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**Examining the characteristics associated with the
career paths of professional women's handball players**

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Ph.D dissertation

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Budapest

2025

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Always just the next step

"It's always the next step," my protagonist muttered to herself as she strode up the stairs. This phrase came up before every challenge. Suddenly, she raised her eyes and concluded that she was blinded by the sun's rays, almost caressing and warming her face. So she stopped, eyes closed, and savoured the magic of the moment, silence, warmth and peace flowing through her body. Like someone basking on the beach in summer.

Suddenly, the bench shouted "Two minutes, deliberate head-shot!" The referee blows his whistle, the handball match is over. Two members of the crew, the doctor and the trainer, rush to my protagonist. She just lies there, smiling with her eyes closed. Then she soon realises that the feeling of silence and stillness actually means that she has saved the penalty shot with her head and won the championship, the first one! Then the physio arrived and the ice-bags quickly woke her from this inner state of mind and her nose began to ache.

Always the next step! This is how her career in sport and learning began. First as a professional player, then as a national team player, an Olympian, a multi-cup champion, then as a chartered economist, then as a sports economist, and finally as a doctor of all these. It was always the next training session, the next match, the next sports season, the next semester at university. There was no other way. Just working, humble, dedicated.

There were numerous situations in sport and education that forced her to back down for a moment, but she never gave up. She had her parents and siblings, her husband, her children, her friends, her sporting colleagues, who always listened, gave her advice or simply reminded her of what she was aiming for at every step! It made her feel strong, brave and ready to do something!

"You'll never be a goalkeeper!" It rings in her ears sometimes, even when she is no longer putting sport first, but writing her doctoral thesis. The phrase is still burned in her mind at the age of 16. It came from the coach she had always looked up to. She defiantly put in the work, pushed herself, imagined putting on her national team jersey. She owes what she has become to the coach, because she was motivated by the idea that it is possible to be a member of the Hungarian national team, someone who is short, less athletic, not a proclaimed talent.

Why am I telling you this about her? Because she has learned to fight for her goals through clenched teeth, she has learned from constructive criticism, but she has also learned to accept harsh, sometimes unfair criticism from those who did not know her. See

learned to handle and appreciate the weight of victory and defeat, and then to go back to training the next day.

She drew strength from the momentum of her sporting past during his PhD journey, as well as during her academic research and teaching career. It was also a challenging time, but her wonderful husband and two little angels gave her hero wings and allowed her to take advantage of the opportunities that sport might have taken away from her. Then there were her supervisors, who held her hand with a mother's protective love, and her PhD companions, like comrades in arms, with whom she has many fond memories and with whom she remains on friendly terms even after writing countless publications. It was a heavenly feeling to get the PhD, like winning the Champions League.

"It's always the next step," my protagonist muttered to herself as she strode up the stairs. This phrase came up before every challenge. Suddenly, she looked up and concluded that she was not outdoors, but walking up to the stage as the next presenter at an international sports conference, and that she was blinded not by the sun's rays but by the light of the lamp, and that was why she closed his eyes. Everything has faded before her, the joys and difficulties of the last 20 years of her sporting career and her years of doctoral training. Here she is, after many successful research projects, talking about her life's work. She can only say thank you, because she has a beautiful family, and sport and science have become her life's vocation. She is slowly seeing the summit she has chosen for herself.

Finally, I open my eyes and see my mother's proud gaze again!

Where is the next step?

In memory of my mother

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to my article-based dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Krisztina András and Alexandra Köves, who encouraged me to start the PhD programme. They have continuously inspired and supported me both personally and academically throughout my doctoral journey, which has always been challenging.

I would like to thank my doctoral lecturers who have been an inspiration to me, in particular Erzsébet Czakó, Borbála Szüle, Dóra Horváth, Réka Matolay, Ágnes Wimmer, Ariel Mitev and Richárd Szántó. My thanks and gratitude go to my colleagues who have supported me in some way and given me impetus on this long journey, especially Tünde Máté, Judit Gáspár, Gabriella Kiss, Zoltán Kynsburg, Attila Kajos, Zsolt Havran. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of my articles and the opponents of my article-based dissertation, Miklós Kozma and Tamás Sterbenz, for their honourable work, because I feel that every criticism and every suggestion has contributed to improving the quality of my research. I would also like to thank Andrea Gelei, Mónika Herman and Brigitta Czumpf for their support during the doctoral programme. I am also grateful to Anna Freund, with whom I cried and laughed during the doctoral adventure and without whom I would have found the barriers more difficult to overcome.

I would also like to thank my former teammates, coaches, managers, and outstanding individuals in the sport of handball with whom I was not able to play on the same team, but who helped me in a team spirit of solidarity. I am grateful to all of them for sparing no time and energy to share their valuable insights and stories with me.

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for providing me with the personal background that allowed me to be where I am today. Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband Ádám Pomázi for his unconditional love, endless support, and patience.

1. Introduction

This article-based dissertation deals with a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of Hungarian women's handball players' career paths. The articles written in the course of the research will address a) what important stages can be identified in the career path of an athlete; b) what is the role of career influencers; c) what are the factors and decisions that influence career development and how do they affect long-term performance; d) what is the "luck factor" and how does it relate to decision situations; and finally e) what are the experiences of sport managers and coaches on what intervention points can be identified for conscious career management. In summary, my research seeks to answer the question of what the career paths of Hungarian professional women's handball players look like, what traits characterised their career paths and key decisions they made after the conclusion of a successful career. All this in order to contribute to conscious career management from the perspective of both the athletes and their stakeholders.

1.1. Rationale for choice of topic, personal motivations

I have had a wonderful and adventurous career as an athlete. Wonderful because I have achieved the kind of success I dreamed of as a little girl sitting in front of the television, adventurous because during my sporting career I quickly got a taste of what it is like to ride the roller coaster (win-lose, individual performance, critical situations, struggling - for success, recognition, for myself, for my peers, etc.). I was introduced to handball at the age of 8, but I could call myself a professional athlete from the age of 16, which lasted for almost 20 years, and I experienced a lot during that time. Throughout my active sporting career, I have often thought that a professional career was not a great challenge, but when I looked around me (watching players my age), I found that in some ways it was very difficult. Many times you can see the result of a player stopping at one level, even if his talent and path to a professional career has a solid foundation. My personal opinion is that my career would have taken a different course if certain factors had not developed in the way that they eventually did. These are often referred to within sporting circles as the 'luck factor', a positive event or situation that develops along causes and factors beyond our control at first glance (Herr, 2020). However, the nature of these factors, how they interact with each other and the conditions and environment required for a breakthrough are rarely explored in sport and science. Such an investigation would not only help individual athletes to achieve their goals, but could also provide important

insights for youth development professionals and sports organisations who are making a serious investment in future players and trying to identify potential talent in, for example, the value-added system of a club. It could also help to reduce the critical periods (typically periods of dual fulfilment of learning and sport) when athletes stop playing or coaches turn their backs on their coaching profession.

My research curiosity was based on my MSc thesis during my PhD research. After finishing my career in sport, I felt a strong motivation to investigate the factors influencing career development, which I started to look at in detail, especially in the context of post-graduate education. There is a personal aspect to my motivation for this topic, since, as soon as I stopped playing, my younger sister, 19 years younger than me, entered the 'investment years' of becoming a professional player. My curiosity about young sportsmen and sportswomen was to see if similarities and differences between different generations could be demonstrated, given similar factors (family, school, PE teacher, coach, club). In answering this question, I have received surprising answers (Herr, 2019), which I would now like to examine one step 'up' (adulthood), to see which factors must be simultaneously 'coincidentally' present for an athlete's career to be successful at the professional level.

Starting my doctoral studies also gave me insights into areas that made me decide to look at my PhD research topic from a different angle – not only how "random" decisions lead to professional athlete success in team sports, but also to show the context of career paths on an imaginary timeline. I was very influenced by other studies related to career research, which triggered a feeling in me that I knew I wanted to examine and illustrate this in Hungarian women's handball. One of these studies presents the specifics of an athlete's career through a cultural lens (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). In the other case (Ekengren et al., 2020a), I was shocked to find that I was almost looking back at my own career path (with one exception – due to the cultural difference between Hungarian and Swedish women's handball, where it is not the primary goal of a Hungarian handball player to play in a foreign club). I then became interested in illustrating an empirical career model along the holistic athlete life course among Swedish professional handball players, showing separately the active athlete and post-sport stages (Ekengren et.al., 2020b). When including studies of other sports, I came across a study of career development in Hungarian professional football players, which focused on three themes: schooling, training and career development (Havran & András, 2018).

The examination of an athlete's career can be done at a wide range of scales and levels (e.g. different career transitions, unsuccessful or successful career paths, drop-outs, burn-outs, etc.). My personal interest in this topic can be interpreted as a kind of therapy as a former athlete and future researcher. As much as I was consciously preparing for life after sport, the switch also left me with challenges and questions. Thus, the research focus of my article-based dissertation is only to present a successful career path and to examine the decisions and the relationships that occur during an athlete's career in the field of athlete career management.

1.2. Specification of the research goals and research question

Career research and its specificity to athletes present a number of challenges in different topics and scientific fields (such as career development, career transitions, career decisions; (sport) psychology, sociology, anthropology, behavioural sciences). I have identified the following *research problems*: On the one hand, the athlete's career is finite (short); the difficulties of transition can be facilitated by a supportive environment, which is often lacking (when the bubble bursts, loss of value). On the other hand, active athletes are not sufficiently aware of the management and planning of sport careers and post-sport careers. Thirdly, athletes encounter different life decisions and decision-makers during different career transitions, which can affect career development. Fourthly, the development of sport has led to an intensification of economic processes in the sport industry. The impact of this can also be felt in the players market. Sports organisations may make decisions on many occasions, which may be justified from a management point of view, but which lead to the materialisation of human values (tangible values). Thus, players can be negative actors in the life of a club, which can have an impact on the development of their sporting careers. Finally, there is little literature on handball-related career research. Furthermore, the 2021 sport strategy (2022-2028) of the Hungarian Handball Federation (MKSZ) defines targets that justify the need for studies related to key stakeholders, handball players. The depth of this is detailed in subsection 2.1.

Based on Maxwell (2005), I grouped my research objectives into the following three categories (Table 1): practical goals; intellectual research goals; and individual goals. In this way, I had a clear focus throughout the research process and was able to structure each step of the research in a consistent way. My personal goals provided the foundation for my research, as I display my own motivation and beliefs in sports career research (Mahadevan, 2011). Thus, the practical, intellectual and individual goals of the research

overlapped with each other, as the three aspects had multiple intersection points. This fact fundamentally affects the interpretation; especially in qualitative methodology this is an important point. My research is exploratory in nature, so I had to be constantly attentive to my own activity, constantly reflecting on it in the research.

Practical objectives	Intellectual goals	Individual goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To support women's handball players and stakeholders to better understand the issues and contexts related to their sport careers. ➤ To help sports organisations understand how to perceive, tailor and address the challenges associated with an athlete's career through practical solutions ➤ Demonstrate the intervention points where conscious career management can influence the long-term performance of athletes, an important aspect for collective success and competitive advantage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Understand how sports leaders and coaches perceive when dealing with athletes. ➤ Understand what it takes to create an environment where athletes can truly thrive, which can be an effective way to achieve the highest potential of sporting performance. ➤ Gain a better insight into the attitudes of players and their position in sports organisations and their place in sports culture. ➤ Understand the network of key elements that develop during the development of an athlete's career. ➤ To show how, through conscious or unconscious decisions and often recurring situations, handball players "manage" their own sporting careers and how these influence their performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Understand individual attitudes to sporting careers and, through this, identify the main and critical points; ➤ To show that athletes are not only an asset in the life of the club, but also a value-adding employee, against the objectivist logic of commercialisation. ➤ The article-based dissertation gives a complex overview of my results. ➤ To show research self-reflection, not to focus on my own (athlete's) point of view, but to incorporate my own understanding of the challenges associated with an athlete's career into the article-based dissertation. ➤ In the course of my research, I worked through the difficulties of transition in my sporting career – therapy.

Table 1: Research goals

Source: based on Maxwell (2005, 2013) own ed.

Table 1 summarises the different but overlapping dimensions of the research objectives. Hence, *the research focus of my article-based dissertation is to examine the characteristics and challenges associated with sport careers through the example of retired Hungarian female handball players, with a focus on the areas of career management and career decision-making.* Thus, my overall aim is to understand the sport career-related tendencies of successful Hungarian women's handball players and to illustrate critical intervention points, thus facilitating the task of conscious career management.

As the focus of my research suggests, my qualitative field research is abductive in nature. In fact, my research explores the everyday actions and activities of stakeholders (Blaikie, 2000) in the world of sport. Qualitative field studies are not merely a data collection activity, "in fact, perhaps most characteristically, they are also a theory building process. Rarely does one undertake field research to test precisely formulated hypotheses.

Rather, it is to try to understand an ongoing, unpredictable process” (Babbie, 2008, p 316). The abductive nature of research therefore does not require the formulation of hypotheses. It does, however, require the definition of research questions. The main research question of my research is presented at the end of this chapter, while the additional research questions are detailed in the following subsection 1.3 (Figure 1).

In summary, my article-based dissertation is an exploratory research that aims to understand the challenges associated with the career paths of Hungarian women's handball players and seeks to answer the following *research question*:

What factors within the culture of the sport of handball can be identified in terms of career management that determine players' career paths and what traits characterise their career paths and key decisions at the end of a successful career?

1.3. The conceptual model of the dissertation

During my doctoral studies I planned to write an article-based dissertation based on three studies. The overall research question was detailed in the previous chapter, and now I will present the conceptual model of the article-based dissertation, the logic and the other sub-questions of the research, which are also the research questions of the articles. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

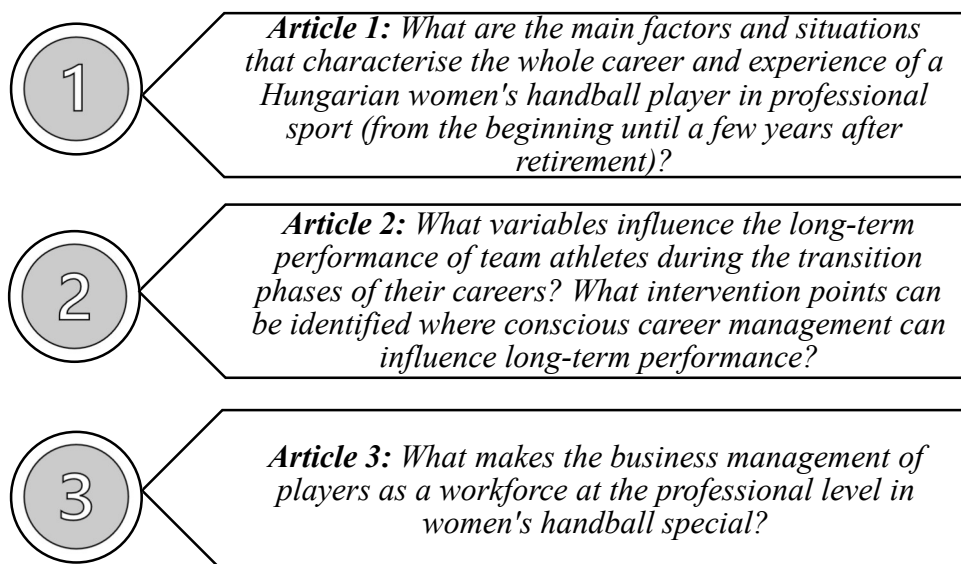


Figure 1: Presentation of the units of an article-based dissertation

Source: own editing

In writing *my first article*, I set out the criteria that informed the research topic I chose for my doctoral period. The introductory article was published in the international journal Q3 Society and Economy on 2 September 2022. The research methodology used was

autoethnography, in which I used my own experience to look at the important factors in an athlete's career that could form the basis for future research. On the other hand, this has allowed me to explore the specificities of the sporting culture in question, the tone of which may be enjoyable for the reader. The application of this research methodology is interesting and unique in itself, and its value for future research lies in the fact that a gap in the literature found in my previous research is somewhat filled by the macro-level study, which focuses on handball athletes. Furthermore, the consideration of the five pillars identified in this article can provide valuable inputs to practice for athletes, federations and sport companies.

The *second article* is a query on the situation of Hungarian women's handball, following on from the first article. The article was published on 4 March 2024 in the International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport (Q2). My co-author, Alexandra Köves (PhD) and I investigated the performance-related effects of handball players' career transitions that may have an impact on the long-term development of their careers as athletes. The use of autoethnography and narratives are sufficiently complementary, so our aim in this article was to apply narrative research methodology with other ex-athletes to present a more comprehensive picture of career-related processes in handball, which we believe is under-researched in this sport. The research with retired players showed a wider range of research findings than we were able to summarise in this article, so the results that were missed will be presented later (subchapter 4.2.). As first author, I have had a significant role and was present at all stages of the research process (80% of my contribution to the research process). My co-author was there throughout the process as a methodological guide and contributed to presenting the results in the paper in a comprehensive and scientific manner.

The *third article* takes a different approach to the first and second articles on the examination of athletes' careers. My co-author Krisztina András (PhD) and I interviewed managers and coaches about the characteristics, factors and experiences that emerge when they employ athletes. The research was conducted using thematic analysis, which gave us the opportunity to create themes using thematic codes. One of our goals was to get at the logic of player selection (Ofoghi et al., 2013) that may influence a handball player's career path. The article was published on 5 February 2025 in the journal Budapest Management Review (MTA A). Like the second article, I was actively involved in all research phases (my contribution rate to the work is 80%).

The structure of an article-based dissertation can be divided into four main parts. First, I present the theoretical background of the research (Chapter 2), followed by the chosen research methodology (Chapter 3) and the results of the studies included in the article-based dissertation (Chapter 4), and the three studies of the article-based dissertation are presented in separate chapters (5, 6, 7). Finally, the main conclusions (Chapter 8).

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical background of my PhD research is primarily provided by the literature of sport business economics and decision sciences and the sport psychology approaches of career research. The main directions of these are presented first in this chapter. Figure 2 shows the conceptual choices of the PhD thesis. In the literature review, I provide a comprehensive introduction to the different approaches in career studies in a domestic and international context. Thus, I focus on the different disciplinary orientations that explain career management and development frameworks and career decision-making situations. Therefore, I will not go into detail on the explanation of sport psychology approaches, but I will describe the valuable contexts and models that fit well with the strategic approach of sport business economics. With all this, my aim was to look from the handball players' point of view at the main areas that are determinants in the development of their careers, answering the overall research question.

I have represented the three main areas with three funnels, the outcomes of which the athlete is positioned in. The first funnel is sport business economics, where business economic concepts are brought to the fore (i.e. employment, selection and aspects by stakeholders). The second is decision sciences, including career-related decisions (who is the decision-maker?). The third funnel is the narrower field of sport psychology, which is specifically career-related research, where the athlete is seen as a whole person at certain stages (transitions) of his or her career. Parts of the literature background are further elaborated in the relevant articles (Chapter 5, 6, 7).

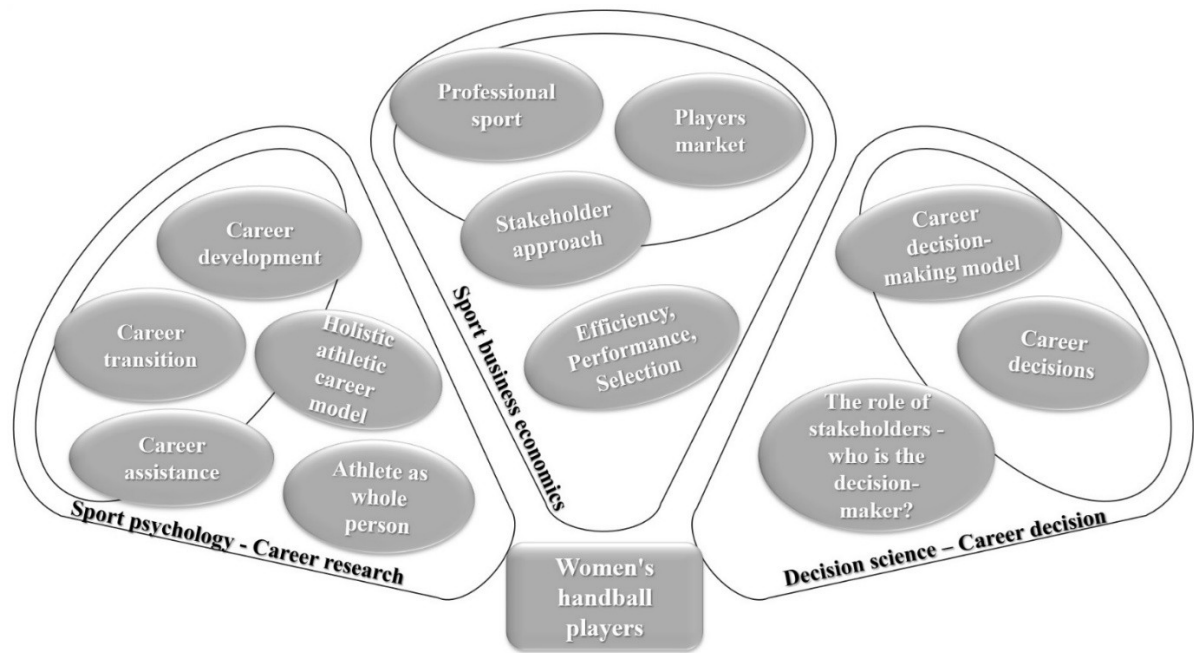


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of article-based dissertation

Source: own editing

2.1. The sport strategy of the Hungarian Handball Federation (2022-2028): Background - Description of the situation - Target status

In our country, handball is not only among the priority spectacle team sports (Act on Corporate Tax, Act LXXXI of 1996, § 22/C, in: net.jogtar.hu), but also ranks high for Hungarian fans compared to other sports. While it is a popular sport in Europe, alongside football, basketball, hockey and volleyball, there has recently been a demand for the global expansion of the sport not only in Asia but also in America (origo.hu, 2021). The reason for this is not only the fact that the 2028 Olympic Games will be held in Los Angeles, but also the focus on consolidating the sport's place in the Olympic programme. In fact, the competition for popularity is becoming increasingly intense between sports, where the position acquired must be maintained and improved. In addition to the global expansion outlined above, there are number of changes to be observed, such as the pressure of rising expectations; parallel developments; expected changes in funding; changes in sport strategy.

In this competitive environment, Hungarian handball wants to play a dominant role on the international stage and apply innovative and dynamic solutions in its operations. Thus, at the beginning of 2021, the Board of the Hungarian Handball Federation (hereinafter referred to as HHF or federation) decided to set a new strategic direction for the period 2022-2028 based on 7 pillars. The pillars summarise the vision, values, achievements,

traditions, successes and resources of the HHF: 1.) Sport professional excellence; 2.) Competence centre; 3.) Product development; 4.) Sustainable financing; 5.) Development of sports facilities; 6.) Social responsibility; 7.) Systems development (MKSZ, 2021, p. 14). In creating the strategy, the decision-makers followed principles such as modernisation while preserving value, stability, credibility, transparency, systemic operating, etc.

I would like to highlight and briefly describe the three pillars that are close to my research question and directly relevant and affecting handball players:

- *Sport professional excellence (the first pillar):*

The definition of sport professional excellence with 5 focus areas starts with massing (grassroots), then integrating it into sport specificities and applying increasingly deeper education and training trends to reach quality elite sport. Thus, the first focus area is children's age groups (8-14 years); the second is grassroots age groups and national teams (15-21 years); the third is professional specialist (experts) education; the fourth is adult national teams; the fifth is competition directorates. The focus is on quality international elite sport, so that the objective is to have a permanent participation of the national teams in international competitions (European Championships, World Championships, Olympics). This is because the success and achievements of the adult national teams (fourth focus area) can influence the performance of the sport from the point of view of professional, sport business economics and sport-political impact, as well as in national and international sport forums (IHF, EHF, MOB, IOC). The strategy describes the objectives and values for the adult national teams. To achieve these, tasks such as the introduction and consolidation in practice of a sport science background and the definition of individual profiles in the sport professional specific and mental areas, which will be validated by the system through monitoring, will have to be addressed. In terms of sporting professional excellence, the federation identified as a further challenge and task to be solved "the changing values of the new, emerging generations, the increase in the number of experts and athletes, as well as the broadening of competition systems and the sharper separation of elite sport" (MKSZ, 2021, p 18).

In order to fulfil the international dominant role defined by the first pillar, the federation has established a broad set of six levels of tasks (MKSZ, 2021, p 71-72), which may significantly determine the stages (transitions) identified in the athlete's

career in the future. These are: maintaining health and ensuring healthy physical development in children; developing and maintaining physical and mental fitness; achieving accountable content in sport (knowledge of the culture of movement through competitive results); having functions that ensure the fulfilment of the desire to compete and provide entertainment and enjoyment; developing and strengthening the competences needed to become a top athlete; prioritising quality indicators.

The majority of professional handball players spend 10-14 years in the international field, preceded by about the same amount of time in youth, preparing for a professional career. This 'long-term participation' in the sport of handball will be determined by the sensitivity of the relationships within training systems on the one hand, and the quality of intrinsic factors linked to sporting activities (such as performance and performance readiness) on the other.

The federation's stated aim is to produce as many highly skilled players as possible, which requires a systematic approach and is detailed in Table 2. The definition of this may have been inspired by the idea that "the quality of the excellence factors of the selected athletes will determine how well a handball player performs, how long he or she can remain among the international elite and how these will be matched with the results in terms of the effectiveness of the national team" (MKSZ, 2021, p 80).

SELECTION	PREPARATION	OBJECTIVE TO BE ACHIEVED
1. General	Broad-based, with little specific content	Search for the characteristics needed to become an athlete
2. Specific sport selection	Support for sports movement material (motoricums)	Design of wide profiles typical of the sport
3. Selection in sport	According to personalised possibilities	Personal specifications - profiles - strengthening positions
4. Restructuring in sport	Creating the background for the new positions to be achieved	Support for professional changes

Table 2: Long-term selection model of the Hungarian Handball Federation

Source: MKSZ, 2021, p 80

So, it is the performance and results at adulthood that will determine the intensity of professional and sporting support and therefore influence the present and future of the sport. Selection must therefore be subordinated to strategic objectives.

International trends use three models. The first is to build a successful grassroots system at team level into the adult national team. The other is when a grassroots system is consciously built up on the basis of individual parameters (grassroots system,

education) and is then introduced into the adult national team. The third is when realistic objectives and results are consciously managed on a level and value system in order to get the athlete into the adult national team. The Hungarian situation in recent periods shows the practice of the first model, where the suitability of handball players for the adult national team is judged on the basis of competitive results. Otherwise, those nations that have focused on a preparation model that has determined conscious adult performance as opposed to a team-level pressure for results at the junior level have been more successful at the adult level. Therefore, the federation's strategy lists a set of core functions that help to implement the third model of maximising athletes' performance and determining their effectiveness at the adult level (MKSZ, 2021).

- *Competence centre (second pillar)*

The federation believes that handball - like sport in general - is a highly human resource intensive field, where personal competences, skills and abilities are the basic conditions for competitiveness. However, the elements of competence include not only personality features, skills and abilities, but also acquired knowledge and self-assessment. Thus, the range of our personal characteristics: self-image, self-concept, attitude, value, worth, expertise, motivation, etc.) (Vojtek et al., 2013).

"The importance of a competence (excellence) centre lies in the visibility of existing competences, the management of knowledge and talent, and the quality of information flows, which enable the organisation to respond to changes in the external environment and new challenges, while at the same time developing competitive advantages over competitors (MKSZ, 2021, p 26)".

The first main area of the task-oriented competence centre is the federation itself as an organisation, with a hierarchy of departments and their respective job descriptions (senior management, committees, county federations). A stable, skilled workforce has accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience and the popularity of the sport and other working conditions make it an attractive place to work. The second main area is sports organisations, around 650 in 2021, out of which 50-62% apply for Corporation Tax support each year (they can be grouped according to several criteria - resources, economic and legal operation, competitive bidding - so the requirements and competences vary).

