described as a mentor (Campbell 2008) within the narrative as he/she provides wisdom and guidance, or as an ally as he/she becomes our main characters sidekick towards reaching their individual goal or narrative completion. Hence, the ally characters impact on the athlete's narrative assembles that

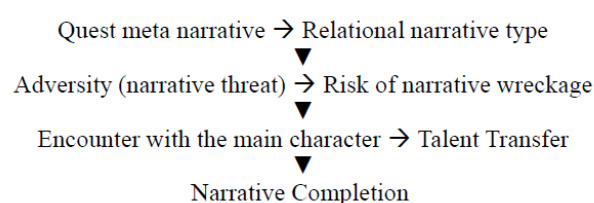
the social world, particularly the influence of specific individuals, plays a substantial role in shaping the TT experiences. The relationship to the ally character can be described as transitory (Storm et al., 2014), as it initiated a transition or a shift in the trajectory of the athlete. The initiation of the relationship is in the athletes' cases much dependent on chance. In Inga's case, the ally character Mikkel, with a seemingly coincidental tap on the shoulder, initiated a blossoming relationship, that would evolve from Inga being a mediocre football player to becoming the greatest sprinter the nation had ever seen. Similarly, Emma's TT owes its genesis to her ally character, a colleague athlete who discerned untapped potential in her. All based on an article she happened to read online. The relationship to these ally characters is depicted with genuine interest, mutual respect and common goal. The sacrifices made by the ally characters on behalf of the athletes, in alignment with Storm et al., 2014's description on transitory relationships, emerge as pivotal elements for the unfolding of the relational narrative. This thematic underpinning suggests a noteworthy finding in unstructured TT – specifically, that such second chances in elite sport, do not autonomously initiate but are rather catalyzed and facilitated by an ally character within the athlete's life. Moreover, the context in which the athlete encounters the ally character was crucial, and in these two cases happened in the right place at the right time. If the athletes had met the ally character at a different time and place, the outcomes likely would have been drastically different. Consequently, this highlights the importance of relational dynamics and the specific circumstances under which athletes meet their ally characters.

The athletes experience a shift in the anticipated narrative trajectory that steers their lives in unforeseen directions. Here, the narrative the athletes expect to live out is dramatically changed, and their entire lives pivots in a direction no one could ever have predicted. In such a pivotal situation, one would expect a corresponding alteration in self-imagery. Yet, the adjustment of identity appears remarkably manageable for the athletes included in this study. When recounting their experiences, they do not identify solely as rowers or football players but, rather, as elite athletes. Emma's departure from and subsequent return to her elite sports life exemplify the ease with which the athletes adapt to their new sporting endeavors, facilitated by their familiarity with elite athlete training regimens and daily routines. This observation aligns with Harten et al. (2021), emphasizing the advantageous role of psychological attributes and generic athletic abilities in TT. This finding is encapsulated in the statement by Inga, expressing her skepticism about leaving football for athletics, articulating a preference for being extraordinary and miserable in football over thriving but being mediocre in athletics. This sentiment underscores the profound attachment to her identity as an elite athlete, a facet so deeply ingrained that she is willing to compromise her mental well-being, already in a precarious state, unless assured of excelling in athletics by her coach. The elite athlete identity proves to be a resilient and influential force in shaping the athletes' decisions and experiences during TT.

At the onset of this discussion, we emphasized the unexpected nature of the TT process for our athletes. This particular (and indeed fortuitous) characteristic of TT represents a departure from classical performance narratives, which can pose challenges for high-performance athletes when faced with an involuntary conclusion to their careers, often resulting in narrative wreckage (Ramos et al., 2024). Expanding on the concept introduced in the

preceding section, which posits that the TT athlete identity may not be inherently sports-specific, our research suggests that TT could potentially avoid narrative wreckage. This departure from a sport-specific identity challenges the traditional trajectory often associated with concluding high-performance athletic careers. Together with the idea presented in the previous section that the TT athlete identity might not be sports specifically linked, our research suggests that TT could help avoid periods of narrative wreckage and rather give the option of narrative completion, as athletes bring their narrative to a meaningful and fitting end on their own terms. In conclusion the narrative pathway presented within this study can be shown in figure 3.

**Figure 3: From narrative threat to narrative completion**



In essence, our findings highlight the fortuitous and advantageous aspects of TT, providing athletes with an unforeseen opportunity to reshape their narratives. This departure from conventional performance narratives not only mitigates potential challenges for athletes unwillingly ending their careers but also offers a positive alternative, contributing to a more holistic and satisfying closure to their high-performance athletic journeys. The athlete career sport psychology discourse (for now) does not include transitions as TT, but with this new way of exploring these kinds of transitions, we get a deeper understanding of athlete career pathways. This study marks the first narrative analysis on TT and contributes both to the scant literature on the TT and also adds to the list of career pathways investigations, that narrative enquiries has explored, mentioned in the introduction.

### Applied Perspectives

The pursuit of medals in international sports is intensifying, necessitating new approaches, particularly for smaller nations (Storm et al., 2016). While some countries systematically embrace TT (MacNamara & Collins, 2015), in Denmark and many other nations, it remains neither explicitly articulated nor integrated into national elite sport strategies. However, TT might hold promise as an untapped resource for enhancing medal-winning potential considering that elite athletes are few in number and rather than wasting years of specialized athletic training, TT could offer new ways forward. First, our investigation underscores TT as a viable pathway to achieving world elite status, thus referring to the athlete career trajectory literature, TT might act as an alternative career pathway for athletes, and as an alternative to the late specialization pathway (Storm et al., 2012), or as an extension to this. Second, the recognition of TT presents the opportunity for athletes to maintain their elite sport identity, allowing for flexibility across multiple sports rather than being confined to a single discipline. Third, for coaches and sports leaders in the Danish sporting environment, embracing TT requires fostering enhanced collaboration across sports and engaging in discussions about athletes transcending traditional sport boundaries. Finally, facilitating TT

necessitates collective openness from stakeholders in the world of Danish sports, including parents, athletes, coaches, and sports leaders, to its potential benefits. In summary, TT should be incorporated into discussions as a viable solution when athletes face challenges, encouraging coaches to support athletes in exploring alternative pathways and innovative solutions during times of adversity.

### Strengths and Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of two Danish elite athletes who successfully transitioned from one sport to another through the process of TT. The use of narrative inquiry allowed for a deep exploration of the athletes' personal stories, highlighting the complex interplay of adversity, identity, and relational support that characterized their transitions.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. By focusing exclusively on successful TT, the research may present an overly positive view of the process, potentially portraying an idealized version of TT and primarily emphasizing the favourable outcomes. This selective examination might overlook the challenges and failures that athletes may encounter during TT, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings. To address this limitation, future research should consider investigating unsuccessful TT or conducting longitudinal studies to capture a more holistic and nuanced understanding of TT. Such approaches would provide a more balanced perspective, encompassing both the successes and setbacks that athletes experience, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing TT outcomes. Additionally, the athletes

were aware that they would not be fully anonymized, which could have influenced their responses. This awareness might result in a confirmation bias as the athletes are led to emphasize positive aspects of their experiences to stand out as socially attractable.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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