The third main area is players, who are seen by the federation as a specific stakeholder group. After all, they are the main resources and primary value creators of

the sports service, the "products" of the grassroots system, and in the case of recreational sport, the consumers of sport. At the same time, they are key players in media and fan demand and product differentiation. Furthermore, stars can be role models for young people and sport consumers and can represent brand value for the sport and its organisations. Finally, the acquisition of stars can be seen as a competitive advantage among sports organisations. There are few handball players who are internationally ranked and who can play a leading role in top teams, and there is a general lack of foreign language skills. The salaries offered by Hungarian clubs are lagging behind those in neighbouring countries, which is counterproductive for the professional development of players. Talented young players are hitting a level of income that the foreign market is unable and/or unwilling to compete with. The federation highlights the fact that through conscious career management (dual career model) managed at the federal level, the sport can provide role models while meeting qualitative and quantitative standards (see pillar of sport professional excellence).

The fourth area relates to coaches and other experts. Objectives such as the renewal of the professional content of coaching courses at various levels, the retraining of lower qualified coaches, the periodic organisation of special coaching courses (e.g. goalkeeper), the expansion of licensing categories, etc. Here, too, there is a case of inverse proportionality, as in the case of players, whereby the disproportionate level of salaries and conditions (more coaches than needed) is inversely proportional to the individual development of the experts. Finally, the fifth area is officials.

The federation considers it a target state that the competence centre is integrated as an independent organisational unit into the organisational structure of the federation. The centre itself will include the structure of professional training and its development, the management of internal training and the coordination of sport-related scientific activities (books, publications, etc.) under the heading of research and development. The federation has defined the mission of the Competence Centre as being able to support the achievement of the objectives set out in the pillars with the existing knowledge and resources, thus ensuring modern and competitive operation. The strategic objectives of this pillar are, on the one hand, the existence of knowledge transfer within the organisation (information and knowledge sharing). On the other hand, "talent makes capital dance", i.e. existing knowledge and competences are developed and the talent of individuals is managed. Finally, they strengthen strategic

partnerships (with international federations and other sporting organisations, academic and business organisations).

- *Sustainable financing (fourth pillar)*

The data, figures, percentages and distributions in the federation's records illustrate the importance of the sport in the sport markets (András, 2004) and in the domestic sporting scene. Until we come to the present situation, it is inevitable to briefly mention that until the introduction of the system of subsidies for spectator team sports, the public opinion was talking about the need to reform the Hungarian sports funding system. The basic problem was that the national economic weight of the Hungarian sports sector was lower than in other countries in Europe. There was no sport sponsorship culture, sport consumption was low, the system for allocating central budget resources was outdated and resources were not used efficiently. In July 2010, Act LXXXIII of 2010 amending certain laws was adopted, which, beyond the support scheme for spectacle team sports, aims to ensure the availability of sporting activities for the general public (school and student sports, recreational sports) (MKSZ, 2021). However, based on the experience of recent years, the support scheme also has a number of risks (Sterbenz & Gulyás, 2014), which may overshadow its positive features.

The federation itself is currently an organisation employing around 3200 people (employees, contractors, etc.), and in 2021 its register of officials included 897 referees, 63 assistant referees and 333 tournament officials (with an uneven distribution by place of residence). Some 650 sports organisations are registered in the federation's register of member organisations (in general, between 325 and 400 organisations apply for approval of a Corporation Tax Support each year). It also lists 670 facilities that are suitable for handball at some level, 396 of which are of standard size (59%) (the county distribution is even). It is highlighted that in the period 2011-2021, a total of 349 sports facilities (worth HUF 74.5 billion) have been approved for construction or development. Out of these, 49 have been authorised for the construction of new sports facilities, of which 17 have been built and 32 are under construction. Of the remaining 300 programmes approved, 170 renovations have been completed. These improvements have expanded sporting opportunities for the local community, increasing the participation of the population in sporting activities and events.

Over the ten-year period (2011-2021), approximately HUF 231.5 billion has been allocated to sports organisations (until 17.08.2021), of which HUF 194.5 billion has actually been received. By then, the association itself had received funding approval of HUF 36.2 billion (of which HUF 31.6 billion had been called up - a call-up rate of 87%). Of this amount, a high proportion was approved for support for the grassroots system (31.39%) and for investments in tangible fixed assets (34.8%). In the case of youth, the continuous increase in the number of players and the launch of programmes for this age group (such as the Handball in School programme, competitions for small school children, etc.), the total cost of the national youth teams and international youth events organised at home were included in the amount of support. In the case of real estate investments, more than 130 gymnasiums were renovated with the approved funding (under the National Gym Renovation Programme for a gross amount of nearly HUF 8.5 billion), 6 new beach handball courts were built, 36 outdoor courts were built or renovated and an innovation and diagnostics centre was implemented for the Hungarian Handball Grassroots Foundation (NEKA).

In 2010, 938 teams (614 adult, 200 youth, 124 junior) participated in the Hungarian championships, with a total of 21,150 players with valid playing licences. In 2021, there are 681 member associations with around 109,468 registered players and 38,994 players with competition licences. There are 419 clubs with a total of 36,808 grassroots players with a competition licence. The number of licensed professional coaches has increased from 541 to 2,309 in the ten-year interval (MKSZ, 2021). The publication Government Information (2017) presents the development of Hungarian sport in figures. Table 3 summarises the data for the six spectacle team sports for the period 2011-2017. It can be clearly seen that handball is ranked second in terms of registered players.

If we look at the international and domestic attendances for the 2023/2024 season, we can see that 3 handball and 7 football teams are in the top 10. This season, almost 480,618 spectators watched handball matches on location. In comparison, in the same period, 1,270,289 spectators watched football matches, 41,857 spectators watched water polo, 170,249 spectators watched ice hockey and 440,567 spectators watched basketball matches (sportstatisztika.blog.hu in: MKSZ, 2021).

Sport	Number of registered athletes			Number of new establishments nationwide
	2011	2017	Percentage growth	
Football	158.682	249.626	157%	64
Handball	24.000	65.606	273%	65
Basketball	24.642	59.647	242%	17
Volleyball*	1.930	11.588	600%	14
water polo	4.223	6.708	159%	39
Ice Hockey	2.305	5.299	230%	21

Table 3: Growth of the six spectacle team sports (2011-2017)

Source: based on Kormány Információ (2017 in: www.kormany.hu) own edition

*Volleyball has been a spectacle team sport since June 2017

Stepping away from the strategy of the Hungarian Handball Federation, we can look at the practice and highlight the following interesting facts, which further illustrate the situation of the labour market of domestic handball players. On the one hand, the experience that the regulation of all players causes unjustified increases in the cost structure of clubs. For example, the foreign player restriction in place until a few years ago (administrative fees of several million forints were paid for up to five foreigners) resulted in an unjustified increase in the salaries of Hungarian players. This had two main direct consequences for Hungarian players: (1) they did not go abroad to gain experience; (2) they were satisfied with the high salary that was easily available at a young age, which also led them to put professional considerations on the backburner in their various decisions, and the principal-agent problem (Chikán, 2021) associated with player agents was amplified. The regulation was thus seen as counterproductive. The removal of this player regulation seems to have led to a reduction of these anomalies. Typically, the transfer of Hungarian youngsters abroad was significant, and the unrealistic salary demands of Hungarian players in Hungary were eliminated. Player agents' activities ideally helped players, but in many cases biased the reflection of players' ambitions in career decisions.

On the other hand, a quality grassroots system is the best solution to the dilemma of the number of foreign and domestic players. This has also resolved the professional and public debate on whether there are too few foreign players in the Hungarian first division. Since the 2018 World Junior Championships, there are now 4-5 age groups at the very top of the world rankings. As a result, Hungarian women's handball players coming out of the grassroots system are immediately competitive in the adult field, both at women's

first division level and internationally. Recently, 12 of the 19 members of the women's adult national team that won bronze at the 2024 European Championship came from the mentioned grassroots teams. All this is welcome, but it is too brave for researchers to draw conclusions from one result, as it is only a snapshot; real trends and conclusions can only be drawn from the results over a longer period of time.

As can be seen from the current and future strategy of the federation and the interesting facts mentioned above, the role of handball players and the various direct stakeholders in the organisational culture is significant and their study may be justified in several disciplines. It can be argued that interdisciplinary research in career studies can help both organisational leaders and athletes and other direct stakeholders to achieve their goals by providing a holistic view of research findings through complex interconnections (e.g., athlete as a whole person, athlete as a decision maker).

2.2. Sports and business economics

The economy is a subsystem of society, and sport is a field of social science with an economic aspect, since the role of sport in modern societies has been valorized, and even became an independent industry (business service) in the 20th century, which has led to the need for economic analysis of sport, thus expanding the literature on sport business economics (András, 2003b). During this period, it can be observed that the concept of sport has been broadened by a number of factors (Nagy, 1996, in: Máté et al., 2020; Sárközy, 2002), see in the case of leisure sports (such as health promotion, recreation, rehabilitation) or professional sports (competition and performance orientation), not to mention stratified sports (such as student, children, disabled sports), intellectual (no physical performance) and technical sports (such as motor sports). A country's geographical location and historical traditions are the deciding factors in what counts as a sport. While competitive sport is an essential feature of spectacular sport, recreational sport is about exercise and physical activity (András, 2003b).

Table 4 illustrates the interpretation of the concept of sport between 2003 and 2014 (Máté et al., 2020). According to Gyömörei (2012), community sport is a sport where social value creation comes first, no income is generated for the individual from sport. Sterbenz and Gulyás (2012, 2014) explain the three divisions: first, elite sport is the activity of top players not necessarily market-based (depending on the specificity of the sport), second, professional (spectacle) sport is business-based, and finally, recreational sport is the same as András (2003b).

András (2003b)	Gyömörei (2012)		Sterbenz - Gulyás (2012, 2014)
Professional sport	Elite sport	Elite sport v. Prolympic sport	Elite Sport
		Professional sport	Professional (spectator) sport
Recreational sports	Community sport	{ Post-school, school - university sports recreational and amateur sports	Recreational sports

Table 4: Interpretation of the concept of sport (2003-2014)

Source: based on András (2003), Gyömörei (2012), Sterbenz - Gulyás (2012, 2014); in: Máté et al., 2020

Dénes (1998) distinguishes the different forms of sport according to two aspects, taking into account the economic approach. On the one hand, from the point of view of consumption and, on the other hand, from the point of view of exchanges. The former refers to passive and active activities, the latter to formal (consumption of sport requires a market transaction) and informal sport.

The subject of exchange and aspects of professional sport markets are detailed by András (2002, 2003a, 2003b) providing a basis for subsequent research to explore the detailed economics of specific areas of sport (as in Szabó, 2012; Havran, 2017; Máté, 2019). I wish to follow and be part of this academic research arc in the field of professional sport career management.

András (2002) notes that sport business economics research focuses on two main areas, leisure sport and professional sport, which can be distinguished into micro, meso and macro levels. My own research area focuses on professional sport, sometimes touching on almost all levels of analysis, since the athlete (even their career decisions and the specificity of their stages) is a specific essence which cannot be immediately discussed, for example, without understanding and evaluating it, without immediately talking about transfers, since the specific treatment of human resources is a sensitive area, which includes career management, motivation or even career development. My research will focus on the meso-level, where the specificities of a sport culminate with the operational specialists of players market.

To explain the relationship between sport business and business economics, the basic concepts of "Chikán's" Business Economics can provide an answer, which is "a social science discipline that discusses and explains the theoretical foundations of how businesses operate" (Chikán, 2021, p.17). At the same time, Chikán's approach takes a multidisciplinary approach to the corporation, which leads to the identification of interfaces with other fields.

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of corporate business economics (Chikán, 2021), András (2003a) represents that sport companies exhibit self-interested behaviour, which is linked to the environmental-organisational relations in which the operations and behavioural features of sport companies are managed. The study describes the functioning of sport companies based on the logical chains of organization theory (contingency theory), identifies the markets of professional sport, including the players market, and its specialties based on stakeholder approach. It is important to underline that it assumes a top management perspective in the operation of the sport companies, thus introducing a strategic perspective in the way of negotiation. In the field of sport business, it can also be stated that there is a strategic focus on knowledge-based management (resource-based theory), since, as Stocker (2013) notes, athletes can be called specialists in their sport.

According to the resource-based view, firms achieve success not because they have better resources, but because they have the right level of capabilities (which are essentially management-dependent) to better utilize their resources (Penrose, 1959). Barney (1991) states that resources must have four characteristics for a firm to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, which are 1) rare, 2) valuable, 3) imperfectly imitable, and 4) non-substitutable. Furthermore, it is important for the organization to know how to exploit the potential of the resources, so the embeddedness criterion must be present (Barney, 1997). At the same time Oliver (1997) argues that a resource-based and institutional view is essential for sustainable competitive advantage, where the goal is to model robust heterogeneity and sustainable advantage that includes the social context of resource selection.

In the last decades, people have been considered the most important resource, among other reasons because of the key role played by human creativity, decision-making and thinking in the corporate sphere (Ramawickrama et al., 2017). This is no different in sport, and sport companies in the field of professional sport can be considered as knowledge-intensive companies (András, 2004; Stocker, 2013), where human resources are similar in many characteristics, and in many cases different from other resources used in the life of a company. It is important to emphasise that athletes and stars are both resources (sometimes investments) and special internal stakeholders, employees within the organisation who influence the value of the sports company. As employees, they aim to pursue their material and non-material interests. As an employer, the sport company aims to achieve good performance (András, 2003a).

The international literature addresses the concept of entrepreneurship, which is common in knowledge-intensive industries (Burgel & Murray, 2000). Changes in sport (e.g. technology) and different perspectives (athletes, coaches, community, company, region) have created a need to understand entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial orientation, and sport-based entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2011). Research has been carried out to examine the links between these concepts and sport: Hall (2006) presents results on the development of megaevents related to urban entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship leads to changes in consumer demand and encourages actors to innovate, and is thus a critical factor in the sport sector (Ball, 2005). The process of innovation is easier when the skills of individuals are integrated into a group, thus creating a collective entrepreneurship (Dana & Dana, 2007).

Ratten (2011) sees sport-based entrepreneurship as an economic activity in the field of sport management, where actors respond collectively to value creation and opportunities. This conception reflects the key characteristics of entrepreneurship, such as innovation, proactivity and risk-taking (Holt et al. 2007). According to Ratten and Jones (2020), this means that sport organisations are in a unique position to create value in a way that other organisations cannot, due to the collaborative nature of the sport industry. In this way, it can be argued that the dynamic nature of sport-based entrepreneurship means that it extends across several domains (e.g. business strategy, crisis management, performance management, etc.) (Ratten, 2011, p 63). While the existence of entrepreneurship can bring sustainable results for a community (e.g. in the case of sport-related entrepreneurship, Peterson & Schenker, (2017)), if there is no value creation or value added for the community, negative effects can be felt (e.g. destructive entrepreneurship is unproductive) (Ratten, 2014).

While the value propositions of sports are unique and require a high level of attention, it can be argued that sport organisations alone cannot create value (Woratschek et al., 2014). Organisations such as leagues, media, event organisers, clubs create value through the combined resources of their members. Passive consumers of sport buy 'products' such as 'sporting events' and consume the value provided by organisations. At the highest level of sporting events, "international sport events are the core products of the sport economy" (Máté, 2022, p. 66). Borland (2006) states that four components are needed to host a sport event: *players, clubs, sports league and stadium(s)*. Woratschek et al. (2014) additionally points out that the role of value-creation networks is significant ('before and after the match' role of fans - poster, atmosphere; or after the match celebration, analysis), they

contribute to the atmosphere of sporting events, so it can be highlighted that their involvement in value creation is essential.

In the business economics of professional sport, the main value creators in the players market are the athletes, to whom a number of related intangible rights are attached (András, 2004), and without understanding and evaluating their value development, it is not possible to directly address the issues of sports business management. In the players market, the products are the athletes. A number of studies on football show the factors that can determine the amount spent on a transfer. Such factors may include, for example, *the characteristics of the players* (their position, age and experience), which can influence transfer decisions and issues related to transfer (Carmichael et al., 1999). By examining the *maximum contract length*, the circumstances of the effect of contract extension can be detected (Feess & Muehlheusser, 2003). Another example is the examination of the level of salaries that can be determined from players' performance (Frick, 2007; Franck & Nüesch, 2010; Havran, 2016a, 2016b). There are evidences of *the superstar-effects* linked to performance in Italian football (Lucifora & Simmons, 2003) and the *winner-takes-all hypothesis* in the case of Spanish superstars (Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2007), as well as the importance of examining *popularity* linked to player performance (Lehmann & Schulze, 2008). In terms of geographical location, *affiliation* (country, league) can determine the transfer strategy (András & Havran, 2014). Furthermore, the importance of *the brand value* of the athlete can be highlighted (Kajos, 2019). The expertise of athletes is difficult to convert and if we look at other global sports (NBA, NFL, NHL, MLB), we see that most sports leagues have monopsonistic power. Thus, specific institutions (such as: Reserve Clause, draft or salary cap) have emerged to regulate the labour market (Sterbenz, 2003).

There are many different aspects to consider when formulating a definition of sporting activity with reference to both international and national research. András et al. (2019) provide a niche illustration of international and domestic developments in sport business over the past decades. In our country, research evaluates the added value, benefits and role of sport in the (sport) economy in relation to the individual (and its environment), the corporate sector, society, the local and national economy and in terms of health motivation (Máté et al., 2020). In the meantime, Hammarschmidt et al. (2022) and Ratten and Jones (2020) provide an overview of the concepts and international trends related to sport businesses and sport entrepreneurship.

Based on the theory of entrepreneurship, Hammerschmidt et al. (2022) define the concept of sport entrepreneurship holistically, according to which: in addition to the entrepreneurial spirit and the recognition and exploitation of opportunities, sport inherently creates value (economic, social, winning) as an intermediary. Ratten and Jones (2020, p 962) present that the literature divides international research into four areas: “the importance of entrepreneurship to sport, the impact of innovation on sport, entrepreneurial strategies in sport, and technologies supporting the use of entrepreneurship in sport.” The study also suggests future research directions, as the authors argue that the changes in the sports industry have been strongly influenced by digitalisation (digital transformation) and innovation over the years and focus on areas such as knowledge management and value co-creation. Over the past decade, the literature on the theory of sport-based entrepreneurship has continued to expand: such as among fitness entrepreneurs Hemme et al. (2017), or even in times of crisis such as COVID-19, the ability of organisations to survive and navigate in the situation that has emerged (e.g. Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2020; Hammerschmidt et al., 2021).

In relation to sport entrepreneurship, it should be highlighted that in practice more and more women athletes are becoming sport entrepreneurs. Thus, there has been recent research interest in the issue of athlete-to-entrepreneur (Ratten & Miragaia, 2020; Boyd et al., 2021), which may broaden future directions for career research. In examining athlete and entrepreneurial identity, it has been shown that athletes' entrepreneur identities are strongly aligned with their athletic identities, and even overlapping identities can be observed (almost the individual, athlete identity becomes the entrepreneur) (Boyd et al., 2021). Both cases use similar attitudes, behaviours, and emotions, but different situations between athletes (professional or amateur) cause the transition (injury, declining athletic ability, planned manner end). The resources accumulated during their athletic activity include, on the one hand, the social capital they have acquired, the leadership abilities they have acquired (enhancing their personal and professional 'brand'), the value they have in the sport and business profession post-career (Ratten, 2015; 2018). On the other hand, their reference power (Boje and Smith, 2010; Boyd et al, 2021), and thirdly, what transferable skills they have that may be necessary for their future professional endeavours (such as: perseverance, dedication, strategy, teamwork, leadership and sport-related expertise) (Bernes et al., 2009).

So, in clarifying the economic aspects of sport, it is essential to see that the economy and society have evolved into a common part, with their own specificities, but also with common logical elements (András, 2003b). I interpret the economics of sport according to András (2017, p 4): "the field of social activity where people produce, distribute, exchange and consume sport services, either actively or passively, to satisfy their needs for sport services. The participant in a sport service may be active (leisure sport) or passive (professional sport consumer: on-site or media consumer), and the sporting activity may be for him or her indirectly or economically."

2.2.1. The importance of career research for the sport business

Many disciplines have studied different aspects of sport careers, so my research will be influenced by interdisciplinary fields and social sciences, in particular business economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, behavioural sciences. It is important to emphasise that the research breaks with the practice in business economics of looking at it from a management perspective. This is because in the sports industry (as in the players market), economic processes have been intensified in recent decades. Sport leaders may make managerial decisions that may be justified from a business economics perspective, but these may result in an instrumentalist view of human values (e.g. no contract after injury). Thus, the careers of athletes are affected by the role of other decision-makers. Thus, the research examines the specificities of career management from the athlete's perspective, where the human is at the centre. Emphasising that athletes are not only present in the life of the club as assets (according to the objectified logic of commercialisation), but as value-adding employees whose human factors are as valuable as their sporting skills and experience.

In the following paragraphs, I will list why I think it is important to deal with career research, which are the areas that are of economic importance when dealing with athletes:

Firstly, *as a professional athlete in a sport, athletes live in a closed bubble*, doing everything they can to achieve sporting performance, recognition and success. They are the *primary stakeholders in the life of a sport organisation*, which has a rapid alternation of positive and negative traits, sometimes centred on employee, worker, resource (as an asset or object) characteristics (as a player at the top of his or her game, the rewards of high salary and prestige; conversely, a sudden, serious injury may result in replacement).

Secondly, *the players market (see through the example of professional football: András, 2003a) differs from the labour market in a number of elements that challenge athletes during and after their active careers:*

- The subject of trade in the players market is the transfer of the disposal about players playing licence for a certain period of time, the main feature of which is the double deal (acquisition of a value of property and labour recruiting)
- Value drivers: Factors that affect the value of the product include the physical, mental and social characteristics of the players, the buy-out clause of the live contract and its length, and other added characteristics.
- Clubs acting as sellers (if they have a valid contract) and buyers; and the players as seller if they do not have a valid contract; intermediaries are player managers, agents, scouts.
- Attention should be paid to the specificities of the sport (whether there is a domestic or international market for players in the sport).
- The athlete is a special workforce, since: the length of the athlete's career is finite; on the other hand, the contractual rules may be sport-specific; the workforce is limited, because stars in the given position are difficult to replace; special working hours are associated with special work tasks, making it difficult to define the subject of the contract (András, 2004; András, Havran & Jandó, 2012). Thus, a challenge may be, firstly, that the athletic career is short, the local milieu to support the difficulties of transition is often missing (sense of when the bubble bursts, loss of value). Secondly, the awareness of active athletes with managing and planning a sport career and post-sport career is low.

Thirdly, *fierce competition has turned sport and the game into a business (Szymanski & Kypers, 1999, cited in András, 2003a), i.e. consumers have a need to be willing to attend matches, thus creating value for the sporting enterprise and for themselves, i.e. to keep winning, the better players and stars are (were) needed. In the world of sport, the specificities of the special labour market, the players market, have not escaped the attention of business, which is presented in detail in a study by András (2004), while Havran (2017) notes that a key factor for sports companies is the development and retention of human resources, which can result in the development of a sustainable competitive advantage. This is because athletes generate value for themselves (image, increase in the value of their playing rights), for their team (performance, effectiveness)*

and for their club (performance, revenues). Thus, success – in the case of team sports – can be interpreted from the point of view of the sports professional on the one hand, the business economics on the other, and the sport companies on the third (András, 2003b). In the long term, it may be in the interest of knowledge-intensive sports organisations to make the most efficient use of their most important resource and to develop it with the right tools and methods: "the task of human resource management is to identify the individual stages of the career of the workforce and to help them to develop and progress" (András, 2003b, p.28). Havran (2017) asks the questions in the field of professional football that need to be answered: on the one hand, who is responsible and who bears the costs incurred in the success of career management; and on the other hand, where and by whom are the direct (tangible) sport and economic results realised in player development?

Dajnoki et al. (2015) describe the functions of human resource management in the development of a modern HR strategy. Career management is included in human resource development activities together with knowledge and talent management. However, their research does not aim to present all HR functions within sport organisations, but only to summarise the traditional areas of activity, for example, giving less focus to career management (focusing more on the development and training provided by sport organisations). This view made me wonder whether preparing for civilian life, training, career planning and building a career in sport would enhance individual or team performance?

Fourthly, in recent years, we have seen the appearance of entrepreneurial ambition among professional athletes (entrepreneurial identity), so its importance can be linked to career research. However, there is a tendency for it to be higher than average in athletes (Hindle et al., 2021; Teixeira & Forte, 2017; Jones & Jones, 2014). Then Ratten and Miragaia (2020, p 61) seek to answer the question "What is the nature of entrepreneurial passion amongst female athletes?" The new aspect of this study is that it explores gender-specific characteristics associated with entrepreneurship and attempts to fill a research gap that links gender entrepreneurship to sport (Ratten, 2017).

Fifth, *career decisions can be complicated and challenging because athletes may receive different support and have different decision-makers in transitional phases (depending on the sport and their international position)*. Precisely for these reasons, it is difficult for athletes to make career decisions, as either they are not the decision-makers (e.g. grassroots period for the parent) or they have to choose decisions that require strong commitment (which may not only be negative: e.g. growing up in a stable grassroots

system). On the other hand, it can make career decisions more difficult when the athlete has to act in different *decision situations (they can be natural, predictable or unexpected constraints)*. (Esse, 2019).

Finally (after a quick keywords search on Scopus), there is an *apparent lack of literature on career-related studies* (career management, career development, career transitions, career decisions) *in the field of sport and handball, both internationally and nationally*. A small number of studies in handball deal with social science, with more research in the field of medicine and health.

After briefly summarizing the above points, I think that it is not only macro-level studies that should be conducted, as suggested by Brouwers et al. (2015) in their paper on elite athlete development pathways in tennis. A micro-level investigation can complement the existing organisational perspective with the narratives of the primary stakeholders and shed light on how the tangible, instrumental role, as seen and felt in the athlete's perspective, can have an impact during and after the career. Presenting the points of career development from the athlete's perspective can provide valuable input to sport companies and athletes themselves. This view may raise the question of how the athlete 'manages' or controls his/her own sport career through conscious or unconscious decisions and situations (even accidental fate elements)?

2.2.2. Role of stakeholders

The stakeholder theory was first introduced in the 1980s and is associated with Freeman (Freeman & Gilbert, 1987). It has changed a lot over the decades, but the basic logic that organisations need to know the role of the stakeholders in their immediate environment has remained. The importance of this has been recognised and applied by the sporting world in their dialogue with stakeholders of sport organisations or sporting events, thus improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their decision-making (Freeman, 2010 in: Szántó, 2019). The concept of stakeholders can be broadly defined, and therefore there is a lot of research on the grouping and classification of stakeholders.

One concept is that stakeholders can be grouped according to their position of power, their social acceptance (legitimacy), the urgency of their needs and demands on the organisation. Thus, according to the 7 parts given by the triple set, stakeholders can be: „dormant, dominant, discretionary, definitive, dangerous, dependent and demanding” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p 874). Another concept can be to classify stakeholders along 2 dimensions, power and interest. The measures of the dimensions can be low and high,

creating a stakeholder group with four characters: „players, context setters, subjects and crowd' (Ackermann & Eden, 2011, p 183).

I would like to highlight a few aspects to consider when dealing with stakeholders. The *expectations and interests of a large number of stakeholder groups towards an organisation (or a sporting event) may differ*, which can lead to conflicts and challenges. Resolving this can be a management task (Parent, 2013). Second, the application of a stakeholder approach in the daily life of the club does *not guarantee that the interests of different groups are taken into account (or cooperated with) in decision-making* (Szántó, 2019). In this case, a factor such as limited rationality can also cause difficulties (the decision maker's decision may not be perfect). This is because it is difficult to gather all possible information, weigh it up and choose the most rational of the available alternatives. In such cases, existing missing parts are often filled in and heuristics (rule of thumb) are used in decision situations as a simplification (Raab, 2012). A third aspect relates to *performance*. Foster and O'Reilly's (2023) research highlights which six key stakeholders play a significant role in club sporting performance (achieving set objectives, winners-losers) and business performance (fan engagement, brand, employee satisfaction) and the measurement of these performances. In the authors' view: “„stakeholder alignment in professional sport clubs occurs when stakeholders acquire knowledge related to the needs of other stakeholders and apply such learning to drive communications, resource allocation and strategic activity related to best promoting the club’s objectives. (Foster & O’Reilly, 2023, p 186)”. Thus, their study focused on the relationship between the different pairs involved by analysing which can be productive and destructive (e.g. owner with little sport industry background) on performance. Their main findings include that the most important individuals related to sport performance are the owner, general manager, coach and player. The dominant actors in achieving off-field performance are the owner and the general manager. The involvement of administration and business executives with owners, management and fans is highlighted (Foster & O'Reilly, 2023). Finally, the stakeholders can form a kind of *stakeholder network*, as they may be related to each other (e.g. Morrow & Idle, 2008). And because of the collaborative nature of the sport industry, where public- and private partnerships can develop (Snelgrove & Wood, 2021; Schyvinck et al., 2021). Ratten's (2022) research highlights the impact of diaspora networks on international sport entrepreneurship in an international context, which provides a holistic picture of how sport companies use their international relationships to identify and develop opportunities.

Career research can also be used as an opportunity to identify the influencing role of the stakeholder groups that contribute to the choices an athlete makes in which directions and for which challenges. In subsection 2.3.1 of the article-based dissertation, career decisions will be discussed, where the main stakeholders are identified. Also, the role of specific stakeholders in career development can be found in the articles written during my research, with reference to the literature in their respective disciplines.

2.3. Decisions in sport

Decision-making processes (problem identification, information collection, generation of alternatives, evaluation and implementation) have appeared in many disciplines in the distant decades. These fields are philosophy (values, ethics), psychology (individual behaviour), economics and statistics (utility, probability), sociology and social psychology (group behaviour), law, anthropology and politics (environment), mathematics (models). Until the last decade, the field of decision theory and decision science has become an independent field of research (Zoltayné, 2005). Studies in the field of sport, which focus on different conceptions of decision theory and rationality, are still in their infancy (Sterbenz, 2017; Köves et al, 2018; Szántó et al., 2019).

To answer the research question of this article-based dissertation, I need to consider the decision situations of athletes and their immediate environment in different situations. In order to I will keep in mind the conceptions emerging in decision science. Thus, I will highlight and briefly describe those that have made their impact felt in some form during my research:

- Since Adam Smith, we know that, from an *economic approach*, the analysis of supply and demand indicates what the seller and buyer are aiming at: maximising utility. And utility is the ability to satisfy human needs. The tenets of the economics approach are quantifiability, monetary expression, and the examination of market value. Among its main features are that it is deterministic, assumes full information, outcomes are sortable, decision utility is maximizable. Thus, homo economicus is capable of making optimal decisions, maximising its own utility through self-interested behaviour.
- According to the *administrative model* advocated by James March and Herbert Simon, decision-makers are guided in their choices by the actual, not the perceived world. Probability estimation and evaluation are central categories of decision. The basic assumptions of this model are that no given set of action alternatives must be

generated, information is not always available and is costly and time-consuming to obtain, and that existing information may be inaccurate, making the estimation of utility uncertain.

- Burrhus Frederic Skinner represents *the model of strict reinforcement*. Decision-makers make their decisions based on the positive decision experience of the previous period. According to this model: the most effective strengths are those that act on the most intense needs and arrive most quickly; positive strengths are more effective than negative ones; intermittently administered strengths are more effective than continuous ones; and outcomes that actually reinforce behaviour can only be empirically measured, not predicted (Zoltayné, 2005).

The criteria for a good decision are rationality of the decision, which follow certain rules: on the one hand, they take into account the probability of utility and outcome, which are otherwise independent of each other (there is no optimist or pessimist, only realist). On the other hand, the alternatives are comparable. Third, the references satisfy the requirement of transitivity. Finally, the alternative with the best possible outcome should always be pursued (Zoltayné, 2005). With regard to the rationality of decisions, I would highlight the following points:

- The rational person, on the basis of *objective rationality*, has all the necessary information. S/he can assess all alternatives (including their consequences). S/he can assess his/her own preferences among the options and then choose the most optimal course of action. At the same time, s/he is consistent in his/her decisions.
- The question arises. Can one be rational, given the following: problems are complex, while the environment is complex. The human mind is limited and most people have no set preferences. The number of alternatives may not be finite at all.
- A critique of objective rationality was formulated by Herbert Simon, who defined the concept of *bounded rationality* (Simon, 1982): First, the environment is complex. Second, that complete information is unlikely. The explanation of bounded rationality can also be found in information limitations. These may be limitations of attention (such as: too much stimulus, search among memories or "can only pay attention to one thing at a time"), limitations of memory (such as: limitation of information storage capacity; memories are erroneous, they are transformed, they can be manipulated), limitations of perception (such as: difficult to establish causal links, fail to see connections, essential information is lost), communication limitations

(such as: complex, specific information is difficult to transfer, share; or cultures, generations, specialisations speak a specific language). Third, the decision-maker is limited in his/her decision making by his/her own cognitive ability. Fourthly, people tend to strive for the status quo, dislike unknown paths, and prefer tried and tested solutions. Finally, the decision-maker strives to make satisfying "good enough" decisions (satisficing = sufficing + satisfying) by taking into account his or her own level of need and "aspiration".

- Sequential treatment of alternatives may arise if the problem requires it, in which case the obvious solutions are considered first. The treatment of alternatives is influenced by many factors (e.g. personality of the decision-maker, experience, etc.). To simplify complex realities, the bounded rationality approach is used to apply decision-maker heuristics (rules of thumb).
- So, the interpretations of bounded rationality are as follows: in *bounded optimization*, George Stigler states that the search for information has a cost, the decision maker calculates where the optimal point is where to stop the search. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman suggest that people make systematically wrong (irrational) decisions because of their cognitive limitations (*cognitive illusions - "heuristics and biases"*). Thus, people do not follow predictions that conform to the expected utility hypothesis (Kahneman & Tversky, 1998). Gerd Gigerenzer is associated with *ecological rationality*, which sees the human brain as an "adaptive toolbox", so that people use fast and frugal decision heuristics (Zoltayné, 2005).

Rational choices theorists assume that individuals act rationally and self-interestedly through actions and interactions. The ideal types of rational action (decision) are illustrated in detail in Figure 3, which illustrates the concepts and contexts presented above. *Behaviour* itself can be described as behaviour that is perceived by outsiders and is not intentional (e.g. impulse, habit, reflexive behaviour), while there is some *intention* behind the action. The latter group is made up of two elements: *instrumentally rational and instrumentally non-rational, i.e. "irrational" action*. It can be seen that the focus of Figure 3 is on instrumentally rational decisions, where we can talk about two further subdivisions. One is the *normative*, while the other is the *descriptive decision theoretic* statement. Satisficing bounded rationality aims to be declarative of how real human decisions are made. The normative prescribes how a rational self-interested individual should make decisions (Csontos, 1998).

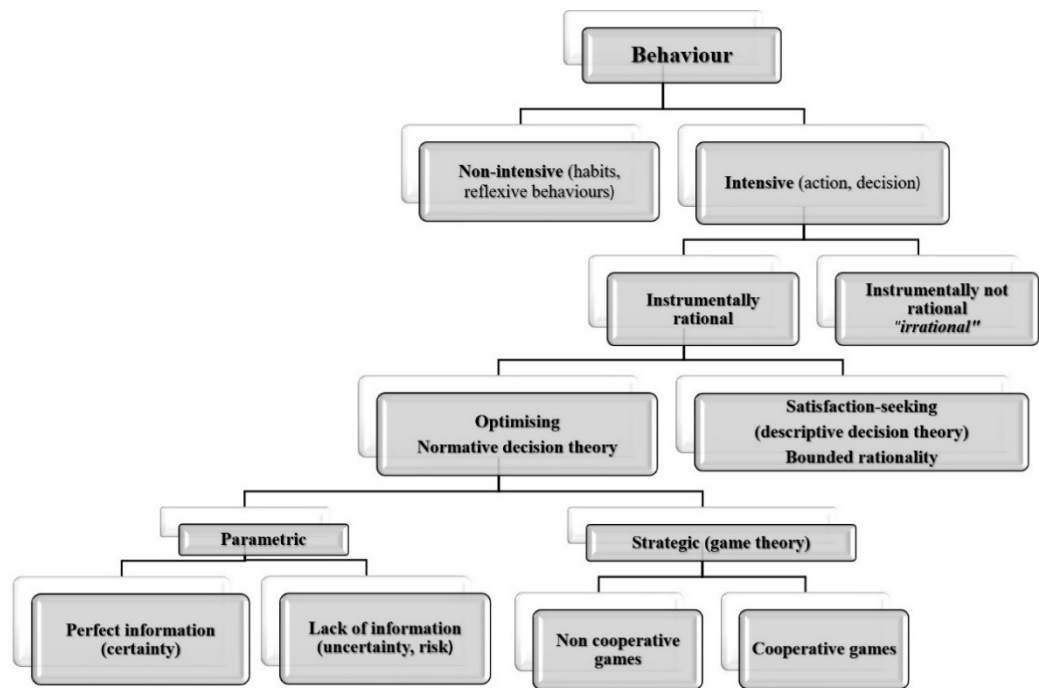


Figure 3: Ideal types of rational action (decision)

Source: Csontos (1998, p 13)

Decisions in sport can be formed at several levels (e.g. career-related, sport-related) and by different stakeholders (athlete, manager, coach, etc.). There are many examples of decisions made by athletes in active situations. As we become more fatigued we make worse decisions (Parkin et al., 2017), decision speed decreases with fatigue (Smith et al., 2016). Experience helps the athlete to recognize situations faster and faster from fewer and fewer signs (Kermarrec & Bossard, 2014). We can use heuristics for fast decision-making: Take-The-First heuristic (Raab, 2007) and fast and frugal heuristics (Gigerenzer, 2004). The concept of software hypothesis is also used to explain better situational awareness, where “better outcomes are obtained through perceptual and thought processes, the use of more advanced knowledge in sport may be consistent with the number of cognitive schemas available to athletes (Szántó et al, 2019, p 19)”. It is also important to observe coaches' decision making, such as the transformation of basketball strategy (Boros & Sterbenz, 2017). On the other hand, it is important to consider the cognitive phenomena affecting coaches' decision making, as coaches' decisions are characterized by a number of heuristics, traps and biases - hot hand fallacy, self-serving bias, hindsight bias, sunk cost-effect (Szántó et al, 2019). Moreover, there are numerous examples of coaching strategies and tactics (Sterbenz, 2019). Game theoretic models are appropriate for the study of leadership and managerial decisions (e.g., decisions to build a competitive system; rationality of sport competitions – Nash-equilibrium), but practice

points to heuristic biases (e.g.: contracting athletes - sunk cost case) in decision-making in this group of stakeholders as well (Sterbenz, 2017).

2.3.1. Characteristics of career decisions

Athletes may face challenges at different stages of their careers (depending on their sport and international standing), which can sometimes generate difficult or easy decision situations. This can be caused by the fact that the athlete is not the decision-maker or that decisions are made that show commitment. As Gati (1986) argues, the career development decision-making model operates on the notion that individuals sequentially eliminate occupational alternatives to make career decisions at different phases of their sport careers. Athletes identify with and accept the existing managerial prescriptions (McGillivray et al., 2005). The 'natural order of things' is an established situation in social spaces (the workplace) that results in decisions being left behind (all processes seem natural), which can go as far as reinforcing the lack of consideration of alternatives beyond the playing career, with some professional athletes not considering post-playing career planning (Lavalley, 2005).

Coupland's (2015) results from the sport of rugby report on how to make the invisible logics of career more visible according to Bourdieu's theory of practice (the role of habitus is decisive). On the other hand, they argue that their results are contrary to protean career theory, which assumes that individuals are guided by their own values; they must be willing to understand uncertain, 'fragile' career transitions (Hall, 2004). This does not mean that athletes are cheated, but that they accept their situation. Thirdly, athletes arrive with habits formed from previous experience (entering a sport – family pattern or the influence of sport-specific factors; not being prepared for career completion).

Lazear (2006) uses tournament theory to provide useful information for corporate leaders by expanding on the core themes of economics (such as: resource allocation and incentives) and using the analytical foundations of this field, while taking human factors into account. It covers topics that concern the specificities of managerial decisions and are relevant for the different stakeholders involved in sports career management, such as: recruitment and hiring; staff turnover; redundancy; incentives/motivation; career considerations; qualification; selection. According to the economic approach to sport success, the determinants of sport performance are the effort made to win (in preparation and during competition) and the skills of the athlete. The relationship between effort and performance may vary from sport to sport, but things beyond the athlete's direct influence

(represented as noise) affect performance in all cases (Sterbenz et al., 2013). Thus, to illustrate the relationship between effort and performance, the authors outline a noise scale that identifies the determinants of noise. Handball ranks on a similar level to basketball and football, as it is one of the most complex and unstable of the sports examined. Based on tournament theory (Lazear, 2006), Sterbenz et al. (2013) found the expected value that can be realised based on the number of players and income rates in the sport of handball. Values less than 1 indicate that the expected benefits are riskier than the benefits to be gained. Overall, the sport structure of handball "shows a strong incentive to move on from the domestic top league [...] it supports the additional effort needed to reach international level (national team players). The low value of entry into the world class group indicates that entry into the narrow group is not according to an asymmetric income structure [...]" (Sterbenz et al., 2013, p 54)".

Lent and Brown (2020) suggest that career decision-making models assume that people are rational decision-makers. However, there is growing evidence that cognitive biases and decision-making errors emerge in relation to career expectations (McLeod et al., 2021). This may result in people having unrealistic expectations about their careers. McLeod et al. (2021) argue that for professional athletes, an ideal area to investigate is whether they use information rationally when updating their career expectations. On the one hand, the career path of the athlete may be clear (measurement of expectations given). On the other hand, public information on athletes' performance and career outcomes can be used by researchers to determine what expectations athletes have (Richardson & McKenna, 2020).

The research of McLeod et al. (2021) raises an interesting research question, as they assume that although Bayesian updating (Kahneman, 2011) is an ideal framework for updating future expectations, which means to estimate the probabilities associated with career expectations in advance and then modify existing expectations accordingly. However, biases can also be observed in athletes, which may arise from emotional and cognitive schemas. In their research, they created a career tree with baseball players to see how they respond to career information (based on their own experience and available from public data). They made three main findings about why athletes deviated from normative practices. The first is that success requires optimism, which led participants to focus on positive thoughts, ignoring negative thoughts, and to adjust their career expectations by focusing on positive information. The second is the neglect of the reference group, accompanied by a tendency to stereotype their peers and ignore other

players' perspectives (e.g., they see themselves as unique, different; they are lazy). The third is that the information has an affective property (which can lead to reactions that are contrary to statistical, analytical thinking). This property can be challenge or motivational information. These help to explain why athletes maintain unrealistic expectations of turning professional, even when there is ample confirmatory information about their chances.

The different decision situations (legitimate, predictable, or unexpected constraints) the athlete has to act in (Esse, 2019). It is important to highlight which phase of the athlete's career decision the athlete is in and who represents the athlete's interests at stage (could be a parent, coach, manager, the athlete himself/herself). Examining this can also justify interpreting the set and interconnectedness of the stakeholders.

It is clear, however, that the most critical decisions are those made at the end of a career, which may be a natural and legitimate (loss of motivation), planned (starting a family) or unexpected (injury) situation. At this stage, the athlete suffers several losses at once when making the decision to retire, which further complicates the transition (loss of public attention; change of identity; change of social relationships; change of daily activities) (Lally, 2007).

In summary, sport is characterised by a dominant economic logic, where a rational decision-making picture defined by an economic approach prevails, and where elite sport is a product of a growth-based society (Harangozó et al., 2018). Thereby, we are objectifying and assigning values to everyone and everything, instead of using concrete moral value choices. There is a need to look beyond the managerial perspective - where prescriptive economic decision-makers prescribe how to choose the best alternative - to examine through different lenses how we actually make decisions in an otherwise complex and uncertain environment, in the light of different experiences and emotions, assuming individual cognitive constraints. In this way, we can see the holistic picture of athletes beyond their role as athletes, where they are treated as human beings and not as commodities (Herr & Köves, 2024; Szathmári & Kocsis, 2022). Therefore, I have taken descriptive decision theory along the stakeholder approach as a scientific starting point to examine career-related characteristics from an athlete's perspective, where objectification is not the main focus. I would like to emphasise that this kind of rationality helps my work to answer the research question through qualitative methodologies and the results obtained from the interviews.

2.3.2. *The athlete as a whole person and the importance of her career choices*

As Coupland (2015) points out, career theories tend to focus on psychological and social variables and measurements. However, my immersion in the topic has encouraged me to use the developed framework in my research, as it provides a comprehensive picture of the importance of career-related decisions, the positioning of stakeholders in the environment and illustrates the experiences of my interviewees from both managerial and self-management perspectives.

Over the past nearly fifty years, discourses on careers have emerged that have provided valuable insights for both career researchers and practitioners. This period was covered by Stambulova et al. (2021, p 526) divided sport psychology discourses into three periods. „The first (1960s-1980s): *Initiation* with a focus on athletic retirement and non-sport frameworks. The second (1990s): *Development* with a shift to a whole career perspective and within-career transitions guided by sport-specific frameworks. The third (2000s to the present): *Establishment* with shifts to a whole person and a whole environment perspectives, and culturally informed research and practice.”

The main findings of the research on athletes' careers are illustrated in Figure 4 (based on Stambulova, 2021, p 528). It consists of two existing research areas (which complement each other well) and one practical application (a set of career support measures). On the other hand, it links all elements of the cultural practice of the athlete career paradigm. Career development describes the athlete's career path by anticipating normative transitions (predictability between related transitions e.g.: situations before the end of a career). Meanwhile, career transition describes how the transition itself occurs and what the outcome is. Careers are put into context, which can be influenced by personal and environmental factors. Career assistance allows for career helping by naming different types of interventions (Stambulova, 2010). They emphasize the need to get to know athletes (sport and non-athletic aspects), other taxonomies of career interventions (career planning, lifestyle management, life skills training, identity development, etc.) (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014).

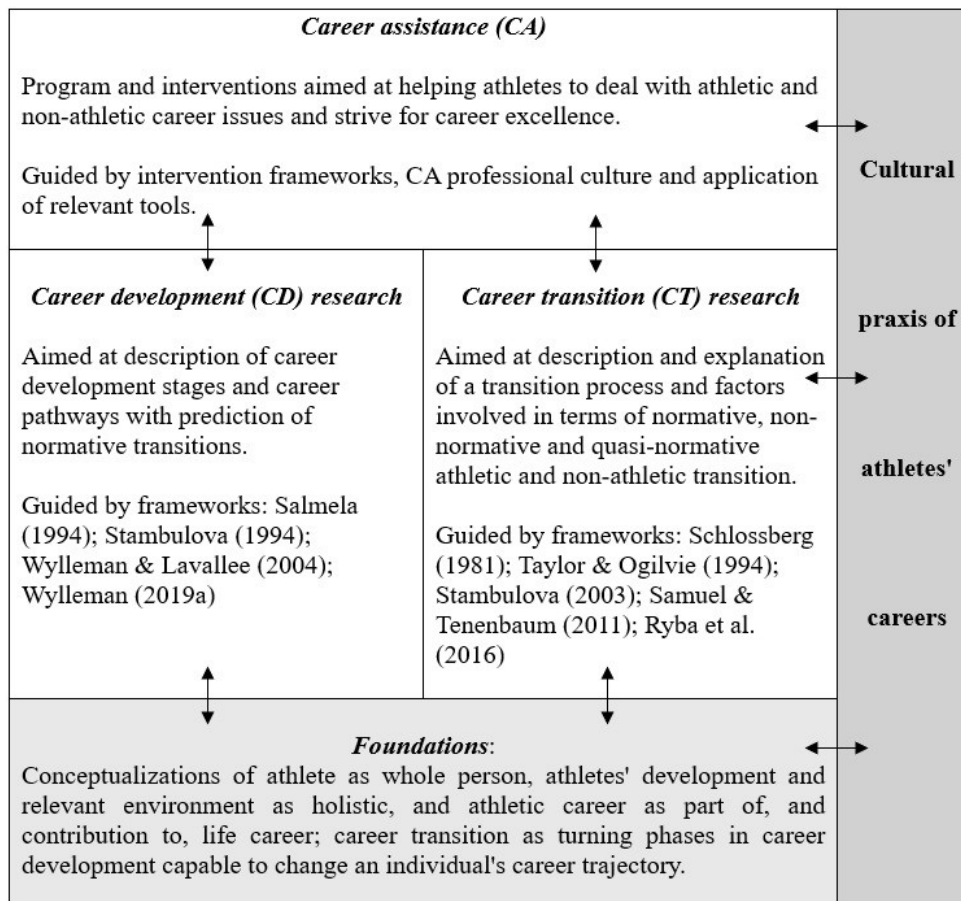


Figure 4: Current structure of the ACD (athlete career discourse)

Source: Stambulova et al. (2021, p 528)

The concretisation of these parts has resulted in conceptual frameworks: the athlete as a whole person who is engaged in other life matters besides sport (Wylleman et al., 2013); The development of athletes is holistic (multidimensional = athletic development complemented by psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, financial and legal layers), where changes in one layer can cause changes in the others (Wylleman, 2019); The athlete's environment is holistic, consisting of interacting micro- and macro-levels, as well as athletic and non-athletic domains (Henriksen et al., 2010, 2011); The athlete's career is seen as part of the overall life-course, with a focus on the athlete's experiences (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), which adds new aspects to the existing concept of the athlete's career. One is the cycle with stages and transitions (Wylleman et al., 2004), the other is athletes' multiyear striving for an individual peak in athletic performance as self-actualisation (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). In the case of career transitions, we can consider them as turning phases in career development, as the substantive changes associated with (which occur in all cases) individual career trajectories are unique. It examines factors such as the assessment of transition demands, coping with transition,

which may lead to successful or less successful outcomes (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). For career transitions, two things are considered, one is the area of life in which the transition occurs (athletic: junior to adult; non-athletic: e.g.: family-related; or dual career transitions) and how predictable the transition is. For the latter, three distinctions are made. The first is normative (the transition is a result of athlete development and therefore predictable: e.g., athletic retirement), the second is non-normative (difficult to predict, such as: injury), and finally quasi-normative, in which case the athlete anticipates it by preparing in advance (e.g.: cultural transitions) (Schinke et al., 2015; Stambulova, 2020).

Among the career development frameworks, Wylleman's (2019) Holistic athletic career model illustrates, with six interrelated layers (athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, financial, and legal), aspects related to career development (athletic: initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation) and transitions.

Outstanding research has been conducted in handball (Ekengren et al., 2020b), where this model was applied, demonstrating the diversity of athletes' careers in sociocultural and sport contexts. The empirical career model presented in the sport of handball is detailed in Article 2, which illustrates the relevance of the important phases in handball. The model shows "what" happened in the players' careers stages.

However, the framework of the holistic athletics career model gives the impression that an athlete's career is linear (this is not confirmed by research), with researchers pointing out that careers are more varied and less linear than these models suggest (Stambulova et al., 2021). To counteract this effect, one can use the multiple-metaphor career framework (inheritance, cycle, journey, action, fit, relationship, role, resource, and story), where nine metaphors are available to help the researcher (Inkson, 2006). Another is to examine the individual career journeys and/or transition pathways of athletes (as identity exploration or career construction) through narratives (Bonhomme et al., 2020; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020).

Different factors are examined in the career change framework in various research studies. (such as: demands, resources, barriers, coping strategies, or successful transition, crisis-transition, unsuccessful transition) (Stambulova et al, 2021). In the meantime, „*the cultural praxis of athletes' careers navigates career researchers and practitioners to: (a) reflexive positioning of career projects in particular sociocultural contexts, (b) taking the holistic perspectives on athlete career and environment, (c) exploring diversity of career pathways and their construction within and across international borders, (d) engaging culturally sensitive methodologies, and (e) developing transnational networks and*

collaborative projects by career researchers and practitioners. (Stambulova et al., 2021, p 530)''.

2.3.3. Trends in international career research

New trends in various career research have been published at recently. As dual career research (learning and sport at the same time), several approaches have emerged (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Torregrossa et al., 2020). The positive effects of a dual career in sport can include, for example, finding a job, creating a sense of financial security, well-being and facilitating retirement. At the same time, they can also promote the athlete's career by giving the athlete the opportunity to adapt and cope with the difficulties he/she faces with a larger toolbox. The dual career of an athlete may involve various mentoring programmes and mentors (Hallmann et al., 2023). Their aim is to help athletes find a balance between their studies and playing sport. The results of Hallmann et al. (2023) present a holistic examination of mentoring relationships in dual careers, i.e. how different aspects of the mentoring programme affect the satisfaction of mentors and mentees. Overall, mentoring programmes are a valuable tool because the results show that mentored and mentors achieved their goals (e.g. accelerated the athlete's transition after retirement).

Second, the study by Taylor et al. (2022a) raises the psychological aspects that can be linked to athletes. The authors highlight that psychological safety (PS) is nowadays an emerging topic in the life of sport organisations and in high performance sport (HPS) environments, while little empirical research is being done on the concept in the fields of talent management, elite sport (Smittick et al., 2019). Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2022a) highlight that the concept of psychological safety itself is not clearly defined and caution against making the concept universally applicable (which would otherwise detract from its use in practice) in HPS. This is because PS itself is an emergent social construct that arises from multiple interpersonal interactions, so its main characteristic is that it is both dynamic and fragile, relying on individual, group and other contextual factors (Edmondson, 2004; Kolbe et al., 2020). From the perspective of athlete career management, it is relevant to take into account Vella et al.'s (2022) reference to the need for a specific definition in the field of sport. The construct focuses on individuals (threat, fear) as opposed to organisational literature: „psychological safety in sport is the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm in sport (Vella at al., 2022, p 15)''.

Thirdly, to define a sustainable sport career, Richardson and McKenna (2020) consider three critical dimensions: person (how the individual manages his or her career sustainably), context (how colleagues or organisations impact on career sustainability) and time “(a sustainable career is not an end state but rather a characteristic or a relevant parameter to describe a career as it evolves over time (De Vos et al., 2018, p 9)”. Richardson and McKenna (2020) interpret their results through a work-demand-resource model, where different demands (as physical, psychological, social) and resources (as physical, psychological-emotional and social) are identified. In summary, needs limit the sustainability of a career (high physical and psychological-emotional level => what it means to be a professional athlete), while resources (such as coaches, physiotherapists, team-mates or mental resilience, discipline, performance, endurance) can positively influence a career in the short term, as they appear as motivators. Finally, a not insignificant fact that the authors point out is that although the athlete career is short, the support resources acquired can be used in other areas (even in the next career stage) (Richardson & McKenna, 2020), which is in line with the issues of becoming an entrepreneur from athlete (see for example Ratten & Miragaia, 2020).

A paper by Dawson and Phillips (2013) provides valuable context on the role of motivators. They encourage policymakers to strike a balance between athlete and coach career development funding and to implement comprehensive policies that make coaches' careers equal in importance to athlete careers. This would not only increase the recognition of coaches, but would also promote the development of athletes, as properly supported coaches would be able to develop athletes more effectively and contribute to international sporting performance. The article highlights fundamental problems that hinder the career development of Australian coaches and could also hinder the development of the sport in the long term if they are not receiving adequate support.

Fourth, ecological career/talent development research (such as: Henriksen et al, 2010; 2011; Larsen et al, 2013; Henriksen et al, 2020), which focus on the development and transitions of young athletes. In talent management, the holistic ecological approach (HEA) calls for a focus not on the athlete but on the athletic talent development environment (ATDE), for which two models are proposed for investigation (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). One is the ATDE working model (Figure 5) and the other is the environment success factors (ESF) working model (Figure 6). In the first, the athlete is at the centre, surrounded by the components of the divided micro-

environment (factors that occur in the athlete's everyday life) and macro-environment (social influences that may affect him/her), with two domains, athletic and non-athletic.

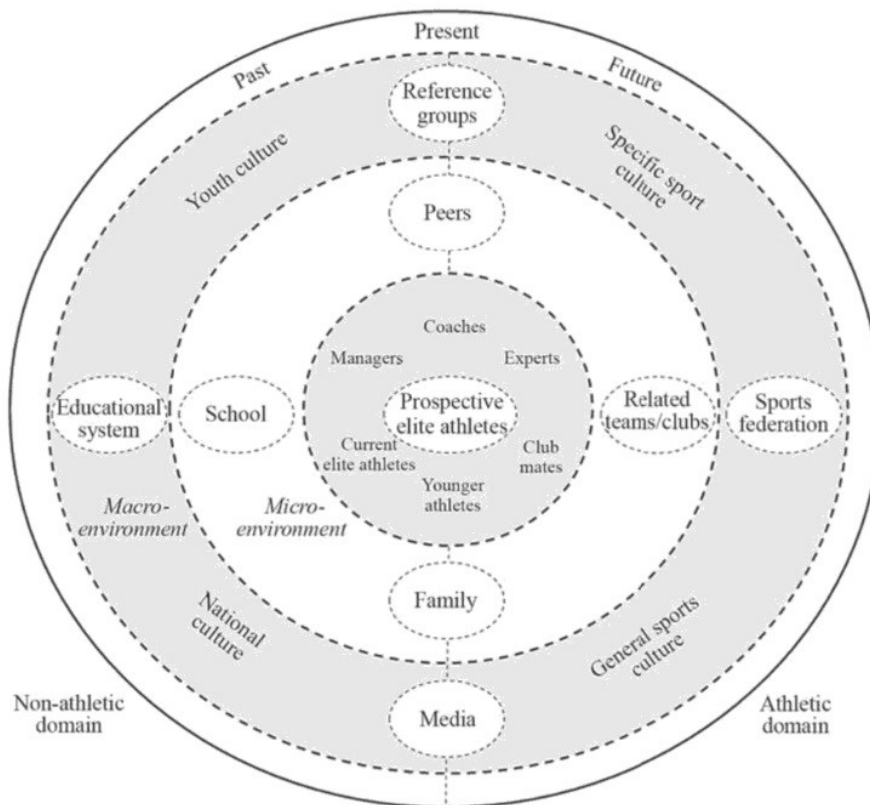


Figure 5: The athletic talent development environment (ATDE) working model

Source: Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017, p 273

In the other model (Figure 6), the environmental preconditions (human, financial, material) are followed by the daily processes (training, competition, camps) to produce three outcomes (individual, team and organisational-cultural). The success of ATDE is the result of the interaction between all the components of ESF (i.e. preconditions, processes and culture). Environmental impacts may vary from sport to sport. There may even be the possibility of an organisational triangle, where cooperation between levels is optimised. An example is the involvement of a local club, the municipality and the national sports federation to improve the functioning of the local club (Mathorne et al., 2020).

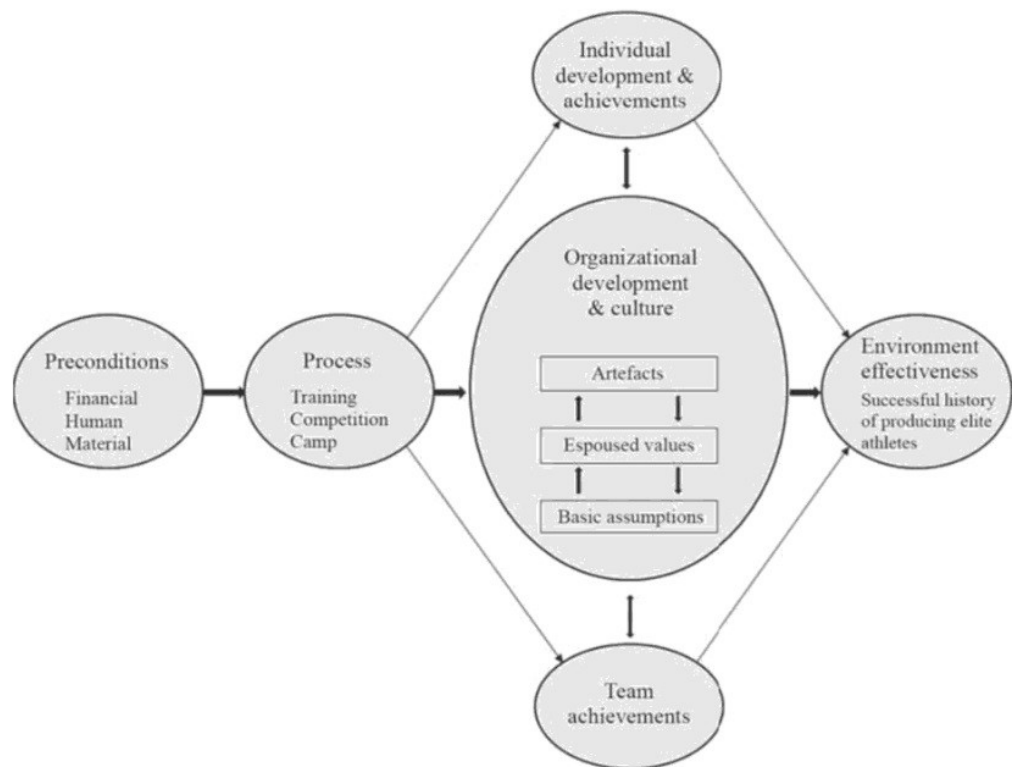


Figure 6: The environment success factors (ESF) working model

Source: Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017, p 274

Fifth, research related to transnational sport careers has emerged as a way of understanding the effects of cultural transition on careers at the elite level (Oghene et al., 2017; Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). The contemporary world of sport has not been spared from globalisation trends. Athletes now may prefer to play in other countries. Such globalising trends complicate the notion of talent management as a purely domestic concern and career pathways in elite sport need to be considered across national borders, requiring national sporting organisations to revise their views on talent management (taking advantage of globalisation) (Agergaard & Ronglan, 2015).

Agergaard and Ronglan (2015) explore the relationship between talent development and the immigration of foreign players through a comparative study of Danish and Norwegian women's handball (multiple-case study). They find that the presence of foreign players reduced the playing time (time on court in matches) of young domestic talents in national championships, which resulted in a decline in the Danish women's handball team's performance in world tournaments. Although the authors believe that a number of micro-macro-sociological variables could be analysed in this context (e.g. sporting companies in the former case; demography, politics, economics in the latter), they have now only set out to investigate the relationship between migration vs. talent development. Their results show that: young athletes can learn from the legionnaires,

which is beneficial; and on the other hand, they can watch the adults at matches, which is not so beneficial for them. Second, the complex and dynamic nature of sports talent development environments must be taken into account. As changes in the macro-environment may alter the social learning conditions of talent in the micro-environment (e.g., in the globalization of Danish handball, attractive job opportunities are offered to both domestic and foreign players). A quantitative analysis of the number of goals scored (2000-2009) indicates that the increased presence of foreign players in Danish women's handball clubs has influenced young domestic talent rather than international league players. It can also be argued that it is not the legionnaires who are to blame for the problem (professional players and the structure of the league), but the pressure to win big and achieve results in the top European leagues can easily lead to less attention being paid to talent development in the top clubs.

Storm (2013) argues that the economic breakdown of Danish handball was also caused by the high cost of winning and competition spiral. Thus, Agergaard and Ronglan (2015) summarise the period 2009-2014 as a series of opportunities after the exit of international star players for Danish youth to gain more playing time and more responsibility in the team. Alternatively, this could lead to a weaker league where the youngster does not get legionnaire experience and does not play at the highest international level (Ronglan [2012] found a similar situation for Norway after the 1990s). Now in our country, I see this trend as what happened in Denmark and Norway. There are many foreign legionnaires playing in Hungarian women's top teams, it would be interesting to conduct similar research on the Hungarian situation, to get answers on what the situation is today in the field of Hungarian talent development.

Sixth, interesting research has been done on the characteristics of athletic retirement (e.g. Park et al, 2013), decision making before retirement (as in Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005); on the other hand, the junior-to-senior transition (JST). Franck (2018) developed a framework to describe the JST transition that combined the holistic athlete career model (Wylleman, 2019), the athlete career transition model (Stambulova, 2003) and the ecological perspective (Henriksen et al., 2010). In the meantime, Stambulova et al. (2017) created a conceptual framework where they examined four stages (preparation, orientation, adaptation, and stabilization), with each stage focusing on specific demands, resources, barriers, coping strategies and outcomes.

Seven times, new research on transition has emerged, focusing on the transition to the Olympic Games (Samuel et al., 2016), or injury as transition (Ivarsson & Johnson, 2020).

The research of Samuel et al. (2015) presents three phases emphasizing athletes' pre-injury career motivation (phase one), emotional disturbance and decision making (phase two), and implementation of the change decision (phase three).

Finally, Stambulova et al. (2021) state that, in addition to the existence of career research, there are also a number of gaps. For example: several groups of athletes have not yet been researched (e.g.: people with disabilities); or researchers prefer to study successful athletes and environments, which leads to less successful athletes and challenges being marginalised.

2.3.4. *Overview of domestic career research*

As I pointed out earlier, the role of human resources in the knowledge-based economy has been increasing in recent decades (Faragó et al., 2018). Thus, the task of HR management in the life of organisations is to increase the return on human capital and reduce their capital risk. To achieve effectiveness, they can create strategies linked to talent management that should be part of the corporate culture (Konczos-Szombathelyi, 2014).

Athletes are a prominent target group among the human resources in sport. Thus, Juhász and Matiscsákné Lizák (2014) describe their careers as a life path defined by three basic sets of factors: *personal attributes* such as skills, abilities and family financial situation; *environmental opportunities*; and *ambition*. However, for a young or early to mid-career athlete, this may not be sufficient, and creating opportunities for dual careers and supporting those close to the athlete may help (Olah et al., 2022).

Athletes experience difficulties in finding a job after an active career in sport, which is a common social problem. To address this, Faragó et al. (2018) seek to answer the question of which aspects of the factors that influence the career path of athletes and which development solutions can help athletes' transition, by which means the success of athletes in civilian life can be enhanced. The innovative nature of the study highlights the importance of the competency matrix in the field of sport. It presents talent management in sport, the place of talent and talent management in corporate culture, aspects of corporate embeddedness, the role of competence and the dual career path for competency development.

Job competences themselves are the attitudes, skills and personal qualities that enable effective professional work and excellent performance. There are general competences, which define social, community-related factors, and there are functional and key

competences. Competences that are linked to personality traits and whose importance is reflected in the employee's employment can be highlighted. Moreover, different jobs require different skills, abilities and characteristics, so it is necessary to assess what competences are needed for each job or task. Accordingly, a competence map can be drawn up (Poór, 2008). These can be used to easily determine whether the employee (athlete or employee of the organisation) is suitable for the position; to facilitate the selection process by comparing the performance potential of individuals; and to help in development by identifying who needs to improve and what needs to be improved (Faragó et al., 2018).

In sport, athletes have unique, specific competences and typically need to focus on several areas (dual career, after sport) (Faragó et al, 2018). The transition to the labour market is challenging for athletes, so it is important to continuously develop competences and to have a flexible attitude to change (Faragó, 2015). Therefore, a three-pillar competence matrix for athletes was developed by Faragó et al. (2018) from the corporate competence models, which can include 10-20 competences, focusing on the priorities of the organisational strategy (Varga, 2015).

The first pillar of the competence matrix describes the professional side (job competence analysis, profiling). The second pillar is the profiling of people related to the person, while the third pillar is the evaluation, where the first two pillars are compared (checking the consistency of the professional profile and the personal competence analysis). Performance is measured at individual, team and organisational level. In sport the key competences are communication; role in the team; behaviour, tolerance; scientific interests; memory. Meanwhile, work-related sport competences are: adaptability; creativity; management; scientific interests; character definition; learning abilities; strategic thinking; emotional abilities; loading. Alternatively, we can distinguish leader competences in sport: lead; motivation; intellectuality; people handling; skills for people; top management capability; stress management; strategic thinking; intellectuality (Faragó et al., 2018, p 78).

The competences learned in sport are in line with those in the labour market, since in sport athletes acquire characteristics that are related to the "soft" elements of HR (Faragó et al., 2018). Soft skills are present in the development of an individual's personality (cooperativeness, problem-solving, decision-making), while hard skills are measurable. According to research by Horváth-Csikós and Juhász (2022), soft skills (such as flexibility, communication, teamwork skills) are more expected in the labour market than

hard skills (e.g. professional knowledge). This is in line with my previous research: humility, diligence, willingness to work, and skills for collaboration and development (gaining experience from experienced players, working with the best coaches) were ranked higher among the aspects listed in the overall ranking of becoming a professional handball player by experienced players than delivering a stable performance during a championship season (Herr, 2020). When selecting professional players, managers and coaches consider the handball player's ability to fit into the existing team as a more important aspect than the player's sporting ability (Herr & András, 2025).

Furthermore, it can be argued that athletes have advanced competences that facilitate their dual careers and enrich human capital at corporate and regional levels (Faragó et al., 2018). However, reconciling a career in sport and education is not always an easy task. There are a number of challenges in practice that athletes need to make decisions that support their sporting careers and facilitate their retirement (Gósi & Faragó, 2020). Farkas et al. (2017) examine the dual career situation in Hungary through athletes in 38 sports, where they highlight the need for a national strategy to address the issues and problems that arise. Olah et al, (2018) reach similar conclusions for elite footballers. Lenténé Puskás (2014; 2017) and Lenténé Puskás and Perényi (2015), looking at students at the University of Debrecen, show that it is possible to reconcile learning and sport, but that education becomes more important as students approach the end of their studies. Moreover, athletes are aware of the career support opportunities at university and their risks. In the meantime, a few studies have been conducted on this topic, looking at different sports and exploring the chances of athletes to find a job in the labour market (András & Havran, 2014, 2015; Sterbenz et al., 2017). Gósi and Sallói (2017) point out that organisations working with young athletes should take into account the need to balance education and sport, as not all talented athletes can reach the top levels.

Olah et al. (2022) suggest that the perceptions of student-athletes should be taken into account. On the other hand, it highlights the usefulness of cooperation between dual career stakeholders and the media (creating communication campaigns) and of exploiting dual career networks to facilitate transnational cooperation (including through communication) and the sharing of knowledge and practices. In addition, the authors highlight the importance of the following needs, which are also necessary from an international perspective (after all, student-athletes compete not only at the highest but also at university levels.):

1. “the establishment of an international agreement on minimum standards for dual career services.
2. the provision of specific educational programmes on academic and sporting requirements
3. informing student-athletes about their dual career rights, programmes, services, financial resources, and the tools and opportunities available in their home country as a transnational student-athlete (Olah et al., 2022, p 94).”

Based on the results of Faragó (2020), in Hungary, career programmes for athletes are in an initial, theoretical stage, and sport is not an advantage in the labour market, so it requires self-care and conscious career building through self-motivation (independent personality motivation) and support from the immediate environment (parents, family).

The aim of Szathmári (2021) is to identify the needs of athletes and to identify problem areas that can facilitate the development of a harmonious, individually sustainable sport career. As a result, athletes' identities are constructed within a performance-based narrative plot throughout their athletic careers. The "central role of coaches"; elite sport as a "protective cover"; the "social connectedness" related to identity development were identified as major themes. It points out that transitions (in particular retirement) are of particular importance in relation to sports careers. Moreover, if athletes lack the necessary skills, coaches and support systems for athletes should help them. Cognitive dissonance appears in relation to the identity of elite athletes. When athletes look back on their careers with ambivalent feelings. While they are proud of their achievements, many do not want their children to follow the same path, as the stress and sacrifice involved in sport can be too much to bear. This highlights that elite sport is not only physically challenging but also places emotional and mental burdens on athletes (Szathmári, 2021).

3. Detailed description of the research methodology

To explore the research in this article-based dissertation, I chose to use qualitative methodology (detailed in subsection 3.1.1). My research is exploratory and understanding; it aims to identify and understand phenomena, relationships and processes (Sajtos & Mitev, 2007). Although the research field is not completely unknown to me, I am interested in new ideas and findings. My findings may provide a good starting point for further disciplines and researchers (either through causal or descriptive research) to gain a more complete picture of the processes at play in the field of athlete career

management. Based on Maxwell (2012), I present the main elements of my qualitative research and their relationship representation (Figure 7).

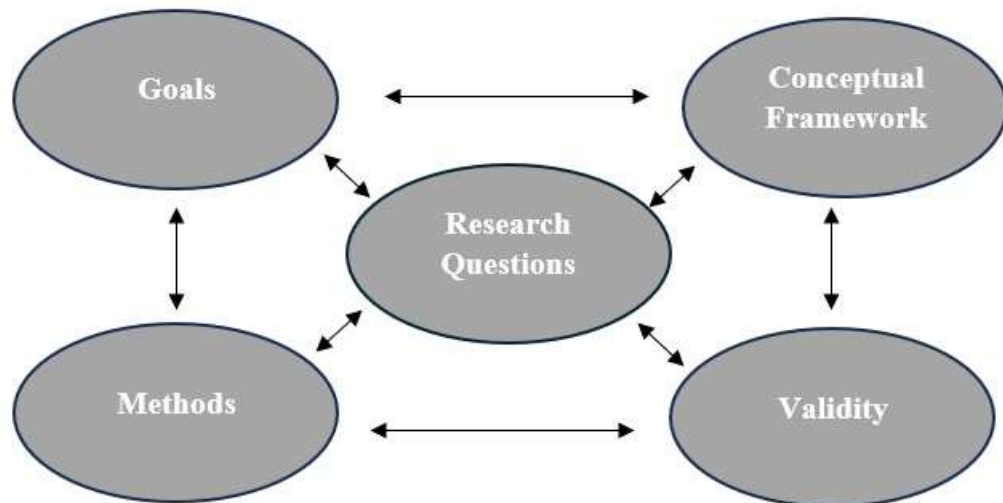


Figure 7: Main elements of qualitative research

Source: Maxwell, 2012, p 217.

The aim of my research, the research questions and the literature background have already been outlined in previous chapters (see subchapters 1.2 and 2). In this section, I will go into the details of the research methodology and the issue of validity.

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. *Qualitative research methodology*

My chosen methodology is a qualitative research methodology, whose main value is that it focuses on gaining a deeper, richer understanding of a given topic by asking interviewees about the information and lived experiences that are relevant to my research, recognising the value of participants' unique perspectives, which can only be fully understood in the context of their experiences and worldviews (Yin, 2015). Descriptiveness is a characteristic of qualitative approaches, which gives the researcher a tool to build a holistic picture of a natural environment (Creswell, 2007) through its abductive nature (Blaikie, 2000).

It can be briefly described by the following characteristics. Qualitative research can be considered diverse, as it can focus on social interpretations, discourses, processes, among other things. Furthermore, it does not show quantifiable results, it does not correspond to statistically evidential research, but focuses on understanding processes, exploring behavioural characteristics, detecting trends (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Thus, observations that are not easily reducible to numbers are typically the result (Babbie, 2008). It seeks to

answer the questions: what, why, how?; what does it depend on? (Majoros, 2005). Conclusions from qualitative research are generally not generalisable (Barbour, 2001; Kvale, 1994), and the conditions of the research cannot be replicated, which is not a limitation but a characteristic of research that should be recognised (Castleberry & Nolen, 2017).

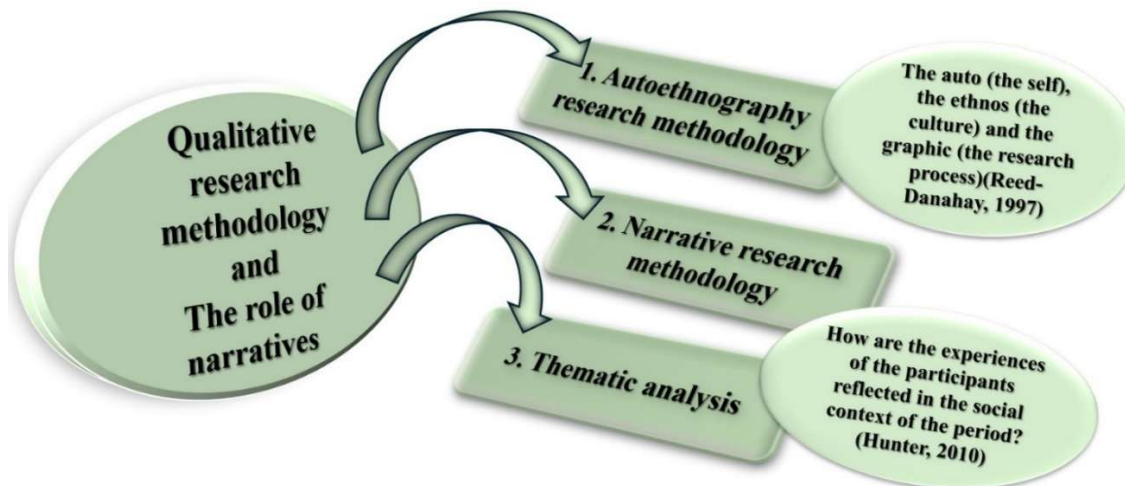


Figure 8: Qualitative research methodologies of the article-based dissertation

Source: own editing

In summary, my criteria for choosing qualitative research methodologies include, on the one hand, the use of a smaller number of individual samples (former professional handball players; coaches; managers). On the other hand, the possibility of incorporating narratives from interviews. Finally, the previous two aspects add to the feasibility of processing unmeasured data. By using the methodology of autoethnography, I have grounded the research, as I am exploring from my own experience the main areas that I can use narratively in further research. The second and third methodologies are clearly applied to collect the experiences of the participants and organise them, where it is also important for me to remain in my research role. So, I cannot forget the importance of self-reflection. A self-critical attitude and attitude of a researcher is essential in qualitative research.

Figure 8 illustrates the research methodologies used in the article-based dissertation, which are described in detail in the following subsections.

3.1.2. Autoethnography research methodology

The presentation of an athlete's career path is best illustrated by the method of autoethnography, because, as Reed-Danahay (1997) states with his analytical theory of autoethnography, the combination of the components of auto (the self), ethnos (culture,

in my case sports culture) and graph (the research process) gives the embedding of the self's personal experience in culture. With this method, access to information and data is easier and simpler, there are no ethical considerations, and fieldwork is clearly easier, since autoethnography researches "showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness (Ellis, 2004, p 38)."

Autoethnographers make a choice about the form and aspect in which to reveal life experiences, which creates a kind of difficulty, as it may give rise to further criticism in the future. This is emphasised by Jones et al. (2016) and lists further relevant points: first, a researcher deliberately takes his or her story to situate it in cultural practice; second, autoethnographies contribute to existing research; third, autoethnographic works can be called secrets, which are made vulnerable to critique; and fourth, they refer back to the previous point that they present personal stories in a vulnerable way in order for researchers to seek reciprocal connections with audiences (in a constructive, meaningful way) to which the audience will eventually respond.

Many researchers have turned towards it and used it in the world of sport.

McMahon & Penney (2013) present the method of autoethnography in the world of women's swimming, in a way that raises issues that need to be addressed both within the Australian sporting culture (the notion of perfection: achieving set swim times + mastering technique + perfecting body weight, shape and composition) and outside it. What makes this article unique is McMahon's experience as an elite swimmer and coach.

Cox et al. (2017) represent a more innovative qualitative research method related to the field of sport management, as it integrates co-constructed and analytical autoethnographic approaches. Their research deals with the discussion of key micro-political exchanges through the example of women's football, which can be observed through the first author's experience. A co-constructed autoethnography approach consists of the author writing a narrative of their experiences, which is eventually developed with co-authors (Kempster & Stewart, 2010), however, this is not equivalent to collaborative autoethnography, where multiple researchers share their research and work together on a given social phenomenon (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). Cox et al. (2017) argues that the mix of research methods they use mitigates the pitfalls listed by Chang (2008): „*a) an excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (b) excessive narration at the expense of cultural interpretation; (c) exclusive reliance on personal recollection as a data source; (d) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in the narrative; and (e) inappropriate use of the label autoethnography.* (Cox et al, 2017, p 525)."

Hockey (2019) explores the experience of sporting routines in the field of leisure sports, linked to running, in the field of sociology using a type of collaborative autoethnography (a summary after a joint discussion of the work of researchers collected at the same time), while Humberstone (2011) focuses on the relationship with the natural environment experienced during surfing, using reflexive ethnography (a case of self-narrative according to Ellis & Bochner 2000 – reflexive experience in one's own environment). Autoethnography research method is also gaining ground in the relationship between sport, sporting events and tourism (Coghlan & Filo 2013; Tham 2020; Costas Batlle et al, 2018), as well as in academic sport (McLachlan 2017; Carless 2012; Nuñez Enriquez & Oliver 2021; Barker 2017).

The research methodology of autoethnography is considered suitable for presenting factors relevant to a professional athlete's career. There is a research gap between the Hungarian sample and the sport relationship and, apart from methodological criticisms and drawbacks, it has several advantages (as discussed in detail in the first article).

3.1.3. Narrative research methodology

Horváth & Mitev (2015) classify narratives as narrative techniques. Everyone tells stories in everyday life, then there are fairy tales, stories, myths, but we can also take folklore. "*Narratives span across cultures and history* (Barthes, 1977, p.79. in: Horváth & Mitev, 2015, p.210)", and every social group has its own narrative. We live in stories, and we are animated by the stories that can be relived over and over again by the storyteller. It is precisely through these narratives that we make sense of our own lives, and this in turn also means that the behaviour and actions of others can be made more intelligible through the use of narrative techniques (MacIntyre & Kaszás, 1999). Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2007) suggest that firstly the concept of storytelling needs to be transformed into narrative research, secondly the researcher is expected to ask questions that will later help to make the analysis more effective, and thirdly the structure and the strategy of interpretation must be developed.

When studying career management in sport, the use of this methodology can be easily justified. After all, 'stars' are the most important resources for sports companies, who on the one hand become stars by standing out on the market through their individuality (appearance, behaviour, acting, speaking skills, responsibility, etc.) and on the other they consciously build their careers through important decisions gaining a thorough knowledge of the very same market (Kynsburg, 1998). Collecting, processing, analysing,

and reading these stories can certainly be interesting, memorable, and useful for all parties.

Hickson (2016) draws attention to the need for a narrative research process to be explicit, clear and acknowledge the implications for the researcher and the research process and suggests that in narrative research, the qualitative researcher should listen quietly to the participant's story, seek to understand the context, the structure of stories and the way they are situated (Mischler, 1986; Riessman, 1993).

This is described by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) as a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which builds on John Dewey's (1938, in: Clandinin, 2006) theory of experience (continuity and interaction criteria, situationalism). The first along the personal and social dimensions (interaction); the second along the temporal along the past, present, future and second (continuity); finally along the location, situation. The narrative researcher (interviewer) is part of this metaphorical environment, where a relational dimension is not excluded from the analysis. So, the researcher is investigating in this space, it can be stated that he/she enters the middle of the stories, as the stories of the participants are continuous (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). He/she works with the participants, he/she must be open to the use of ideas used in the creation of the field text, which must be positioned in a temporal, personal-social, place consideration (Clandinin, 2006). Some researchers (such as Sarbin, 1986), on the other hand, argue that narrative is identical to story meaning, so that it has a beginning, middle and end, which are articulated and held together by plot.

As Hunter (2010) states, the analysis phase of narrative research presents its own challenges, as finding the most appropriate data analysis method and presenting the findings takes time and effort. Care must therefore be taken to make the best use of the data collected and to present the participants' stories in a coherent and meaningful way. Chase (2005 in: Hunter, 2010) presents five analytical lenses used in narrative research: *„The first lens focused on the narrative as a vehicle for the uniqueness of human actions, the second on the narrator's voice and the verbal action and choices made by the narrator. The third lens focused on the ways in which the narrative was constrained by social circumstances; whereas the fourth lens treated narratives as socially situated, interactive performances between the researcher and the participant. The final lens focused on researchers as narrators and can be seen in autoethnographic research.“* (Hunter, 2010, p 47). In writing my second article, my aim is to include the first and third glasses, where participants can share their thoughts, experiences and decisions about their

successful professional sporting career paths, and to show how these narratives are represented in the social context of the time.

Gergen & Gergen (2003) highlight the challenge that the researcher faces in terms of representativeness and validity. According to the social constructionist approach, all „narratives are at the intersection of history, biography and society” (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p 132); they depend on the context of the narrator and the listener; and they are not intended to represent the *truth*” (Hunter, 2010, p 44). Horváth & Mitev (2015) argue that a narrative approach both enriches the methodological repository of management studies and provides a more human perspective on the problems that arise, which can be used to generate practical solutions.

3.1.4. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research methodology (also considered a data analysis strategy) that is suitable for both primary research and systematic reviews. Braun and Clarke (2006, p 79) define thematic analysis as: *“a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.”* It is a useful method to organise and describe data sets with minimum dimensions and detail, while reducing the data and fitting in with other data analysis methods (Vaismoradi et al, 2013).

Castleberry and Nolen (2017) point out that thematic analysis, which they refer to as qualitative research, is preferred in many fields, leaving out of the analysis the parameters for narrowing the data, the way themes are defined and the conclusions drawn. According to Collingridge and Gantt (2008), qualitative methods have become more widespread, while qualitative research norms and qualitative approaches have not kept pace. However, researchers who ask research questions that can be answered using the data analysis method and follow the steps of thematic analysis, which otherwise follows loose rules, can uncover deeper contexts (which are otherwise missing in quantitative research) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative approaches can be grouped into dependent and independent (epistemological) perspectives. In the former case, the qualitative method is applied on a well-regulated theoretical plane (e.g. discourse analysis; Menezes et al., 2018); while in the latter case, it is considered a flexible and useful research tool due to its theoretical freedom, which includes thematic analysis itself. In the second case, a key aspect of a good thematic analysis is to make the research question say something important, to make its themes emerge consistently, and to describe in detail how the dominant themes

emerged from the data sets. This detail involves making decisions about the principle which the researcher is working on. Thematic analysis can be data-driven or analyst-driven principles. In the first case, themes within the data are identified inductive approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) or deductive (Boyatzis, 1998). In the second case, the researcher is guided by his or her theoretical or analytic interests (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I present the 6 steps to carry out a detailed thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p 87): 1) Familiarizing yourself with your data; 2) Generating initial codes; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing themes; 5) Defining and naming themes; 6) Producing the report. The authors emphasize that qualitative research methodology is similar and these points should be followed flexibly to fit the research questions and data (Patton, 1990). It should be highlighted that researchers often develop a thematic map to visually represent themes, codes and their relationships, allowing them to place the themes in the broader context of the phenomenon (Kuckartz, 2013; Castleberry & Nolen, 2017).

3.1.5 Sampling, data collection and analysis

I used qualitative research methodology to answer the research questions of this article-based dissertation. Table 5 summarises the main characteristics of the data used, divided into articles.

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Data collection	Mixed methodology: autoethnography research methodology and use of journal articles or book chapters written during an active career. Collection and creation of a database.	Qualitative methodology: narrative research methodology Conduct semi-structured interviews	Qualitative methodology: thematic analysis Conduct semi-structured interviews
Sampling	Purposive sampling Database	Purposive sampling 16 retired professional women's handball players	Purposive sampling 5 sports leaders and coaches
Data analysis	Finding recurring themes and patterns in written material (articles, books and database) (Chang, 2008, p 131)	Semi-structured interview analysis Using Nvivo Inductive and deductive codes (based on Article 1) Using a system map (based on Barbrook-Johnson and Penn, 2022)	Semi-structured interview analysis Using Nvivo, Thematic coding

Table 5: Research methodology of the articles in this dissertation

Source: own editing

For the *first article*, I chose autoethnography research because, given the types of auto- and ethnographic writing, it is possible to use a mixture of Descriptive-Realistic Writing (descriptive experience as accurately as possible), Analytical-Interpretive Writing (similar to Anderson (2006) mentioned earlier), and Confessional-Emotive Writing (with more of the emotional traits) style traits (Chang, 2008). I consider myself as the primary source and present my experiences from my own perspective, for which I chose a starting strategy for collecting a personal database (WRITING EXERCISE 5.1; Chang, 2008, p 74, p 157). The period under study lasted from my introduction to handball until the end of my career. During the typing of the database, I put my personal experiences on paper in an uncontrolled way. In this way, during the self-observation, I ensured that the cognitive processes and emotions that are deep within me were revealed (Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002). I read through the database several times, always adding valuable thoughts. In total, a 13-page transcript was produced. As I have written several newspaper interviews and book chapters over the course of my career, I have supplemented my database with these. In analysing the dataset, I looked for recurring themes, which resulted in 5 vignettes.

For my second article, I chose the narrative research methodology, firstly because I consider it the best method for presenting personal experiences, and secondly because I contacted the first author of a study on a similar topic (Ekengren et al., 2020a), Johan Ekengren supported me in building on a similar methodology, which will allow for comparison and possible collaboration in the future.

Table 6 in the third column shows in italics the process of the narrative method for the career paths of professional Hungarian women's handball players.

I had 16 interviews available; the sample was selected according to the following criteria: Hungarian professional women's handball player; more than 5 years in the first division; professional career as a player already finished (at least 6 months); international success (national team, club level).

I approached the participants, presented the topic of my research and they accepted my invitation. All the interviews were conducted online (I also recorded them on a tape recorder in case of a possible internet connection failure), and all participants agreed to be recorded. The one-round interviews were on average one hour long. In selecting the context for the stories, I chose to focus on individually told personal stories using a semi-structured interview format.

	Step by	<i>Presenting the steps of my own research</i>
1.	Defining the aim of the research	<i>Examining the characteristics of the career histories of Hungarian professional women handball players – creating an aggregated career (from the beginning to a few years after the end) based on the participants' own words.</i>
2.	Defining the type of stories	<i>Personal stories and testimonies related to the professional sports career.</i>
3.	Identifying the sources of stories	<i>Interviewees (16): women's handball players who have completed their professional careers in Hungary, who have played international matches (national team, club level), and who have achieved several domestic and international successes.</i>
4.	Choosing the context of the stories	<i>Personal stories told individually in the form of semi-structured interviews.</i>
5.	Choosing the stories to tell	<i>Invocation, photo, memorabilia, drawing of a personal career.</i>
6.	Collecting stories	<i>Online (Microsoft Teams) recording, voice recording, note-taking during interview (by researcher), creation of a personal career graph during interview (by participant).</i>
7.	Analysis and interpretation of stories	<i>Deductive (based on Article 1) and inductive coding, Thematic analysis (Smith, 2016); Using a system map (based on Barbrook-Johnson and Penn, 2022). NVIVO</i>
8.	Theorising	<i>A model of career destinations for Hungarian professional women's handball players.</i>

Table 6: Process of the overall narrative research on the career paths of Hungarian professional women's handball players

Source: Czarniaswska (2004, p15) in Horváth & Mitev (2015, p 214) own edited

During the interview, the questions started from the present time, followed by those related to the past, to the beginning of handball. I tried to ask the questions more or less in chronological order, but sometimes I went back and forth between questions. Occasionally, I orally supplemented my interview outline with extra questions for interesting directions that arose during the interview. After the participants had described their sporting careers over a period of time, I focused on life outside sport. During the interview, I made a timeline note of the key words spoken to aid analysis.

In the last half of the interview, I asked the participants to create their own career model based on what they had heard during the interview. I distributed to all participants the same PPT slide with different diagrams (circles, squares, triangles, arrows, etc.). Their task was to write down key factors (stations, persons, experiences, etc.) from the life situations of the interviewee in the shape of their choice, guided by me. I then asked them to sort these shapes into models. In this way, I was able to create 16 career path figures. Although these figures do not form part of the results of Article 2, I consider their future analysis important, and I would like to highlight their help in interpreting the results.

Finally, I consider it essential to focus on the personality of the researcher during data collection. During the interview, I have tried to listen actively and I consider it important

not to influence the subject's reactions. I also took notes for self-reflection, which helped to minimise subjectivity in the subsequent analysis.

The literature points out that narratives can be interpreted in many different ways, and the patterns of analysis tend to be deductive. Examples include ritual components (ritual objects, script, roles, audience), Frye's typology (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony), Propp's morphology (Horváth & Mitev, 2015, p 216).

The analysis was both deductive (using vignettes from Article 1) and inductive. In the latter case, we used Smith's (2016) narrative thematic analysis to interpret the players' narratives, taking into account what the players had said, to identify different themes (inductive – composite vignettes), so that each vignette was composed as a collective and coherent story related to the chronology of the career. The players' own words are preserved, ensuring the authenticity of the players' experiences. My co-author colleague was a "critical friend", helping me with my work.

In the case of the *third article*, there are many similarities with the data collection and processing of the second article. I personally contacted the experts, introducing my research area. One interview was face-to-face, the others were online interviews, lasting on average 1 hour 30 minutes. They were audio- and video-recorded, with notes and all participants contributed to the recording. The recordings were transcribed manually and a total of 102 pages of single-spaced, verbatim transcripts were produced. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the same way as for the athletes, with open-ended questions occasionally prompting the interviewer to ask an additional question.

From the transcripts, thematic codes were generated, so the analysis was done inductively, which allowed me and my co-author to create a thematic map of the dataset. My co-author colleague also acted as a 'critical friend' for the third article.

3.1.6. Ethical issues in research

In my research, I strive to follow ethical guidelines. I will protect the interests of my interviewees and other participants from any kind of harm (e.g. I will not disclose information that could compromise their privacy). I will guarantee anonymity when conducting the questionnaire (ensuring anonymity to fully protect identity). At the same time, if I am requested to do so, I will respect confidentiality (researcher knows the data but does not make them public). I will assure participants that I will not mislead them during the research, I will not make false statements about myself (Babbie, 2008).

In addition to the many ethical obligations listed, I will also maintain ethical behaviour towards fellow researchers and readers, which include analysing data, how I publish, presenting my results fully and accurately, or even presenting my shortcomings (Babbie, 2008).

At the same time, I will not forget to fully inform my interviewees about the purpose of the research, its processes, the benefits of participation and the risks involved before starting. Furthermore, I take special care to ensure that the audio, video and typed materials of the interviews are stored in a safe place, so that no information about athletes or other people involved is leaked by me carelessly.

3.2. Validity, reliability, generalisability

In the past, qualitative research has been sharply criticised and it has been stressed that quantitative criteria such as objectivity and validity cannot be applied to qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The generalizability of qualitative studies is not based on the extensibility of the results (statistical generalizability), but rather on the development of a theory that can be extended to other cases (Becker, 1991). Yin (1994) calls this *analytic generalization*. Meanwhile, Sinkovics et al. (2008) propose a specific research strategy for dealing with qualitative data from interviews that "to establish 'trustworthiness' of qualitative research, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability need to be established (Sinkovics et al., 2008, p.691)". Their strategy includes, for example, programmes such as NVivo, which can help to rigorise the qualitative research process, or the six-step research report, outlined with a degree of analytical logic, to increase confidence in the research findings. I have used these in my own research with my co-authors. Namely, we applied deductive and/or inductive approaches to the analysis of the articles, complemented by the use of NVivo. The latter helped to make explicit the implicit knowledge from the interviews (which, incidentally, could then be further captured, analysed, transcribed and made transparent at the same time). On the other hand, the dialogue with my co-authors on continuous and up-to-date data and analysis was also useful. This helped to consolidate qualitative procedures and improve the dependability and quality of our qualitative research (Sinkovics et al., 2008).

Babbie (2008) illustrates practical examples of how qualitative methods can present more valid measurements than questionnaire-based surveys and experimental methods. Qualitative observations and conceptualisations are valuable in their own right, as they

can provide depth to topics and concepts through complex, comprehensive measurements, which can otherwise be starting points for further research (both quantitative and qualitative). Thus, field researchers tend to give detailed examples rather than concepts.

Maxwell (2013) points out threats to the validity of qualitative research: description, interpretation, theory and generalisation. For the purposes of my valid description research, I consider the verbatim transcripts of the interviews themselves for all of the studies in the article-based dissertation to be „Rich data” (Becker, 1970). Interpretation validity is related to the researcher bias. Does it bias the researcher's theory, view? To avoid this, I have constantly consulted my subject supervisors, co-authors. And theoretical validity is unquestionable when theories of substantial importance are considered.

There is a validity versus reliability criticism of field research, which field researchers are well aware of. To address this, they use methods such as: filtering out their own biases and the effects of their views; seeking help from colleagues (the collective nature of science) (Babbie, 2008).

Related to this, researcher bias is a sensitive issue for autoethnography research methodology. Self-observation (introspection), according to Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), can take several forms in scientific settings. A long-standing criticism is that research introspection is not an appropriate tool and critics do not recommend its use because it is regarded as unscientific and unsubstantiated (Horváth & Mitev, 2012).

In my research, a very specific form of subjective personal ('researcher') introspection appears. Although no one else can see inside my head, I have accurate and important data at my fingertips. I can perhaps proudly say that the Ericsson et al. (1993) principle of deliberate practice (10,000 hours over 10 years) has been doubly implemented during my 20 years of professional, successful sporting career. Thus, by using the autoethnography method in my case, my aim was to focus on the relationship between myself and the sporting culture, which is otherwise ignored by critics. "Recollection is an introspective process of remembering. According to Gould (1995), personal recollection provides much more and more direct data (Horváth & Mitev, 2012, p 5-6)". Thus, I can apply the autoethnography method to better understand the perspectives of myself and the stakeholders influencing my sporting career by aiming for lifelikeness and verisimilitude as opposed to objectivity (Ellis, 2004). This view is corroborated by Jones et al. (2016, p 33): "autoethnography does not claim to produce better or more reliable, generalizable

and/or valid research than other methods, but instead provides another approach for studying cultural experience.”

Csikszentmihályi (2011) points out that the theories or measuring instruments developed are developed by humans and therefore cannot be independent of the observer. And our observations take place in some reality, which may be determined by our culture or linguistic symbols. Tacconi (1998) points out that in the field of constructivist epistemology, the study of existing reality is value-linked and inseparable from the value system of the researcher. It is also accepted that, in the application of qualitative methods, this reality may be influenced by other factors (even changes in the research process), which, if properly managed, can be grounded in inductive data analysis to produce a theory. The results obtained will reflect the reality that the researchers perceived with the people involved in the given context. Or, they state that the results of qualitative research are not set in stone, but are the result of how the researcher interpreted them. It is thus possible for another researcher to put another piece of the 'common' under different circumstances. This also means that the majority of qualitative research findings are not generalisable (Tacconi, 1998), and it is a fact that the research conditions cannot be replicated in exactly the same way (Castleberry & Nolen, 2017).

One of the limitations of the generalisability of my research is that a sample of people surveyed in a particular era shared their career experiences with me and my fellow authors. The results of interviewing a new group of people a few years later may highlight completely different factors for successful career development. As our interviewees have pointed out, different generations think differently. A limitation may also be that in a different cultural context, completely different emphases may emerge as outcomes than in the Hungarian sample or even in a completely different sport. Nevertheless, it is interesting to highlight that the results presented in the study by Ekengren et al. (2020a; 2020b) can be compared with our own research findings to draw general conclusions. At the same time, due to the descriptive nature of my research, my aim is to present the specificities as a representation of generalisable results. This is because solutions are needed for practice and the competitive and innovative environment is pushing decision-makers to change continuously.

During the research process, I consciously kept in mind the importance of self-reflection, as a researcher's self-critical attitude is essential in qualitative research. Striving for objectivity in the interpretation of data and information and avoiding bias were all important aspects, even though I may have once been part of the sporting culture.

A helpful tool for me was the writing of reflections during certain processes, which served as a reference point during the analysis, as it provided all the explicit details regarding the circumstances of the research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). I was also helped by the set of rules or frameworks related to the methodologies, which also provided me with research notes (see subsection 3.1.5). The ability to incorporate my own reflections into the research was hindered by the fact that I regularly consulted my subject supervisors or other researchers in the field of sport business economics on the topic during the research. So, In my qualitative research, I acted according to the criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability. As I aimed to be able to prove the validity of my own concepts; on the other hand, in terms of reliability, that the chosen methodology is an accurate representation of the research question. Finally, I have tried to make my claims supported and justified, avoiding the trap of generalisability (Mason, 2002).

4. Presentation of research results

Just as in grounded theory, theories are constructed in a purely inductive way. My article-based dissertation is based on qualitative research methods (autoethnography, narrative research, thematic analysis) where the focus is on observations, I did not start from hypotheses, I avoided outlining preliminary concepts, I only focused on finding connections and relationships to develop theories (Babbie, 2008, p 415). All this in order to identify the main correlations between the career and theories. As a consequence, I did not make any prior propositions.

This chapter provides a brief presentation of the main findings of the article-based research, as well as a summary of other background information and other findings that were not included in the studies. I highlight the research propositions of my article-based dissertation in the conclusions section (Chapter 8).

4.1. Presentation of the results of the autoethnography research

The research question of *the first article of the article-based dissertation* is: What are the main factors and situations that characterise the whole career and experience of a Hungarian women's handball player in professional sport (from the beginning until a few years after retirement)?

In this research, I was able to be both a subject and a researcher in the field. The analysis and interpretation of the data collected from my encounter with sport to its completion was greatly influenced by the research method used, as the behaviour of the

'I' must be interpreted in its cultural context. According to Chang (2008, p 131), I looked for recurring themes and organised patterns into five vignettes of a sporting career (significant others: role of influencers; local succession: importance of local sporting culture and identity; star positioning: randomness – or what is the luck factor?; rollercoaster: struggle to win and lose; rebirth: when the bubble bursts – civic life).

In summary, it has been shown that the role of career influencers has a major impact on career development at a young age. The presence of parents (especially for young people) is unquestioned (its intensity appears to be declining along the development route and becomes rather supportive); however, as Knight et al. (2017) highlight, little research has addressed the development of strategies that parents can apply to their children that will best help them to enjoy sport in the long term and realise its potential. Closely linked to this stage is the sense of belonging to a community (which can arise in a myriad of situations during a career path), in which stakeholders are important factors. The role of coaches in career transitions is different. In youth, pedagogical skills are essential; whereas in adulthood, the skills of a sports professional or expert are dominant.

On the other hand, a local talent development environment is essential for a young athlete. After all, the social embeddedness of the sports club in the sporting environment is a given, where the young person gets to know the sport and establishes his or her social contacts both within and outside the world of sport (Henriksen et al., 2010). Social involvement is a key issue for sports organisations. Walker & Kent (2009) note that in the sport sector there is a difference in geographical scope, influence of stakeholders and business activities compared to other organisations, and on the other hand, there is a secondary value (beyond the basic product: matches) in the life of sports organizations when a new facility building or expansion takes place for the local community, which can also serve to support local youth education. Godfrey (2009) introduces CSR (corporate social responsibility) issues to sports organizations and recognizes the social legitimacy of private sector organizations in their original interests in order to create and maintain a higher quality of life. Until then, Scott (2001) uses three institutional pillars in the field of sport. *The first is sport as a cognitive institution*, where the focus is on community relations (e.g., what are the duties and responsibilities of athletes and clubs in developing core values about children's characters?). *Second is sport as a regulatory institution*, when norms for social life are established and enforced, and *finally sport as a normative institution* that creates and transmits values.

Third, it is not possible to prove causality between random events and life course variation, but it can be argued that life course variation has several determinants even if they are random events (Shanahan & Porfeli, 2006).

Fourthly, performance-centricity can "force" athletes to become obsessed with their sport, to the detriment of their other interests, thus jeopardising their future success in other areas of life. However, research shows that sport and learning pathways are compatible and should be seen as complementary. It should be remembered that athletes are not machines pulling the wagon for performance expectations, so they cannot afford to allow the 'train wreck' narrative to ultimately prevail (Douglas & Carless, 2009) because sport is a station in their lives.

Finally, the bubble bursts. Several studies (e.g. Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007) deal with the post-retirement period and its processing. Ex-athletes who are "hardened" in continuous struggles can have a more resilient character (better able to cope with the workload) than the average worker (Westmattelmann et al., 2021) if they have a smaller athlete identity. For athletes with a high athlete identity (overachievement centric), transitions may take longer (Erpič et al. 2004). My research confirms the view that conscious planning can facilitate the transition to civilian life. However, the pain point of bursting the bubble when an athlete leaves the sporting world can be demonstrated, which takes time to process.

4.2. Presentation of the results of the narrative research

The research questions in the *second article* of this thesis are: What variables influence the long-term performance of team athletes during the transition phases of their careers? What intervention points can be identified where conscious career management can influence long-term performance?

Our narrative research is of international importance, as the Hungarian handball teams are among the best in Europe. To answer the research questions, we used a unique sample of 16 female participants from the most successful eras of Hungarian women's handball. Our results complement the findings of previous qualitative and quantitative career research, which is discussed in detail in the paper (Chapter 6). Our aim was to provide a systematic overview through the variables extracted from the experiences of Hungarian women's handball players in two career transitions ("*from development to mastery*" and "*from mastery to discontinuation*"). We identified which internal or external factors inhibit or support the athlete's performance. Table 4 in the second article shows in detail

the grouped variables (individual, interpersonal, organisational and socio-cultural level) where the use of different managerial approaches is justified, so that conscious career management can be responsible for the practical application of the results obtained.

Research by Taylor et al. (2022b) reports that, at the individual level, the strength of internal beliefs, values and motivators (club culture, tradition, atmosphere, value, i.e. a sense of belonging to the right environment) were compared with the strength of external motivators (e.g. winning and money) that determined their career choice. It is suggested that at this level (amateur and semi-professional and individual) money is the least motivating factor, the main goal being simply to belong to a team and gain experience. At the interpersonal level, the nature of the relationships with the four stakeholders (support or inhibition) was observed: family, coach, employer and teammates. The presence of victimization (juggling between sport and family) during the transition from amateur to semi-professional athlete was also observed in their research. Mooney et al. (2019) also highlight the many sacrifices between family and career, while the opposite sense of why it is all worth doing is also present.

Another important finding that confirms the existence of commonalities with other sports is the influence and participation of various stakeholders (Szántó 2019) in the success stories of athletes that needs to be addressed in the development of elite athlete career paths. The study by Brouwers et al. (2015) conducts a meso-level investigation from an organizational perspective in the sport of tennis. The research shows that clubs, coaches, and associations are involved in all processes of athletes' development, and their role, influence and participation are characteristics in all development processes within the ARTN (Attracting, Retaining, Transitioning and Nurturing) framework (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Their research identified the limitation of not having covered elite athletes as key stakeholders, and – even if not in tennis – our research partially filled this gap.

At the organisational level, it is clear that the majority of athletes have a need to learn, so an organisational issue that arises alongside club support is how higher education can provide flexibility for athletes to gain alternative qualifications.

At the socio-cultural level, the important role of the community, which emerged from this research, should be highlighted. Opportunity (in school, opportunity available, opportunity to change) appears at all career levels and seems to be closely related to the strength of community. According to Barabási (2018, p 28), success is a collective phenomenon: "success is never about you, or even about your performance. Success is about us and how we perceive your performance". Thus, the task of successful career

management is also to create and strengthen these communities. Gammelsæter (2021, p 14) asks the question: *"What is our mission? In what direction(s) do we influence the social activity of sport, and is this direction sustainable and defensible? Is sport just another industry to which we educate recruits, or is it, on the contrary, a unique organised social activity that deserves a management discipline that is tailored to promote the blessings of sport for as many people as possible?"*

Other background information regarding narrative research:

The results presented in the second article are only part of the overall narrative research. The aim of the whole research was to examine the career stages and other influencing factors of retired Hungarian women's handball players at a micro level that led to a successful career. I will illustrate the main findings of the full study, which have been omitted from the second article:

First, the full taxonomy ([Annex 1](#)) illustrates the career stages Hungarian women handball players have gone through, the variables that have influenced, determined or simply influenced them. It was only the magnitudes and intensities of the variables that differed in the case of the sixteen interviewed athletes, but these variables were all represented in the narratives. The research identified four stages (*youth sport success, the transition between youth sport success and active age success, active age success, wellbeing after sports*) that handball players progressed throughout their sporting careers, where a single distinct pathway can be identified as the pathway that takes a young person through sporting success to the years after retirement. The key is that this path is self-driven with highly intrinsic motivations where being courageous, risk-taking (both in terms of health and accepting massive uncertainties), believing in destiny is just as important as the external opportunity that arises. Older athletes look back on these opportunities as luck but according to this system map, success is an emergence influenced by a large number of different intrinsic and extrinsic variables. A career in sports is an intense, competitive environment, where the athlete is present only for a limited period of time; and after a while, the need to change comes and the way this happens affects well-being later in life.

Second, it raises the question of how the issue of "invisible forces" is reflected in sport careers and career transitions? 'Luck', 'fate', 'preparation meets opportunity', 'being in the right place at the right time' were often mentioned by participants as key elements of long-term success. This is also an inductive, emergent theme of our research. We thus

complement Czeizel's (2004) fate factor model. However, the actual event translated into a variable in our system map shows that the “invisible factor”, i.e., the favourable or unfavourable development of any one of these factors along the career path creates these opportunities or barriers, and shapes career-long sport performance. Luck, for instance is often quoted to play a role in the selection process and later in the development of a player's career in a complex set of circumstances. For example, the subjective opinion of experts can be formed during talent selection as subjective biases (Brown et al., 2022; Johnston & Baker, 2020). Therefore, Grossmann and Lames (2013) suggest that the selection strategy of coaches should not be based on current performance, but rather on the potential of junior talents. Of course, winning is the goal during the game, but the goal should be to train as many players as possible. In this way, the athlete (and other stakeholders) must be prepared for the unexpected, recognise it and exploit the opportunity by using their skills. We argue that there are factors that are mainly up to the athletes, but overall they can be influenced and sometimes controlled by people and circumstances from the external environment. All successful athletes have been through this, with varying degrees of emotional charge.

It can be said that in team sports, the personal destiny factor interacts closely with the destiny factors of the members of the peer groups. After all, the team has a certain number of players specialised in specific positions, the national team has a certain number of players who can play, and there is a clear 'winner' and 'loser' not only in matches but also in the hierarchy within the team. In this context, illness or injury of another athlete is a common occurrence (Herr, 2019).

There are some similarities in the economic approach. The sacrifice for success is the effort and the skills of the athlete. Lazear (2006) suggests that the promotion process can be determined by the positive and negative effects of luck or noise (uncertainty and measurement error). The stronger the noise, the lower the athlete's effort level. A negative effect can be an illness or injury, while a positive effect can be a situation where a young player is replacing an injured player. For measurement error, I would give an example from a sport that is somewhat similar to the cognitive phenomena involved in coaching decision making. For example, a coach trusts an athlete who has not shown high performance for a long time (sunk cost-effect) or vice versa, a coach considers a very trying athlete as a medium ability athlete. Another determining factor in the promotion process is the degree of heterogeneity observed among those who are competing for

promotion. Thus, to maintain a high level of effort, it is necessary to have people of the same ability competing (homogeneous) for a given position (to avoid slack).

It can therefore be said that the “fate” or “luck” factor appears as a dynamic equilibrium between the variables of the system map. A similar perspective is of Li et al. (2018, p 9): “forecasting future professional success of young players is difficult, because athlete development is a complex process that is influenced by a dynamic interplay of athlete, environmental, system and chance factors.” It is recommended that we not only look at the variables in isolation, but also examine their interrelationships, since the "invisible factor" in our system map is the positive interaction of many different variables at a given point in time.

The third finding of our research is that money and material resources were treated more as pocket money at younger ages. During the active age it was treated as a reward for sports performance, which can be interpreted as the accumulation of experience in sports. The issue of money was only consciously reflected upon as an important resource after retirement where the future seemed uncertain. In the case of elite team sports, research by Maier et al. (2016) investigated the roles of monetary and non-monetary (family integration, second career support after retirement and private problem support) incentives, focusing on athletes' sport performance and job satisfaction. Their results showed that monetary incentives are less important than non-monetary ones. Our research substantiates the claims that non-monetary support coming from diverse sources has a stronger influence on performance.

4.3. Presentation of the results of the thematic analysis

The research question of the *third article* in *this thesis* is: What makes the business management of players as a workforce at the professional level in women's handball special? The focus of the research for the third article was to understand what critical factors, situations and perceptions emerge in the experiences of managers and coaches that are directly related to the athlete. The data extracted from the in-depth professional interviews was organised and listed into three main themes related to the research question. Important aspects were considered to be sport-specific (as training related to the different stakeholders is an area for improvement), other influencing situations (the increasing role of player managers, 'constraints' and money) and aspects related to the handball players themselves. In the latter case, the human qualities of the players and their

ability to fit into the environment should be highlighted as a measure of their value in the selection process.

Two themes were identified and evaluated through the methodology used. These were: to present the conceptual framework of the medium (Article 3, Figure 2) and to illustrate the value typology model for the type of athlete (Article 3, Figure 3). Finally, the elements of Figure 3 of Article 3 are compared with the roles that can be identified along the behavioural dimensions in handball (Table 1 of Article 3). In both cases, the participants' narratives are presented. This gives a clear picture of where the athlete is positioned and what internal and external environmental factors surround her in handball. On the other hand, we can gain insight into the logic of player selection, which is mainly based on value-price (with tangible and intangible parameters). The construction of this model was inspired by Henderson's (1970 in: www.bcg.com) four-cell growth/share product portfolio matrix. Thus, the grouping of athletes is based on the degree of market value of the athlete to the sports company and the human factor nature of the athlete. Finally, the suggestion of Driskell et al. (2017) to compare team roles with team profile models (Article 3, Table 1) is fulfilled.

Other background information related the thematic analysis:

The results of the third article do not include data from in-depth interviews with participants from the world of gastronomy. In the meantime, my co-author and I presented the specificities of the world of gastronomy and sport at the III Business Research Conference. Thus, I will briefly summarise the main features that were left out of the article, as the overall research can be expected to provide lessons for the corporate sector, as it is also important in the field of human resource management to assess how individuals experience the processes that take place in corporate culture. The question may be raised whether the corporate manager, in selecting and nurturing talent, has the same traits or differences in mind in interpreting talent as the manager of a sports organisation?

I would highlight the similarities: *working in teams*, a *change in attitude*, which can also be seen as a generational challenge (in the case of sport: missing transitions – expectation instead of struggle; gastronomy: the emergence of "me-time" – see Maslow's hierarchy of needs). Second, the perception is similar in relation to the medium, as a *stable core* (hungry for success) is needed to help the newcomer fit in, or be projected out of it. Also important for the value of the employee is *the acceptance and representation of the*

role in the medium, since in both cases, fitting in is seen as a condition for long-term success. Thirdly, how to ensure an adequate workforce in terms of quality and quantity. In both cases, the idea of a *list or database* or certification *from abroad* was raised.

Finally, when it comes to selecting a worker, experts agree that professional experience is not enough, but that human qualities and a love of the profession are important.

Overall, similar perspectives and experiences emerged for gastronomy and sport. The only difference that emerged is the involvement of employees in value creation. This can be explained by the fact that different incentives appear in the two industries when pushing employees to perform better. In sport, for example, the character and personality of the coach may be a more important consideration, while in gastronomy money and remuneration are more important.

In the following three chapters, the written articles are appended with separate reference lists (Chapter 5, 6, 7). These are followed by Chapter 8 which answers the main research question of the article-based dissertation, followed by the reference list of the article-based dissertation outside the bibliography of articles (Chapter 9), and finally the annex (Chapter 10).

5. First article

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

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Published in: Society and Economy (2022)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1556/204.2022.00016>

Abstract

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

Keywords: Career path, Handball, Autoethnography, Professional sports, Personal experiences

JEL Code: M12, M54, Z22

1.Introduction

While sports have long played a significant role in the social sphere, sports have gained substantial importance in modern societies also in economic terms, to the extent that in the 20th century it turned into a unique industry being a business service. This also generated a need for the economic analysis of sports, and increased the body of

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

András (2017, p. 4) speaks in greater detail about sports economics, claiming that it is a “a field of social activities where people generate, provide, share and consume sports services, in an active or passive fashion, in order to satisfy their need for such services. People taking part in sports services can be active (leisure sports) or passive (those consuming professional sports: right there where sports are practiced or from the media), plus sports can matter to them indirectly or from an economic perspective.” This definition covers the following domains: professional sports, leisure sports, youth sports (nurturing talent), sports schools (school sports), sports facilities, sports events (major tournaments).

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

resource management is of utmost importance in the field of sports, and the intangible values of athletes also play a role in this.

Athletes generate value for themselves (image, growing transfer value), the team (good results, increasing revenues) and society (community building, promoting values) alike. Thus, in the case of a team sport, success can be interpreted from the perspectives of sport as a profession, economic considerations, and sports businesses (András 2003b). For this, it is essential to assign the right kind of tasks to employees, and this works the same way in the world of sports as well. Teams are fighting for signing the biggest stars for the different positions (for instance rising transfer fees mean business success for the selling party, and it also qualifies as success if a team can exploit the quality of a group of players). We can say that human capital defines how successful organisations are, together with the profitability of economic processes, as it is the knowledge and skills of the organisation's members – and the experience and motivation rooted in these – that build up a collective value, which is sometimes called intellectual or knowledge capital (Karolinyné et al. 2010 in. Dajnoki et al. 2015).

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

Often during her handball career, the author of the present study thought that having a career in professional handball is not a substantial challenge, but when she looked around in her own environment (observing the players who were the same age as her), she found that in a certain sense it is actually very difficult to become a professional handball player. In numerous cases a player comes to a halt on their career path, even if they are talented and there is a firm basis on which they could build a professional handball career. It is also true for the author that her career would have developed faster if certain factors worked out differently than they eventually did. The nature of these factors has hardly been studied in social sciences, let alone the relationships and interplay between them, the prerequisites for making a breakthrough and the peculiarities of the actual environment. Analysis like this would not only assist the individual athletes in achieving

their goals, but would also offer an important insight for those working with youth teams. For those sports organisations that want to invest in the players of the future, and are trying to find out from the many players going through the club's value creation system who can be those young players at a club who have the necessary potential for going professional — this knowledge is paramount. The author wishes to introduce those steps and processes in a career's history that can manifest in a successful career, from the analogous perspective as athletes "see the field". They know it well why their teammates are moving in a certain direction in a given situation on the court; or why and how the centre back can pass the ball to the player in the corner without looking in that direction: they simply see the field.

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

In this introductory part of the study the motivation for discussing the topic has been presented and placed in its academic context. After two main parts follow. The first describes the methodology used, and the second the results of the autoethnographic research. Finally, the conclusions of the research work are drawn.

2. Methodology

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

2006, p. 378) in order to point out that there is a wide range of practices beyond the data, while theoretical development and refinement are also taking place.

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

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

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

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

During the research work, subjective personal introspection is applied (Wallendorf – Brucks 1993). It is the author that serves as the primary source, and she shares her experiences from her own point of view. She has selected a strategy for building a personal database (Chang 2008, p. 74 – writing exercise 5.1), in which data collection

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

Analysing and interpreting the data is greatly influenced by the research method applied, as the behaviour of “the self” needs to be interpreted in the context of its cultural relationships. Chang (2008, p. 131) recommends ten strategies for this: “(1) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyse inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyse the relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly; (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories.” From these the author picked the first one for analysing the database, because the focal point was exploring and understanding areas and processes related to career management. Besides, due to the lack of professional literature, there is no similar research, data or framework theory available for getting accurate answers, so the author wanted those topics to spring to the surface, in an abductive way, which can be important in relation to an athlete’s career. Finally, she systematically arranged the recurring topics and patterns into five vignettes, which appear as the main topics and facilitate the better understanding of connections and narratives extracted from the autoethnographic data (Reay et al. 2019).

3. Results

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

Table 1. Interpretation of vignettes

Vignettes	Concepts concerned	Explanation
Significant Others: Role of influential people for a handball player	Parents	pillar, supporting role (material and emotional)
		decision-making role (in the youth system)
	<i>"In any case, I didn't want to leave home as a child, because I was a bit influenced by the external environment. But my parents saw something in me. They gently asked the question when I was 14: Do you want to stay at home and play handball a little, study and then work, or give yourself the opportunity to break away and leave? They knew I wanted to play handball."</i>	
	Coaches	individuality, good teaching character – in the early years
		individuality, coach, coach's eye for selection, need to perform, trust
	<i>"I owe a lot to him because he was the one who trusted me and saw something in me, and the club didn't bring in an experienced goalkeeper, and I was able to play in important games at the age of 20-22, and had a stable one or two years of coaching in the adults."</i>	
	Sibling	partner, teammate and sometimes opponent
	<i>"It is an interesting situation, when your sister is beaten on the court or you want to help her, but she intentionally doesn't pay attention, or she needs to take a penalty when you are at the goal and it goes 2 meters wide, while you were praying that she shoots to the left corner."</i>	
Peers – teammates	love of play, friendships, competition	
<i>"(...) I got to know people my age as opponents, and then over time, through further studies or other situations, they became friends, then teammates and teammates in the national team as adults."</i>		
Local Grassroots: Youth system – the importance of local sports culture and identity	Sports culture	tradition, community
	<i>"I think for me the possibility presented itself to get to know handball, as my home town has always had a successful sports environment and sports culture, which overwhelms schools, teachers, coaches, parents, people and last but not least the children."</i>	
Star Position: Randomness – or else what is the factor of luck?	Luck	a concept that concerns athletes
	<i>"Being in the right place at the right time!" and "Preparedness meets opportunity." – These sentences bring me back to those memories. It matters in which city, in which club, with which coach and also in which year you are there where you are. Then it is also necessary that someone sees some extra potential in you, in comparison with other selected players. Then it is up to you to live up to the opportunity, to show what you got."</i>	
Roller Coaster: Struggle in victory and in defeat	Injuries	pain, focus on return, support from family and teammates
	<i>"I started to get the rhythm and the victories kept coming, along with good individual performances, and towards the end of the season during a warm-up game I stepped so badly that a surgery was waiting for my knee. It was a trauma for me, because I had to skip an international cup final, which we couldn't win at the end. I really missed that glory."</i>	
	Studies	time management, role of communication between stakeholders, awareness, external help
	<i>"After a lost game they say it is a problem that other activities distract your attention from the games. 'Why do you need a degree anyway?' I hear from the coach. I was crying throughout the training in my inexperienced years, I wasn't prepared for this. But I know that a sports career will not last more than 10-20 years."</i>	

	Conformity pressure – successes and low points	pressure to perform, pressure from the environment and from yourself
	<i>“I always wanted to show that I am here, too, I am good, don’t forget about me! So I fought a lot even with myself. (...) Fluctuations in your performance mean you are unpredictable, you aren’t reliable and the club won’t be able to build on you. A player with a good steady performance can get everything, they are the ones the club can always count on.”</i>	
Rebirth: When the bubble bursts – Civilian life.	What’s next?	new beginnings, uncertainty, seeking new goals
	<i>“Towards the end of my career my ego was becoming more important than sport. I felt that something was not like in the old times, but I could never really phrase it. New feelings came to the surface, and I didn’t want to be only a player anymore!”</i>	

Source: author

3.1. Significant Others

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

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

who doubted me, sometimes my own competitors with whom we had a healthy competition on the court, and I also made many friends throughout the years.

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

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

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

Todd – Edwards (2020) analysed three different aspects in connection to the parents. One is about managing both internal and external pressure. The other is about how the parental influence and support change during the years of the child's life, and with the growing competing level: "hands on" support (active support system) is replaced by "hands off" support (the leading role belongs to the authorised coach, while the parent only supports when the child needs it). The third aspect is about the preparation for the life after retiring from the career in professional sports, when the parent is paying attention to how the child can adjust to a life other than an athlete's life.

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

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

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

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

"It is unquestionable that a characteristic individual could be successful as a coach too, with a vibe that was both dignified and funny, and he taught us all the necessary basics. [...] You, knucklehead, come over here! – is still ringing in my ears, it didn't

matter whether I delivered a good or a bad performance. I looked up to him and these sentences didn't bother my parents either when they were rightful."

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

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

3.2 Local Grassroots

This vignette summarises both how belonging to a local sports culture and a youth system are key factors in choosing a particular sport at a young age and discusses the identification process that an athlete can go through during their career path. Then there comes a point where the athlete can ask themselves: is it enough just to be an athlete?

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

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

Behind the achieved success, we can identify key factors in connection with the professional (elite) level. The study of Henriksen et al. (2010) points out that it is essential for the coaches to focus on the broader environment as well (not only on the quality and quantity of the trainings) if they want to support the successful transition of young players into adult players. On the other hand, the author says that every athletic talent development environment is unique, therefore it is crucial to analyse these separately. “From this perspective an ‘athletic talent development environment’ (ATDE) is defined as a young athlete’s social relations both inside and outside the world of sport – social relations which have a sports club or team as their core but also include the larger context in which the club or team is embedded” Henriksen et al. (2010, p213.). Lastly, the results could motivate the environment to achieve better results in the future by identifying the blind spots. He also mentions the environmental success factors, which show the prerequisites for daily processes in a given environment (individual development and success, team performance, organisational progress and culture). The author also describes the processes involved in the actual activity of doing sports (trainings and competitions), and last but not least he highlights the organisational culture, which is in the centre and which has three levels: cultural artefacts (stories, myths, traditions, clothing, building); espoused values (the organisation leads and it is committed to these values: social values, norms, objectives and standards) and basic assumptions (subconscious reasons behind actions, consisting of beliefs and assumptions, which members take for granted) (Henriksen et al. 2010). The listed elements affect the success of the environment, as I heard it many times from my competitors:

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

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

Walker – Kent (2009) describe the community outreach of the clubs in the sports sector. Firstly, it may differ from other organisations partly in its geographical scope, in the influence on stakeholders and in its business activities. Secondly, when a new facility

is built or expansion occurs for the local people as a “secondary value” (besides their basic product: the matches), it also impacts local youth development.

3.3 Star Position

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

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

“Nevertheless, self-perceived chance events are almost completely unexplored territory in life course studies, and they may well be a ‘tool’ with which many people come to understand their lives.” Shanahan – Porfeli (2006 p. 117) summarise their research work, in which they describe four categories for how a chance event (the authors also specify its characteristics) can be defined. First of all, chance events are unlikely (luck is usually positive, whilst fate is usually connected with negative outcomes), which can hardly be defined by researchers or its subjects. Secondly, they bring changes in one’s

life (although cause and effect may sound speculative), which means that it is hard to state as a researcher whether there could have been a different outcome if the event had happened differently. Thirdly, they are not deliberate, and lastly, they are occasions that require explanation because of their social significance and specificity.

The expressions “luck” and “coincidence” are not really of scientific nature, and this presents some difficulties. However, there have been many realisations about how coincidence could affect a course of life, and specifically a career. Statisticians (based upon the law of large numbers) imply that prevalence can be estimated for larger populations, i.e. random events can be expected (Shanahan – Porfeli 2006). Those who believe in chaos theory claim that it is possible to analyse the impact of random events on one’s life course (career) with statistical accuracy by using dynamic system models (Vallacher – Nowak 1997). However, there are also those researchers (e.g Krantz 1998) who believe that coincidence is not a scientific phenomenon, and there is a need for new methods for completing standard forms of testing or keeping the traditional methods and completing them with a different model.

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

Among others, behavioural psychologists have also studied the processes of making decisions in uncertain situations, which results in people systematically falsifying the estimates of the probability of events (Kahneman – Fredrick 2002), Moreover, this can be taken a step further by adding the fact that they falsify the story of their life when telling it, depending on the storyteller’s actual circumstances and on the social context of the narrative (Ross 1989), which can be entertaining or shocking. However, those contexts during which a sequence of related events occurs are ignored, they are not considered random. There is also an aspect that the literary elements permeate the narrations, by this highlighting the narrator’s positive characteristics and uniqueness

(Bruner 1994). The personal and situational factors that interact to produce random events are usually important for the person, therefore they consider them to be prominent, while for others they do not mean anything and seem insignificant (Shanahan – Porfeli (2006).

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

3.4. The Roller Coaster

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

“I always wanted to prove that I can become a professional goalkeeper, even though I was shorter and curvier than the standard used to be [...] I was given playing time in adult games without adequate experience. In my very first game I could perform very well, but not in the second. I took notes, I observed. Then I was better, and then again, I wasn't. I think I was tense, and my expectations were high towards everyone. Then I got injured, but after 2 months I was back on the court. [...] During the rehabilitation I built up strength in me (although there was crying, laughing, disappointment and disillusion), so that later I get an invitation to the adult national team. [...] After that I didn't settle for some 'handball girl' role, I wanted to study. It was very hard to find a balance between the university and sports, but I won the championship. Then I moved abroad to a foreign team which was a bad decision, but at the same time I successfully earned a degree [...] then we were queens in the eyes of one of our coaches at the national team, I can say he knew something besides trainings and preparation, and lead to us winning a medal. [...] Then I took it very hard that I didn't get an invitation to the national team anymore. In my almost 10 years in the national team there was pride, proving my worth, fighting, showing my best

performance even in bad times, success, guilty conscience, shame, victory, feeling I was the best in the world, winning a medal and then bidding farewell. I am very sorry after all this that I couldn't handle the pressure better, and that I was often tense."

3.4.1 Injuries

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

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

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

This may be in accordance with the idea that performance pressure and the related effort is the key to success in sports (Carless – Douglas 2012). Hard work is precious, so there is a possibility to accumulate social capital and to retain community orientation (Dohlsten et al. 2020).

3.4.2 Studies

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

From an athlete's point of view, it can be a cause for concern if they have to invest time in the success of both sports and studies (Ryan 2015), as sometimes this can lead to negative situations such as fatigue, lack of motivation, overload, or in a worst-case scenario, injuries (McCormack – Walseth 2013). Whereas from a social point of view their social relations are likely to diminish, as they are limited to sporting events (Miller – Kerr 2002). Moreover, the same concerns emerge during adolescence, when the burdens of both studying and competing in sporting events suddenly overload young athletes (Borggreffe – Cachay 2012), or when the level sports performance is reducing while the athlete is also studying, which is not the favourite period for coaches (Aquilina 2013).

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

3.4.4 Compulsion to conform

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“At the peak of my career I decided to change clubs after a very long period of time (new environment, more minutes to play, curiosity). At the very last minute my

international transfer fell through, because the foreign club declared they couldn't afford foreign players and they needed to play with local young players instead. I had a hard time accepting the fact that I was WITHOUT A CLUB at the beginning of August! – But I was needed here, at home.”

3.5. Rebirth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Somehow I still strive for more. I think there is no other way – I always have to set new goals, studying and improving, because this is what makes me move forward. In

the meantime, during these struggles, I have learned that success doesn't just come to you. – This is how I function.”

4. Conclusion

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

One of the main findings is the role of *significant others*, who are highly influential factors during a sports career. The presence of parents (especially for young athletes) is unquestioned (at the invested-professional level it appears to be declining), however, as Knight et al. (2017) highlights it, there is little research on developing strategies that apply to parents, which can help their children the most in enjoying sports, and in realising their potential in the long term. Closely linked to this stage is the sense of belonging to a local grassroots community, in which the people concerned are important factors. On the other hand, the *roller coaster* ride should be mentioned, which is a short, adventurous trip. Sometimes you get to the peak quickly, and then you are quickly falling, so that you do not always enjoy the highest point, where the view is beautiful and the sun is shining, because you have either lost a match or you have been injured, or perhaps you have failed an exam. Then suddenly you are back up in the sky, but you can see the end of all the fun, you can see the next passenger in line who is about to take your place. When the car stops, you are both pleased because it's been an enjoyable adventure and sad because you know you have to get off, it's the end of the journey. Then you have to queue up again for another uncertain adventure.

However, performance-centricity “forces” athletes to become obsessed with their sport, to the detriment of their other interests, thus jeopardising their future success in other areas of life which can come at a dear price (Aquilina 2013). On the other hand, high expectations and the *pressure to comply*, which are rooted in the performance-centric approach, make it basically unacceptable to commit mistakes. This research proves that the pathways of *sports and learning* are compatible and should be seen as complementary. Athletes need to speak out about their experiences, both positive, or negative ones

(Williams 2020), as non-machines who are pulling the performance expectations bandwagon cannot afford to allow the “wreck” narrative to prevail (Douglas – Carless 2009), because sport is only one part of their whole life. It is a major responsibility for everyone involved to ensure that the athlete is reintegrated into the actual labour market and society upon retirement.

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

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

Acknowledgements

As a novice researcher, I immerse myself in the research, but I am not alone, I would like to thank my supervisors, Krisztina András and Alexandra Köves and my colleagues for their insightful comments and suggestions. I wish to thank both reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments. They have really contributed to improving the revised version of the paper significantly.

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6. Second article

Achieving while looking forward: Variables influencing performance in the transitory career phases of professional women's handball

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Published in: International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport (2024)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24748668.2024.2323372>

Abstract

This paper investigates what variables may influence long-term performance in the transitory phases of a team athlete's career according to the perceptions of the athletes themselves. Narrative research was conducted with sixteen world-class, retired women handball players and the qualitative analysis reveals those factors that influenced their performance in the transitory phases "from development to mastery" and "from mastery to discontinuation" on the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural levels. The variables are organised into a systems map to provide a full overview as well as the perceived relationships between them. The practical implication of the paper is to draw the attention of those organisations that aim to improve long-term performance to the leverage points that athletes themselves find important.

Keywords: elite team sport, handball, career transitions, narrative research, women athletes, long-term performance

Introduction

At the end of the day, sport is about performance. Understanding an athlete's career and stages in life provides invaluable information on the athlete who is not just an asset, but a key internal stakeholder in a sports organisation, and as such, needs special attention. Studies of sport performance contribute to our understanding of athletic achievement through the analysis of players, teams, coach behavior and referees (O'Donoghue, 2010), the analysis of technique (Lees, 2008; Campos, 2013), work-rate analysis (Carling & Bloomfield, 2013), effectiveness of chosen techniques and tactical analysis (Palao &

Morante, 2013; Hibbs & O'Donoghue, 2013), or the factors affecting sports performance (Taylor et al., 2008; Gomez et al., 2013). Even in team sports it is becoming increasingly important to consider the individual athletes' personal attainments when analysing performance (De la Rubia et al., 2020). Our paper aims to contribute to research that uncovers the relationships between performance and the diverse characteristics of athletic careers, in particular in the transitory phases between development and mastery and between mastery and discontinuation based on qualitative research involving internationally successful Hungarian women's handball players.

Studies have covered such topics with regard to various individual and team sports. The longitudinal univariate analysis of Post et al. (2020) provides relevant and valuable information on the multigenerational performance development of top-elite swimmers looking at the performance levels required at certain ages to predict development towards the elite level. Yusters et al. (2019) examine the impact of early specialization on the performance of senior elite swimmers, analysing variables like swim style, distance, sex, age, status, country, and years of high-level competition underpinning the positive effect of a long career on performance. Brustio et al. (2022) present the career performance progression of elite international swimmers in sprint events finding that progress in performance during the transition to an adult career might be a strong indicator of performance potential. They also emphasize the importance of pre-requisites (dependent on coaches, parents, and athletes) in transiting to international levels. Brustio et al. (2023) evaluate youth-to-senior successful and unsuccessful transitions to comprehensively quantify the prevalence and magnitude of relative age effect in Italian female football national teams. They also draw attention to the importance of addressing gender-specific mechanisms (e.g., sport popularity, selection opportunities, and differences in the timing of maturation) in the talent selection and deselection process. Baker et al. (2013) establish that career length is a reliable predictor of performance in team sports.

Transitions into the retirement stage have also been widely researched in various sports (for a comprehensive literature review see Knights et al., 2016). Nonetheless, Monteiro et al. (2020) claim that this area has not received enough attention in football (see also Carapinheira et al., 2019) and understanding how the retirement phase affects the competitive level of Portuguese football players is crucial as the lack of awareness about career planning, a delay in retirement, and negative emotions can contribute to adjustment difficulties.

While our present study contributes to this existing line of research, we posit that it can extend our understanding of the current state of affairs from a number of different perspectives. Firstly, whereas most previous research aimed to analyse actual (objective) sports performance using observational data, we turn attention towards qualitative, subjective data. As O'Donoghue (2010, p.225) suggests: "*Quantitative observational techniques are good for describing 'what' participants do during a performance, but they are not so good at explaining 'why'. Therefore, qualitative techniques have great potential in the analysis of sports performance*". Such narrative techniques have already been used (e.g. Poizat et al., 2010) to uncover thoughts and factors influencing decision-making processes that lead to sports performance. As instrumentalist approaches have intensified with the commodification or hyper-commodification of sports (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2006), we believe that such qualitative personal accounts also combat the treatment of athletes merely as "human machines" or "economic assets" and remind us of the importance of the human(e) perspective.

Secondly, creating an environment where athletes really flourish can be an effective way of reaching the highest potential of sporting performance. Overseeing the crucial elements of career development from the athlete's point of view can provide a perspective on how they 'manage' their own sporting careers through conscious or unconscious decisions and often recurrent situations and how these influence their performance. Hence, our central research question is to find out what leverage points can be facilitated through career management measures that support long-term performance.

Thirdly, to the best of our knowledge, handball has not been the subject of research regarding the relationship between career transitions and sports performance. Research by Ekengren et al. (2020a; 2020b) is unique in focusing on handball, illustrating an empirical career model along the holistic athlete life course among Swedish professional handball players. However, their research did not consciously cover the highest achievers in the sport.

Sport careers have been studied from many different aspects by various disciplines, especially (sport) psychology, sociology, behavioural sciences. Several studies present frameworks for athlete development (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). Similarly to Monteiro et al. (2020; 2023) analysing football careers and Battochio et al. (2016) analysing ice-hockey careers, in this study we also rely on Wylleman's (2019) holistic athlete career model (HAC-model) as it provides a clear understanding of the

characteristics of the four main athletic stages: initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation.

However, as career transitions significantly impact sports performance (Lavalée, 2019), from our research covering the whole length of a successful career, in this paper we focus on the two main transitory phases in an athlete's life: firstly, when becoming a professional and secondly, when already concerned about retirement (see Figure 1).

Even if there are opportunities for active athletes to plan ahead to their retirement, experience shows that they are reluctant to participate in such programmes as according to their perception, they distract them from their sports performance (Park et al., 2013). However, as retirement involves several losses (e.g., loss of identity, loss of employment, reduction in income), the fear of that affects athletes in the later stages of their active age as humans tend to invest psychological resources to limit potential losses (Hobfoll, 2002). When examining career performance data (team selection, team tenure, career tenure) of men's Australian National Rugby League players, participation in retirement planning significantly correlated with individual performance indicators and was positively related to them (Lavalée, 2019). Therefore, it is worth examining high-performing athletes' accounts for managing these transitory career phases when analysing sports performance.

The research presented in this paper used narrative research methodology to uncover the variables influencing the career performance trajectories of highly successful Hungarian professional women handball players, showing the intervention points where conscious career management can influence long-term performance. Handball is a fast and competitive team sport that has been highly popular in many countries beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. As Hungarian handball teams are among the best in Europe, the research has international relevance. Overseeing these variables can be crucial for sport management to understand how career paths can be actively influenced to enhance performance providing a supporting environment for athletes. For an overview, we propose a systems map (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022) based on the narrative interviews.

Methodological background

Narrative studies in sport can be traced back to the early 2000s, used especially in the fields of health sciences and psychology (e.g., Ekengren et al., 2020b). Agreeing with O'Donoghue (2010), we argue that the narrative approach both enriches the

methodological repository of performance analysis and allows us to examine performance from a more human perspective.

Data Collection

In our research sixteen retired women's handball players were interviewed on their successful handball careers. The sample was selected according to the following criteria: Interviewees had to be outstanding Hungarian professional women's handball players having played at least 5 years in the first division and having had their sporting career finished at least 6 months before the interview to have sufficient experience on discontinuation. Among the participants, one player had not participated in games with the Hungarian national team but did participate in Olympic preparations. (The reason for missing the Olympic Games was pregnancy.) The overview of the relevant demographic and career data is presented in Table 1. The average age of the interviewees was 45 years. They became elite handball players at the average age of 17 and played in the Hungarian national team on an average 106 times. They retired from elite level sports at the average age of 34 and almost half of the participants continued playing in lower leagues. While the majority are engaged in handball coaching after discontinuation, three are no longer involved in handball and found new occupations.

Table 1 Overview of relevant data on the interviewees

Players	Current age	Age of becoming an elite player	Hungarian national team appearances	Age of retirement from elite level	Sports level after retirement	Current occupation	Explanation of retirement from elite level
1.	49	18	161	37	non-professional	physical education teacher, coach	<i>Hard</i> ended due to injury, but coaching made the transition easier
2.	51	14	110	32	-	coach, expert commentator on TV	<i>Easy and not</i> dissatisfaction with her performance; injury; civilian goals in the foreground
3.	54	20	131	36	non-professional	coach, mental coach	<i>Easy</i> internal motivation has run out
4.	46	18	150	38	-	coach, expert commentator on TV	<i>Hard</i> she thought it would be easy because she was prepared, but she doesn't have a sense of belonging; disappointments in people
5.	44	18	no match just preparation	34	-	coach	<i>Hard</i> loss of privilege and disappointment in people; starting a family makes it easier
6.	41	19	93	38	non-professional	grassroots professional leader, coach	<i>Easy</i> a decision considered for years; motivation exhausted
7.	36	18	103	33	-	coach	<i>Hard</i> what will I do, will I allocate my time?; alleviated by training
8.	57	15	58	33	-	professional director, coach	<i>Easy</i> after her decision due to injury; new goals have become (learning)
9.	37	20	38	34	non-professional	interior designer	<i>Easy</i> loss of motivation; family is a priority over travel
10.	56	18	82	33	-	coach, university lecturer	<i>Easy</i> loss of motivation, other things became more; important, she was physically fine
11.	46	14	133	37	-	coach	<i>Easy</i> she maximized her opportunities (she had a 3-year break in her elite career)
12.	38	15	26	34	non-professional (after birth)	entrepreneur	<i>Easy</i> she longed for something else (motherhood), there was no emptiness left in her
13.	46	17	101	30	-	coach	<i>Hard</i> she didn't make the decision; they got rid of her due to injury
14.	37	17	122	33	non-professional (after birth)	full-time mom	<i>Hard</i> "We were in a comfortable world"; other tasks come the children come first
15.	43	15	152	33	non-professional	head of her own association, training of grassroots	<i>Hard</i> she did not make the decision; because of her injury, she was persuaded to retire; she couldn't find her place
16.	41	16	140	33	-	full-time mom, coach	<i>Easy</i> own decision, it is time to retire
Average	45	17	106	34	-	-	-

Source: based on interviews

The corresponding author – having been active in the top leagues before turning to academia – had the opportunity to find interviewees with truly great performance behind them. Table 2 and 3 show their sports achievements to enable the reader to judge their long-term performance. All the interviews were conducted online between December 2021 and August 2022, and - as all participants agreed - they were all recorded. The interviews were on average an hour long. The research was conducted with the highest standards of integrity following the university’s recommendation for research data management and went through the university’s research ethics approval procedure.

Table 2 Outstanding achievements of the 16 interviewees as members of the Hungarian national team

Sample number (person)	Olympic Games (1996-2008)					World Championships (1995-2019)				European Championships (1994-2018)						
	Participation (person)	Place (pcs)					Participation (person)	Place (pcs)				Participation (person)	Place (pcs)			
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.		1.	2.	3.	4-14.		1.	2.	3.	4-12.
16	12	0	4	2	5	3	15	0	6	7	28	15	4	0	12	28

Source: based on interviews and <http://www.kezitortenelem.hu>

Table 3 Outstanding domestic and international club-level performances of the 16 participants in gold medals between 1992 and 2019 (pcs)

Hungarian champion	64
Hungarian Cup	52
Champions League and European Champion Clubs' Cup	15
EHF Cup Winners' Cup	3
EHF European Cup	10
Other (e.g.: champion of another country, etc.)	27

Source: based on interviews and <http://www.kezitortenelem.hu>

In selecting the context for the stories, the focus was on personal stories using a semi-structured interview format, occasionally supplementing the interview outline with additional questions. The questions started from the present time, followed by those related to the past, all the way to the beginning of their handball career. Questions were mainly in chronological order, but if the storyline required, the discourses moved back and forth. After the participants had described their sporting careers over a period of time, life beyond sport was also discussed. During the interview, a timeline was drawn to help the analysis. During the interview, the interviewer (who is also the lead author of this paper) strived to listen actively and considered it important not to influence the subject's

reactions. In addition, she took notes for self-reflection to minimise subjectivity in later analysis.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and loaded into NVivo software. After multiple re-readings, codes were created inductively and deductively. Inductive coding was generated through the meaning-making of the interviews, and it resulted in the use of 52 codes. Deductive coding was based on the autoethnographic research (Herr, 2022) and on the research of Ekegren et al. (2020a; 2020b) to enable the comparison of the results in the future.

As Hunter (2010) states, finding the most appropriate data analysis method and presenting participants' stories in a coherent and meaningful way is challenging. The method we picked was systems-mapping (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022) as it enables both the condensation and the visualisation of a vast body of narrative texts uncovering the patterns within them. Systems maps illustrate how different variables relate to one another and how they make up a complex system. The variables of the systems map were created by the researchers looking at the texts for each inductive codes and seeing those elements in their narration that repeatedly occurred as an influencing factor. When grouping together the texts through the codes, it also became clear how these factors impact each other. Once the variables were identified and their relationships drawn up (see Figure 2, 3), the patterns were analysed. Those variables that played central roles with numerous inbound relationships were colour coded burgundy as they serve the fundamental aims of sporting careers. Those that have more than one relationship were colour-coded green as they seem instrumental in the success of a career. Those with just one relationship were left grey as these can also play a role in an athletes' life, but their role is slightly more marginal. This also enables us to focus on the crucial variables in our results section without leaving the contexts out. We also checked and found that the length of the discontinuation period had no impact on their career accounts.

Results

While the original research covered the whole career trajectories, this paper focuses on those transitory phases that impact performance. The HAC-model (Wylleman, 2019) presents the transitions and levels related to the athlete's development, while Ekegren et al. (2020b) supplemented the existing basic model for Swedish elite handball players.

Figure 1 presents the four main and three transitory phases associated with a handball career. This results section will focus on the variables belonging to the second and third transitory phases.

Figure 1 Transitory phases in the holistic athletic career model



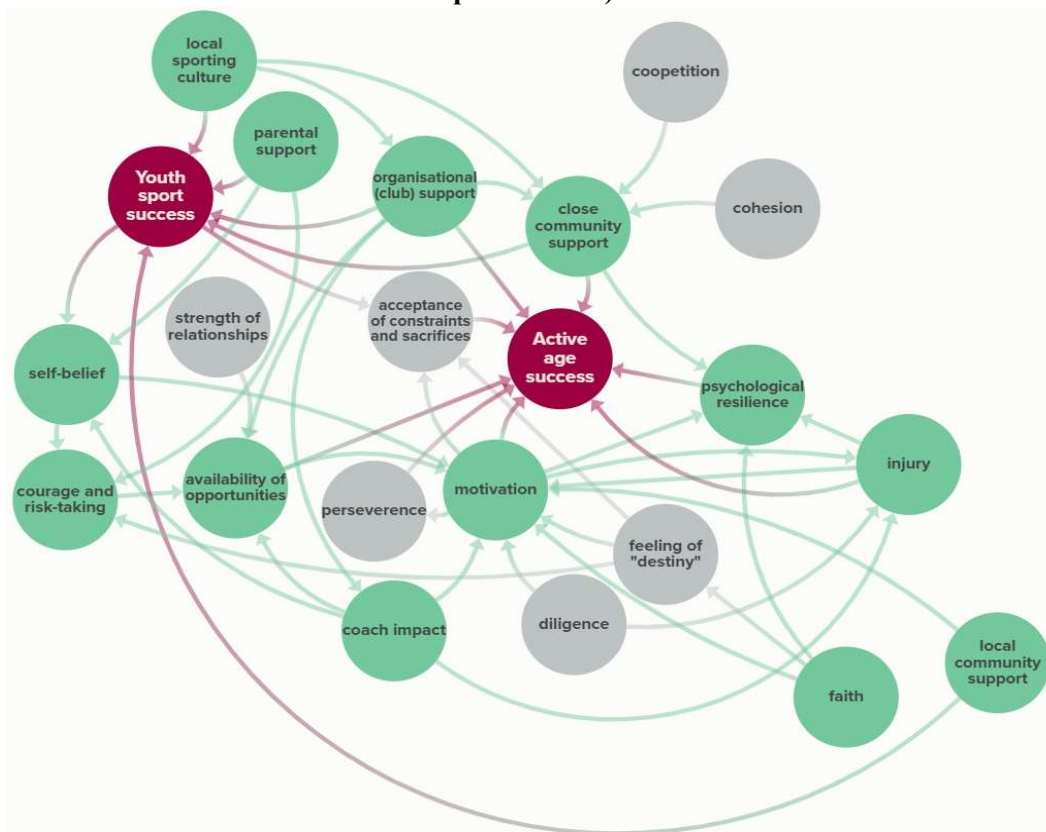
Source: own edit based on Wylleman (2019, p.96) and Ekengren et al. (2020b, p.162)

Variables impacting performance in the transitory phase between development and mastery

During initiation and in the first few years of development, children play not necessarily as a preparation for a professional career but for the love of the game. However, for those talented players who decide to aim high, performance can be affected by the expectations of the transitory phase. Figure 2 illustrates the variables that influenced successful young handball players make the transition to professional sport. For the sake of conciseness, only the most relevant relationships are to be described.

A key variable impacting performance in this transitory phase that occurred often in the athletes' narratives was strong *self-belief*. This can be impacted by the youth *coach* providing *support* confidence, encouragement, the sense of discovery, or a concrete offer from another club. *Parental support* also plays a role in the emergence of this belief both in terms of psychological support and sometimes concrete guidance. Another factor in the transitory phase is that young people have to *accept constraints and sacrifices* (sometimes missing out on things completely like the prom or family celebrations) as they move towards professional sports. They deem accepting others to plan their schedules as an invisible payment for doing what they like: play handball.

Figure 2 Variables in the transitory phase from development to mastery (from amateur to professional)



source: own edit based on systems-mapping (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022)

The degree of self-belief over time will determine the level of ***courage and risk-taking*** and intrinsic ***motivation*** of the young athlete. Self-belief seems to come hand-in-hand with intrinsic motivation, the strength of which plays a decisive role in the transitory period:

"But I don't know, I was always so motivated that I didn't care if it was raining, ugh, what's happening? I wanted to play handball; I told my mother I wanted to be a national team player." (Interviewee 8)

In their accounts, athletes often mentioned that the extent to which they were ready to take risky decisions either consciously or unconsciously were not only a matter of parental or coach influence but their own perception of what they could become:

"... they said, well, I'll never play here because I have no talent. [...] that emptiness, that failure, that disappointment, I think that's what it took for me to get to where I am. I still gave myself 2 years, hoping to become a handball player. I went to the lower league while taking a job. [...] So I could appreciate it when they said, "Listen, we need you." (Interviewee 3)

The degree of courage is also influenced by a variable that we coined as “*feeling of destiny*”, which is when the athlete dreams, feels, knows that sport must be a strong part of her life even through major sacrifices and this belief in destiny determines her motivation to do everything in her power for future medals. Alongside courage and risk-taking, *perseverance* and *diligence* are clear personality traits in athletes who emphasise the importance of dedication and consider it an important element in their progression.

To the athletes, the *availability of opportunities* is the most important when it comes to the big leap from development to mastery. They believe that "being in the right place at the right time" opens the door for a young person to enter the world of professional adults. While it seems like an independent variable that is beyond the control of the athlete, the emergence of these opportunities rarely comes from thin air. The *strength of relationships* (i.e., with the coach, the club, or other contacts) can provide strong leverage points, but it is not unrelated to intrinsic factors. It is through self-belief, perseverance, diligence, and talent that they gain the attention of certain actors who ultimately decide to open up opportunities:

"My high-school PE teacher was a high school classmate of my future coach, and they had a class reunion and he talked about me because he thought there was more in me. [... the future coach] wanted to see me [...], and then the rest was up to me."
(Interviewee 5)

For a young talented athlete, the existence of a *sporting culture* is clearly important. It also has an impact on the functioning of clubs as organisations and on the opportunities provided in schools (both developing a love for the sport as well as developing the sport itself). *Organisational (club) support* covers the provision of conditions and opportunities for development beyond the school, at the local sports club which also influences performance at this age.

"The best players in the world played handball in Dunaújváros under such conditions, with such a fan base and such a sporting life ... I fell in love with it." (Interviewee 4)

Close community (that refers to the group support directly in connection with the young athletes rather than the wider local community included in the local sporting culture) was also often mentioned by the former athletes. This covers the presence of peers who they compete against, share their first successes, or just acquire a sense of love

for the game and this having an influence for later stages as well. This variable also depends on the local sporting culture, i.e., the local traditions.

"Actually, sport itself didn't really matter, it could have been anything if we were experiencing something together, doing something together with the team."
(Interviewee 3)

It can be shown that motivation is affected by *injury* and vice versa. Although a few interviewees had already been injured in their youth years, they stated that the psychological and other burdens of these injuries were not comparable to those that occurred in adulthood when sport is a profession. However, on the one hand, through *psychological resilience* (especially when mental support is being provided), the athlete can focus on returning to the field as soon as possible (which is why she remains motivated).

"With small steps, injuries, struggles. Uh, I had to stand my ground in the juniors, [...], so I had this kind of fight and struggle. Actually, I had the talent, I had the shooting power, I was injured a lot, but I overcame that after 2 years, so to speak." (Interviewee 15)

The role of teammates in this context can be assessed at several levels. *Coopetition* may be present, as they are all partners in moving the team forward. A typical example cited by interviewees is that older players often act as 'unintended' mentors during the youth transition. This can give them a decisive impetus to continue playing and to pass on the experience to new young athletes. In teams where coopetition is the norm and team cohesion is evident, there is a lack of ostracism and even after sports careers end, celebrations of subsequent major sporting successes involve older players.

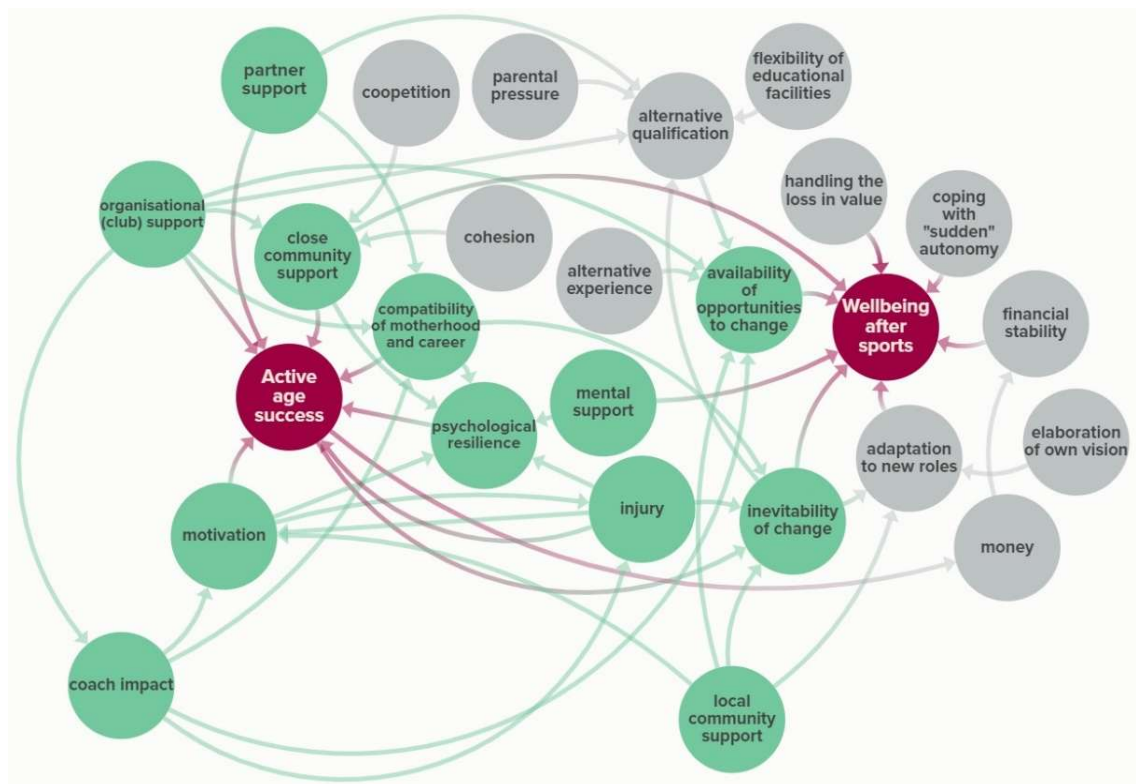
From the narratives of the athletes, we argue that these variables influence their performance during the transitory phase when as young players they already focus on where they want to go and how they might be able to get there. It is not just the existence or strength of these variables that matter but also the constant interplay between them.

Explaining the transition between mastery and discontinuation

Figure 3 illustrates the variables that helped the high-achiever professional handball players in their transition to life after sports. This transition might be an even more important area to investigate in terms of performance, since the inevitability of the end of

a sports career influences players already in a phase where their physical performance is still unaffected, and their significant experience enables them to achieve great performance. However, psychologically, the mounting feeling that it is soon time to switch lurks behind their achievements. Based on the perceptions of the interviewees, the length of the phases and the intensity of the variables may differ from individual to individual. Nonetheless, understanding the way women players go through these phases can become a key to influencing late-career performance.

Figure 3 Variables in the transitory phase from mastery to discontinuation



source: own edit based on systems-mapping (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022)

Well-being after sports is what players consciously or unconsciously strive for in their late sporting careers. Their trust in their ability to achieve such well-being or their anxiety for the unknown future can impact performance. From the narrative accounts of those who had already experienced this transition, the well-being after sports can be influenced by a number of variables. The most important one – not dissimilarly to the other transitory phase - is deemed to be the *availability of opportunities for change*. While such opportunities can manifest themselves for example in a coaching job or something to do with sports management, they are no longer strictly associated with just sports. Hence, variables like the athlete's *alternative qualifications* and *alternative experience*

(alternative being something unrelated to sports) also play a role, while the support coming from the coach or the club, or the community also matter.

It is observed that the availability of opportunities to switch has an impact on the success of *adaptation to new roles*, since - for instance - the offer of a coaching position and the experience of success or failure in it has significant impact on wellbeing. Alternatively, frustration may cause the athlete to take much longer to adapt to new roles or can delay the choice of roles to be engaged with after active sports. The existence of alternative qualifications and experience can make a significant difference. Whether this is available to the athlete during the transition phase depends on having had acquired them in the previous stages of life. According to those interviewees who had such qualifications and experiences reported that much of this depended on *parental pressure* and was only really possible if *educational facilities were flexible* enough to accommodate the special circumstances of athletes.

The second key variable to wellbeing is what we coined the *inevitability of the change*: the extent to whether the athlete can decide based on her own free will to discontinue due to for example lack of motivation, different priorities, new goals, simply being tired or is being forced to stop:

"I'll play as long as I have the motivation. And if my motivation is anything less than scoring more than 15 goals, [...], then I don't want more. So, the only way to do it is to really love it and give 100 percent." (Interviewee 3)

In this variable, of course injury is also a factor, where the athlete herself or someone else (e.g., a club executive) is in the decision-making role. It can be observed that these different alternatives have different depth and directional effects on the success of the adaptation to find a role after finishing. After all, if it is the athlete taking the decision, they tend to be more flexible in pursuing a post-sport career. If, on the other hand, injuries or others are the determining factor, it is more difficult to start a civilian life.

The challenges of forced transition can be eased by the support of those close to the athlete (family, former clubs as a source of new opportunities) and by the athlete's alternative qualifications and experience:

"You have to feel for yourself when you've had enough or when you want to move on to something else, so that's how I've been given this discretion. They didn't interfere

with that because my parents and whoever else was close to me always told me to do it as long as I enjoyed it." (Interviewee 16)

Motherhood can also bring about a decision in the athlete (especially if she is towards the end of her career) that the need to change is not far away, as the child comes first. (Often, they start school again at the same time as the child.)

The third variable crucial to well-being after sports is the ***adaptation to new roles***, which explains how well the athlete finds herself in the role of a mother, a coach, an employee, or a wife. This depends on the ***elaboration of one's own vision***, such as preparing for motherhood, having a vocation (e.g., wanting to be a coach or an interior designer), or other events that dampen negative emotions or set new life goals (e.g., a wedding). On the other hand, it depends on the strength of the community, as the support of the athlete's immediate environment may help her get through the difficulties of the transition and adapt to the new role.

Fourthly, ***financial stability*** suggests that after a successful and productive career, state benefits (e.g., Olympic benefits) or savings put aside over the years can provide the basis for a post-sport career for the athlete, which can provide some stability when starting afresh. This was the only context where ***money*** earned during the active phase received some attention as a resource that can provide stability in the years of transition.

"I was prepared for what would happen if I retired, there was no financial constraint, ... I would add that the sure financial base requires the Olympic annuity that I will receive after the 2 medals, which gives me the basis so that I don't have to stress about it, but really only that much I can work as much as I like." (Interviewee 3)

The fifth variable is ***coping with "sudden" autonomy***, which can be linked to the idea of time management. The athlete has had all her time planned, regulated, and prescribed (when and where to train, eat, play) throughout her career, leaving only little free time at her disposal. After sport, time management can cause difficulties such as taking on too many tasks (difficult to anchor in one place), boredom, inertia.

Handling the loss in value is the sixth issue observed during the interviews. The notion of commodification here is strongly felt by the athletes. The value of the athlete as an asset is reduced at the end and this is reflected upon by her environment. The difficulty in losing privileges and worth, which had been a long-standing feature of a successful sporting career, often appears in the interviews.

"...we lived in such an environment, in such a world of stars, that we were treated as privileged people. Falling into everyday life from this meant a terrible psychological and psychic break. It was very difficult for me." (Interviewee 5)

This negative connotation of value can lead to an athlete feeling that they have nothing to do with themselves and are worthless to society (mostly observed in those cases where they spoke also of disappointments at the availability of opportunities to change). Overall, it can be said that this factor can be influenced by the strength of the community through which both the athlete and the environment can manage the situation.

The ***availability of mental support*** can improve both the challenges during the active ages and the transition to a post-sport civilian life, as both the presence of a professional and the support of the environment are important at these phases.

Finally, among teammates friendships may persist over time, sometimes taking on an almost family-like role in the life of the former athletes. Last but not least, there is also the effect of partner support, as the adult athlete's life partner is also a significant influence. If the partner of the player is an athlete, s/he will understand what the priorities are: sport comes first and everything else second. In all other cases – even if the partner is not an athlete – support is crucial in among other things helping with studies (to achieve alternative qualification that may help later in life) or raising the children (i.e., reconciling motherhood and career).

Discussion

Previous research based on Wylleman's (2019) HAC model collected a lot of information about the characteristics of each career stage (like Ekengren et al. [2020a; 2020b] in handball). Our research, however, aimed to uncover the relationships between performance and these diverse characteristics of athletic careers, in particular in the transitory phases between development and mastery and between mastery and discontinuation.

Monteiro's (2020, 2023) research that identified career indicators over the stages of career development of Portuguese football players – also relying on the HAC model - emphasized how important it is for athletes to understand how to define their career goals; evaluate their own career paths; and both plan and manage their careers from the very beginning to retirement. They also concluded that empirical models are not sufficient for the analysis of certain relationships and quantitative and qualitative data can both be

beneficial in understanding them. Our study contributes to this line of research showcasing the variables influencing performance in the transitory phases of an athlete's career when already being concerned by the next consecutive phase in her life.

While the theoretical implications of this study might be limited as the research had not uncovered radically new influential factors, the practical implications can be manifold. First, it can repeatedly draw attention to the importance of providing personalised support to athletes as core stakeholders not just out of moral imperatives but also in order to improve performance. Second, the research provides a “register” of variables to be considered with a clear indication of interplay between them. Understanding and consciously managing these leverage points can enhance long-term performance.

How to facilitate long-term performance in the transitory phases of athletic careers?

Performance analysis is about understanding factors that influence short- or long-term performance in order to be able to improve it (Taylor et al., 2008; Gomez et al., 2013). While much of this can be done through objective means, it is essential to think of athletes as incredible achievers with their own personal stories behind them. In this section we offer our findings that may provide some practical guidance on how long-term performance can be facilitated through conscious career management measures. When singling out these variables, the results may not come as a surprise. However, our aim is to provide a systemic overview of the barriers and supporting factors that influence athletes' performance while also indicating how much of this is based on intrinsic or extrinsic factors. Conscious career management can support both intrinsic and extrinsic variables.

Hence, we grouped the variables on the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural environmental levels (based on Taylor et al., 2022) as they need different management approaches. Table 4 presents these variables in a way that it also becomes clear which tend to be highly dependent of the athletes' own personality, circumstances, and intrinsic values and which require the cooperation, coordination, or availability of support independent of the athlete. We believe none of these variables can be categorised as one or the other as the interplay between them is highly important. However, the table enables us to point out those variables that are “low hanging fruits” for sports organisations to focus on if they would want to assist long-term performance.


On the individual level of the transitory phase from development to mastery the most important intrinsic types of variables are self-belief, diligence, perseverance, faith and feeling of destiny. While motivation, courage and risk-taking, and psychological resilience are also intrinsic, they can be influenced by external forces. We found (similarly to Mooney et al., 2019) that the acceptance of constraints and sacrifices played a crucial role, but balance between family and career can be enhanced through for example more humane schedules. Early injury is the least dependent of the athlete but - as the narratives showed - at this age, the love of the game, youth successes and intrinsic variables (e.g., psychological resilience, diligence, perseverance) encourage the athlete to return to the field as soon as possible.

In the case of the transition from mastery to discontinuation the most important intrinsic variables are how the athlete is capable of elaborating her own vision of the life after sports and her capacity to cope with the sudden autonomy she faces. Motivation and psychological resilience are important at this stage as well but here, the existing alternative experience and qualification also support the athlete. The inevitability of change is not merely dependent of the athlete, but it can also be intrinsic when it covers the loss of motivation or other life goals gaining importance. Interestingly money and financial stability were consciously reflected upon by the athletes at this stage as an important resource after retirement where the future seemed uncertain and as a means to provide a certain peace of mind. Money and material resources were treated more as pocket money at younger ages. During the active age it was treated as a reward for sports performance, which can be interpreted as the accumulation of experience in sports. Our research substantiates the claims that non-monetary support coming from diverse sources has a stronger influence on performance (see as Maier et al., 2016). Injury is the least controllable variable also in this phase.

Our research revealed that from development to mastery, the effects of variables in the interpersonal environment can be crucial. Hong and Coffee (2018) also developed a curriculum to support the work of sport managers in managing athletes' career transitions relying on the concept that stakeholder involvement is crucial. Parents, the club, teammates (the presence of competitive and/or friendly peers), coaches and the local community appear as crucial variables. The strength of the relationships between these stakeholders and the athlete is neither independent nor fully dependent of the individual. After all, these variables can result in decisions that result in the availability of opportunities for the athlete. From mastery to discontinuation, the support of a partner

also becomes crucial on the interpersonal level and the external support in the form of a mental health professional was also mentioned.

Table 4 Performance-influencing variables in the transitory phases

INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES				
Determined by the athlete 				
<i>Transitory phase II</i>	self-belief faith and feeling of destiny diligence perseverance	motivation psychological resilience courage and risk-taking	acceptance of constraints and sacrifices	injury
<i>Transitory phase III</i>	elaboration of own vision coping with "sudden" autonomy	alternative qualification and experience motivation psychological resilience	inevitability of change money and financial stability	injury
INTERPERSONAL VARIABLES				
Determined by the athlete 				
<i>Transitory phase II</i>		parental support	strength of relationships cooperation cohesion	coach impact availability of opportunities
<i>Transitory phase III</i>		parental pressure partner support	mental support	coach impact availability of opportunities to change
ORGANISATIONAL VARIABLES				
Determined by the athlete 				
<i>Transitory phases II&III</i>			availability of opportunities (to change)	organisational (club) support flexibility of educational facilities
SOCIOCULTURAL VARIABLES				
Determined by the athlete 				
<i>Transitory phase II</i>				local/close community support
<i>Transitory phase III</i>	handling the loss in value	compatibility of motherhood and career adaptation to new roles		local/close community support

Source: own edit based on Taylor et al. (2022)

At the organizational level, the two transitory phases are quite similar. The support of the club can be manifested in the availability of opportunities offered by the organization. Another organisational issue is how higher education can offer flexibility for the athletes to gain alternative qualifications.

Sociocultural variables are more important in the transitory phase between mastery and discontinuation. The behaviour of the close community as well as the wider local

community surrounding the athletes matters in both phases. However, the "compatibility of motherhood and career" variable is only present in the mastery period providing a broader sociocultural challenge to accept that mothers can also be high-performing athletes, but parental and work obligations need to be balanced. "Handling the loss in value" is also a sociocultural variable as the environment strongly echoes this type of objectified worth of athletes. The "adaptation to new roles" can reduce the previously mentioned sense of depreciation, as new life goals can come into focus appreciated by the external environment.

Originality and limitations

The originality of the study lies partly with the unique sample as the participants were drawn from the most successful periods of Hungarian handball, who were ready to open up to the first author more for having been a peer herself rather than for being a researcher. However, this also conceals limitations. On the one hand, it was the other author's task to filter out this effect and maintain validity. On the other hand, the sample covered athletes who performed at the highest levels (e.g., Olympics, World Championships), which gives a picture of a positive performance trajectory, so to uncover all factors influencing long-term performance, it may be justified to carry out the study on a sample that has not achieved similar levels of performance. As the sample included former athletes, the authors point to the future direction of research to be taken by conducting similar research at certain intervals, as intergenerational attitudes can also be changing. The interplay between different variables can also be an interesting future line of research, especially that "luck" mentioned so often by the athletes might just be a harmonious dynamic balance of all these factors.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their gratitude to all the athletes who devoted their time to this research. We also wish to thank Zoltán Kynsburg, Zoltán Bajmócy and Attila Szathmári for their invaluable suggestions to improve the first version of this paper. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers who contributed significantly to the improvement of this manuscript.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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7. Third article

Examining the perspectives of sports managers and coaches related to employment of female handball players as employees

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Published in: Budapest Management Review (2025)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14267/VEZTUD.2025.02.05>

Abstract

The main objective of the study is to identify the "key issues" in the employment of athletes in the sport of handball. The methodological framework of the research is based on primary source and a qualitative approach, including thematic analysis. The findings from the five expert interviews allow us to get a comprehensive, realistic picture of the career - related processes in professional women's handball (i.e. selection) from the athlete's and from the sports company's side. Otherwise, they highlight why professional women's handball players can be considered as a special workforce. Among the results are grouped around four main themes: *peculiarities of managing players; handball players; sports professional aspects; other influencing factors*. In addition, the research defines the *local milieu* and the *value typification model of the athlete types* associated with each theme, which are compared with the roles that can be identified along the behavioural dimensions.

Keywords: handball, professional sport, thematic analysis, portfolio analysis, athlete value typification, human factors, career

Funding: The authors did not receive any grant or institutional support in relation with the preparation of the study.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their gratitude to all coaches and managers who dedicated their time to this research. We also thank our colleagues and reviewers whose insights and suggestions were valuable during the revisions.

1.Introduction

Over the past decades, studies have emerged in a number of disciplines focusing on various research questions related to professional athletes (Grossmann & Lames, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015; Li et al., 2018; Ekengren et al., 2020a, 2020b; Szathmári, 2021; Foster & O'Reilly, 2023; Herr & Köves, 2024). The focus of the present study is the so-called meso-level, which focuses on professional sport, and within this, women's handball players. This provides the opportunity to highlight the specificities of the sport of handball through the „specialists” (athletes) of its functioning in the players market. The aim of the research is to draw business economic conclusions on human resources from a sports business economics perspective, since the value-adding capacity of handball players as a human resource in professional sport is indisputable and stands out in complexity compared to the business economic issues of other resources. This research focuses on the human resource management characteristics of professional women's handball teams. The reason for including a narrower segment in the study is that the conclusions drawn will later be comparable with the results of other groups (e.g. men's handball players or athletes in other sports). Moreover, the study of human resources in handball has so far received little attention in the national and international literature. The relevance of the topic is that, on the one hand, handball is a national strategic sector in Hungary and the existence of the existing TAO support system (Act on Corporate Tax, Act LXXXI of 1996, § 22/C) provides a basis to ensure the development and funding of the sport's youth base, which can help handball to survive and grow stronger, even compared to other sports. Furthermore, Hungary has a prominent place in the history of women's handball, with Hungarian teams having achieved sport success at both national team and club level over the past decades. The research adopts a practice-oriented approach, aiming at theorising and describing long-term relationships, knowledge and concepts in line with practice. The authors' further ambition is to provide useful implications for the sport strategy of the Hungarian Handball Federation (Magyar Kézilabda Szövetség, MKSZ) and scientific results for the already formulated goals. After all, the sport sector strategy addresses objectives such as: the practical implementation and consolidation of the sport science background; the definition of individual profiles (in sport and mental areas), the development of knowledge and competences, even through strategic partnerships such as international federations, organisations of other sports, scientific and business organisations (MKSZ, 2021).

The research question of this study is to investigate *the characteristics of the management of athletes as a workforce at the professional level in women's handball.*

The research aims to fill a gap in the literature by presenting the experiences of managers and coaches of handball players in one of the most successful spectacle team sports in the country. The conclusions of the research aim to enrich theory while at the same time providing knowledge that can be used in everyday practice in the future

As the research and its results are focused on the management of handball players, they cover several scientific fields. The topic is related to domestic sports business economics (András 2004; András et al., 2019) and management and organisation science (Schein, 2010; Bakacsi 2015; Bakacsi et al., 2006), on the other hand, it is related to theories such as stakeholder theory (Freeman & Gilbert, 1987) and resource-based conceptions (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1991, 1997; Oliver, 1997). The research also aims to contribute to domestic practice by presenting a framework for the selection of athletes. Szabó (2007) focuses his study on the real problems in Hungary, stating that, among other things, the social and sport environment has changed and that the selection methods established in the 1970s can still be considered modern ('know how'), but that the reference data (standards) need to be updated and methodological problems addressed.

In the remainder of the paper, the authors first draw on the literature to clarify the interpretations used in the research. They then describe the thematic analysis method and its main steps, the sample characteristics and the data collection process. They illustrate their findings in thematic map grouped around four main themes. After refining the thematic categories, the importance of the topic of player selection emerges and the research places particular emphasis on this area, as there are few studies in the national and international literature on sport, particularly women's handball, that take a strategic approach. The paper then describes the frameworks that emerge from the research that represent novel values. Thus, the authors define a conceptual framework of the local milieu and create a matrix of value typologies of athletes to aid selection. The article concludes by drawing conclusions and suggesting further possible research directions.

2. Theoretical background

In recent decades, human capital has been considered the most important resource, as human thinking, creativity, decision-making and behaviour have become key factors in the life of a company (Ramawickrama et al., 2017). Human capital determines the success of organisations and the effectiveness of business economic processes, as the experiences and motivations of organisational members, based on their skills and knowledge, create collective value, sometimes referred to as intellectual or knowledge capital or intellectual

wealth (Karolinyné et al, 2010 in: Dajnoki et al., 2015; Csath, 2023). In the field of sport business economics, sport companies operating in professional sport can be considered as knowledge-intensive firms (András, 2004), thus personal competences, skills and abilities can be a fundamental condition for competitiveness. Although the main value creator in the players market is the athlete, a category that refers to the product itself (András, 2004), Woratschek et al. (2014) argue that sport organisations cannot create value on their own. The role of value networks is significant (pre- and post-match role of fans - poster, atmosphere; post-match celebration, analysis), all of which contribute to the atmosphere of „sporting events” as a product purchased by consumers (Máté, 2022). This can be complemented by the fact that the bond between not only team and fan, but also player and fan can stem from the intangible, human factor of sportsperson value. The definition of labour needs must therefore take into account the fact that the athlete generates value for himself/herself (image, increase in the value of the playing rights), for the team (sport and commercial performance, efficiency) and for the association (sport performance, revenue). Thus, performance in the case of team sports can be interpreted from a sport perspective on the one hand, from a business economic perspective on the other (András, 2003; Szabados, 2003; András & Havran, 2015), and from a societal perspective on the third hand (Kozma & Kazainé, 2015). In the corporate sphere, it is essential to have the right job title for the employee when hiring a staff. In sport it is no different, there is a huge struggle to attract 'stars' for specific positions, and sport managers and coaches have to make considered player selection decisions and strategies (Ofoghi et al., 2013).

In researching men's handball, Massuça et al. (2014) set out to create a multidisciplinary model that can help predict the chances of men's handball players progressing to the professional level, which may be key to selection. The national literature does not address the selection of female handball players at all. It is therefore necessary to illustrate the specificities of the subject by using examples from other sports. On the talent research side, Bar-Eli et al. (2023) point out that there is both a subjective ("the coach's eye") approach (Lath et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019) and an objective approach, where they aim to map motor and psychological abilities (Koopmann et al., 2020). The two approaches are often used as complementary to each other in the field of sport. Schmidt (2021) argues, based on Markowitz (1952), that the extension of portfolio analysis to the NBA seems straightforward, as managers and coaches need to form a picture of players' future performance based on past performance and experience. The

expected return of NBA players is based on their on-court performance (points, rebounds, etc.) and managers and coaches select players who will allow them to win the desired number of games with the least possible risk.

There is also a need to clarify the concepts that will help to better understand the theoretical contexts and thematic outcomes for athletes listed so far. There is a large body of research on factors that influence the performance of firms, organisations and groups, such as entrepreneurial attributes, entrepreneurial competencies and motivational levels (Baum et al., 2001; Hankinson et al., 1997), employee satisfaction (Alajmi & Arabiat, 2021) or team roles (Driskell et al., 2017). The performance of individuals is an indicator of how effectively they perform their job role within the organisation. This indicates the competence and attitudes of employees and the importance of regular appraisals for continuous improvement (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015, Ramawickrama et al., 2017). Sambasivan et al. (2009) propose a two-dimensional construct for examining factors that influence entrepreneurial performance that combines *the personal qualities* and management skills of the entrepreneur. This has become necessary because several researchers acknowledge that leadership skills can be learned, while person-specific qualities can influence leadership skills (e.g., Baum et al., 2001). *Human qualities (traits)* are both enduring characteristics of the individual and consistently manifested in the individual's behaviour in a variety of situations (Herron & Robinson, 1993). The origins of the *human factor* can be traced to experimental psychology, with a focus on human performance and system design (Salleh & Sukadarin, 2018). The study of *roles* is relevant because roles embody behavioural patterns that are otherwise related to the actions of other team members in order for the team to achieve its goals. Driskell et al. (2017) seek to compare different research along three behavioural dimensions (dominance, sociability and task orientation) that can be linked to taxonomies of roles specific to teams. It is worth highlighting that the study of team roles is in a sense relevant to the selection, removal or replacement of members (Mathieu et al., 2014). It is no different in sport, where sport-specific skills can be learned through practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) and human traits, roles and human factors can affect team performance (Batizi, 2023).

For the purposes of this research, it is also important to define the concept of *culture*. The definition first appeared in the fields of social and cultural anthropology (Keesing, 1974). One conception of culture is that it is in people's minds: "culture consists of cognitive schemas or standards that shape and define people's social experiences and interactions with others (Chang, 2008, p 21)". Others define the concept in terms of its

location outside the individual: “culture consists of explicit and implicit patterns of behaviour acquired and transmitted through the symbols that constitute the distinctive performance of human groups (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1966, p 357)”. In the 1980s, a new theoretical concept emerged in management and organization studies, namely the theory of organizational culture, which has become a dominant element of academic discourse (Schein, 2010). This paper considers the words *local milieu* (similarly, Von Krogh et al, 2000) as a synonym for the smaller group or unit used in the concept of organizational culture: “culture can be thought of as the accumulated shared learning of a particular group, covering the behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements of the overall psychological functioning of group members. For such shared learning to occur, there must be shared experiences, which in turn presupposes a certain degree of stability of group membership (Schein 2010, p 17)”.

In summary, professional athletes, on the one hand, according to the resource-based view (Barney, 1991, 1997), are the rarity, the asset, the non-replicable and difficult to replace of their sport, who are employed by sport enterprises in their value creation processes. They use their tacit knowledge to create a consumer experience, operating in a rapidly changing competitive environment for which several organisations compete. On the other hand, it can be argued that sport organisations must not only have the right skills, but also the skills to select sport managers who take into account the ability of the athletes, but also the human factors, in order to meet the criterion of embeddedness in the given environment.

3. Methodology, data collection

The research is based on a qualitative methodology. Data was collected through semi-structured thematic interviews, which were analysed by the authors using the thematic analysis method. The method of thematic analysis is able to identify and analyse patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while organising and describing the data in rich detail (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Using this method, the research aims to answer the following research question:

Q: *What makes the management of athletes as a workforce at the professional level in women's handball special?* That is, what issues (aspects) are taken into account by managers and coaches of sport organisations when dealing with athletes as a workforce.

Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that the 'key importance' of a topic does not necessarily depend on quantifiable metrics, but on whether it demonstrates something important related to the research question. An advantage is that the flexibility of the method means that themes can be consistently identified. However, they point out that within the method it is important to show what type of analysis the researchers wish to carry out (or provide a detailed description of the whole data set, which will help to understand the dominant themes). If researchers go further than this, they interpret different aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998), as this study does. Implicitly sometimes framed as a realist-experiential method (Roulston, 2001), its theoretical freedom makes it a flexible and useful research tool, potentially providing a rich and detailed complex account of the data.

In the thematic analysis, the themes (or patterns) within the data were identified by the authors of this study according to *an inductive* (bottom-up, see Frith & Gleeson, 2004), in other words *data-driven principle*, as the data were coded without attempting to fit them into an existing framework. Researchers usually have to make an additional decision during a thematic analysis that focuses on a particular level of themes. The present research does not stick to the surface level, but examines the underlying ideas, conceptualisations and ideologies that shape the semantic content of the data. The resulting analysis is not merely descriptive, but is already theoretically developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This level of interpretation is referred to as *the latent* (or interpretive) *level* (Boyatzis 1998). The literature also identifies a semantic (or explicit) level, whereby analysts identify analytic, descriptive meanings within the surface meanings of the data, and the analyst does not look for anything beyond what the participant has conveyed (Frith & Gleeson, 2004).

Sampling and analysis

By looking at the female athlete segment, the research analysed a small, well-defined group of five national senior and recognised first-class coaches through their experiences. The focus on the careers of female athletes provides both an opportunity to compare results with other groups and is of particular importance as the first author has been a professional athlete for almost twenty years. Inspired by these personal experiences, she set herself the goal of carrying out research on women's careers in sport, of which this research is a part.

Of the non-probability sampling procedures, the authors chose to *use expert sampling* because, as Babbie (2001, p 206) put it, "we select people on the basis of what we know about the population, its components and the purpose of our research". Based on the league table for 2022-2023, the Hungarian women's handball league consisted of 14 teams (4 from the capital and 10 from the provinces). The participants of the research are from provincial teams and top teams, from the top and bottom of the midfield. In light of this, the authors considered that the five interviews reflect the key qualitative characteristics of the sample in relation to the number of teams. Many of the participants have a high level of expertise and experience in the sport of women's professional handball at the master coach level (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). To protect the anonymity of the experts, random numbers (e.g. Expert 2) are used in the study to identify the interviewees. The main characteristics of the sample are detailed in Appendix 1.

A semi-structured interview is a good way to gain insight into additional issues that arise during the open-ended questions. Examples of questions used during interviews include: "What are the main managerial decisions and considerations that emerge when selecting an athlete?"; "What makes HR management of athletes as a workforce in the sport of handball complicated?"; "What factors do you think make up the value of an athlete?"; "What skills do you think an athlete should have?"; "How to ensure a player pool that matches the goals of the sports club in terms of quantity and quality?"; "How to ensure that the available player roster is most effectively involved in creating value?". The list of questions also sometimes warranted additional questions to gain a more detailed understanding of what was said: "Could you explain this in more detail?" or "How does this affect of the club?" (Hanton et al., 2005). Four interviews were conducted online on MSTeams and one in person between 14 October and 4 November 2022. The interviews ranged in length from 50 minutes to 1 hour 50 minutes and were audio and video recorded with notes. The recordings were transcribed manually, and a total of 102 pages of single-spaced, verbatim transcripts were produced. The authors used the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006):

1. *Familiarizing yourself with your data*: transcribing data, writing down initial ideas after repeated rereading.
2. *Generating initial codes*: the interview transcripts were entered into NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis software, to organise and manage the data (Sotiriadou et al, An inductive (data-driven) approach helped the researchers to look for patterns in the data and develop a theoretical framework that could explain these patterns

(Blackstone, 2012). Thus, systematic coding of interesting features of the data across the entire dataset was done, collecting data for each code (data differing by themes – which are units of analysis).

3. *Search for themes*: codes have been compiled into possible themes, all data related to each possible theme has been collected.
4. *Reviewing themes*: checking that topics work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the full dataset (level 2). Preparing a thematic "map" of the analysis.
5. *Defining and naming themes*: ongoing analysis to refine the specificities of each theme and the overall stories, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. *Preparing the report*: the last opportunity for analysis. The last step is the final analysis.

The next chapter presents the results of the inductive and latent thematic analysis, where the authors illustrate the four main themes and their related sub-themes in a thematic map.

4. Results

The authors illustrate the summarization of the interview dataset by creating an initial thematic map (1). Instead of focusing on codes, they focus on the broader level of themes, which includes the classification of different codes into possible themes. Figure 1 shows all the themes and sub-themes, even those that are not significantly addressed later in this paper (or do not seem to fit into the main theme). Four levels of themes are shown, with the main overarching themes marked by an oval, the themes emerging at the second level by a rectangle, the third level by a rounded rectangle and the final level by a hexagon. Participants' narratives in this section are always *in italics* and quoted with. Athletes mentioned by name during the interview have been modified by the authors to the specific athlete's position or the word "player" for reasons of anonymity.

Identification of themes for thematic analysis

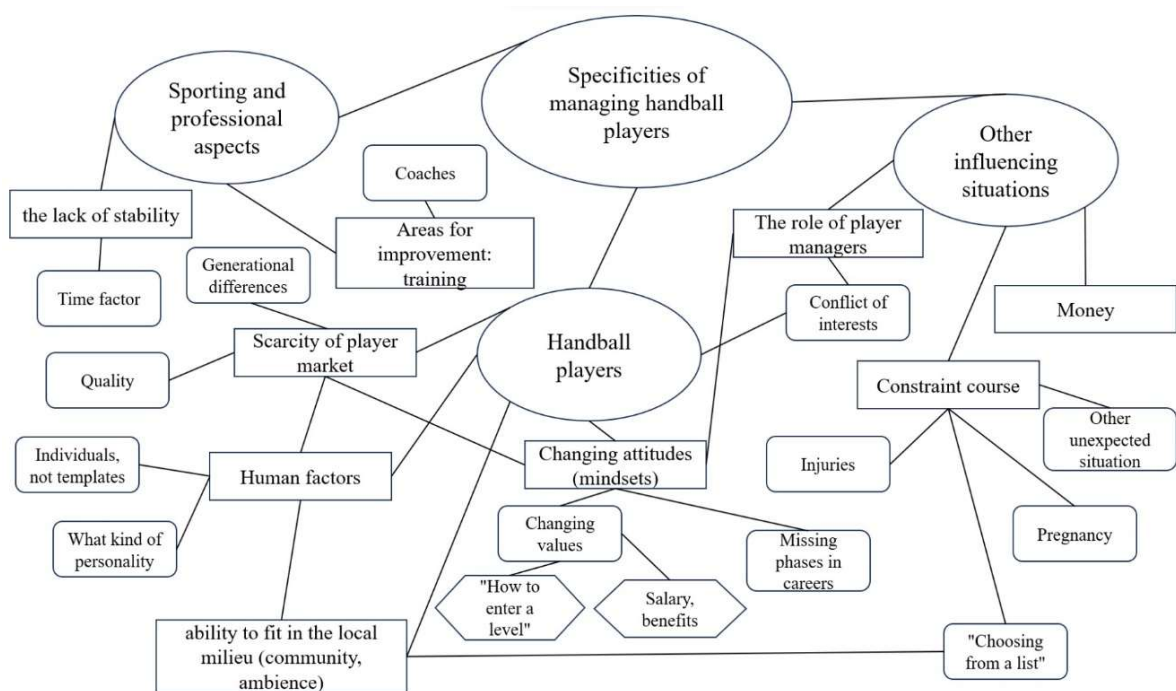
The first major theme to be highlighted and overarching is related to the research question itself: *what comes to mind when we think of employing handball players in the sport of women's handball*. The second main theme is the emergence of a *sport-specific perspective*, which illustrates the lack of stability and long-term thinking. This draws

attention to the need to allow time to build (as few players or coaches think in terms of 3-4 years periods).

This includes sports education as an area for continuous improvement, as there are gaps in the training of both coaches and youth players. The third main theme to be highlighted is the emergence of aspects directly linked to *handball players*. The shortage of quality Hungarian players can be explained by the scarcity of the player market. One reason for this may be that there are age groups that are more talented and others that are less so.

"There should be a lot more Hungarian players than I can choose my squad from now." (Expert 3)

Figure 1: Thematic map with 4 main themes



Source: own editing

On the other hand, the quality and existence of the composition of human factors and personality traits is important. Linked to this is the ability of players to be individuals on the pitch, not templates. In the present situation, the lack of athletes with this ability is apparent from the participants' accounts.

"there is clearly a big difference in intelligence, in thinking about life. [...] there are only templates on the field. [...] [...] I'll give you an example, I don't know any goalkeeper at the moment who has the tactical thinking of not running after the

ball at maximum speed and then throw it out after a goal is scored or a shot is saved when the team is short-handed. Well, I'm going crazy in there, because we're a man down." (Expert 2)

Thirdly, another aspect is the change in the mindset of handball players, as certain phases in their career paths are missed out, which can be called generational challenges. Examples of such challenges are the salary of a young athlete (players' values are not proportionate and realistic), the way in which they progress (from a junior to an adult player, there is no fight for a place or position) or their lack of attachment or identity with clubs

"while young people used to expect to get promoted at any cost, even for free, this is no longer the case for young people nowadays. Okay, how many forints will I earn? And it doesn't come from them, it comes from the manager." (Expert 5)

Finally, the athlete's ability to fit into the environment is a key value indicator in the selection process. Closely linked to this, in addition to professional knowledge of the sport, are the personality traits, skills and other characteristics (strength of relationships) that characterise the athlete as a person.

I've had vintages, there's one right now for example, where they're pulling in line and they're very, very talented, very skilled and very good minded people. So, again, that's what kind of local milieu you're in and where you're in it." (Expert 2)

The fourth main point to highlight is *other situations of influence*. On the one hand, the activities of player managers and other constraints are included in this category. In the first case, the participants stressed that it is not always the case that the intermediaries have the player's best interests at heart (they can be called sellers, as the player agent market in the sport is protectionist and oligopolistic) and this can also affect the player's justification.

"[...] it is quite common to approach players through managers. [...] incredible things come to light from a one-to-one conversation. And now it's not the financial part, now it becomes impersonal and you only meet the player when she's arrived, signed the contract and a workflow has started." (Expert 3)

In the other case, events can occur that can overturn situations in the world of sport in an unexpected way (injuries, pregnancy, "pick from a list", other unexpected situations).

"[...] If an athlete drops out, [...]it's another financial sacrifice for the club, [...] you could lose your whole budget for the year, or you could have a team that's underperforming so much that you're forced to sacrifice a part of it rather than lose the whole thing and justify a player to replace the injured one." (Expert 3)

The themes obtained are covered and/or complemented by the research of Massuça et al. (2014), which attempts to predict the probability of male handball players to reach the first division by identifying morphological, strength, handball-specific skills, psychological and socio-economic categories. Their results supported the hypotheses that professional handball players were more robust, athletic, taller, faster in physical abilities; more outstanding in handball-specific skills; higher in socio-economic status and more time spent in training; while psychological variables did not show significant differences compared to non-professional players.

Refining the themes of the thematic analysis

The biggest insight from re-reading and recoding the interviews is that fitting into the local milieu is an important sub-theme because it is linked to two main themes (handball players and other influencing situations) and two sub-themes (human factors and 'choosing from a list'). Furthermore, the interviews show that the professionals consider the player's fitting into the existing system (from the human side) as a more important aspect than focusing on the player's sport skills and experience first. On the other hand, by observing Figure 1, it can be discerned that most of the sub-topics in the second level are closely related to the topic of player selection from a managerial point of view:

- the scarcity of the toy market: there is not enough supply on the Hungarian market;
- the role of player managers: usually, the player managers who make the transactions have the most information, which in many cases can be associated with information asymmetry and, if their motivation differs from the goals of clubs and players, can create a principal-agent problem (Chikán, 2021);
- a change in attitude: starting from the previous point, there are changing standards that clubs and coaches find difficult to deal with in the selection process;

- human factors are closely linked to the ability to fit into the environment (see following subsections);
- money: its role emerges when a quality workforce (what sports and human qualities are concerned) is recruited in what interviewees described as a sucking market.

Thus, after refining the thematic findings, the novelty of this research became apparent to the authors, as frameworks for the selection of women's handball players emerged from its empirical findings and drawing on theories. These are presented in detail in the next section.

5. Discussion

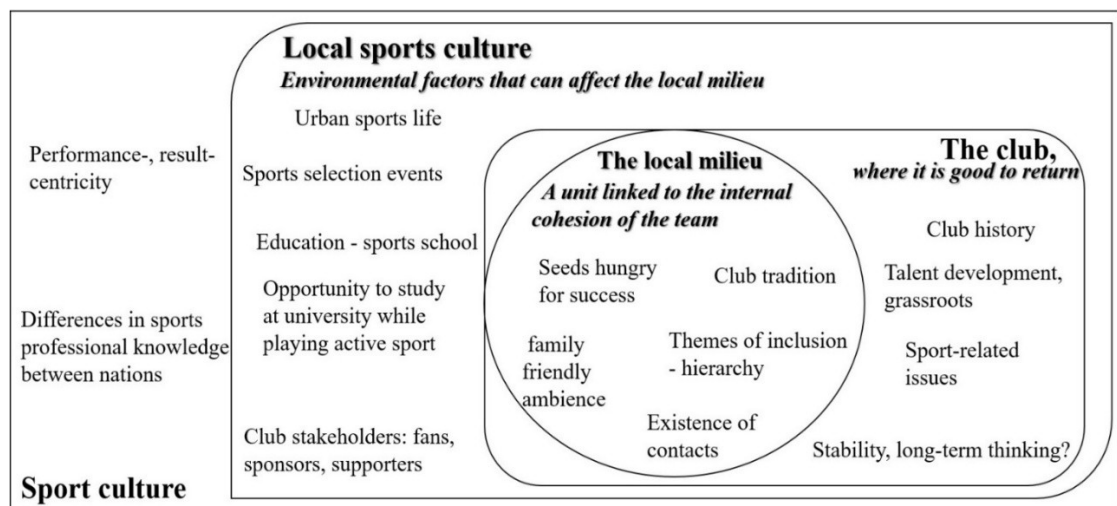
The authors' aim is to present results for women's handball that provide a theoretical basis for the operational framework in practice (Figure 2) and the criteria for effective player selection before the start of a league season (Figure 3 and Table 1). If the concepts related to the questions raised (e.g. culture or roles) are highlighted, the results obtained are not surprising for the practice, but the authors' ambition was to systematise the experiences that could be extracted from the participants' narratives.

Specificity of the sport environment in handball

The context in Figure 2 is in line with the main ideas of Henriksen et al. (2010), where on the one hand, he uses a holistic ecological approach to present the characteristics of the wider environment and an athlete talent environment; on the other hand, he explains the model of environmental success factors. Organisational development and culture are an integral part of this. Based on the present results, four levels of defining the environment can be identified. The framing is illustrated in Figure 2, while Annex 1 supplements this figure by including other characteristics in addition to the participants' narratives of the local milieu for ease of understanding. The most comprehensively represented, and thus the largest 'onion skin', is *the sporting culture of handball*, where factors such as performance and outcome centricity and sporting differences between nations are reflected. *The local sporting culture* is the set of factors arising from the environment that affect the club (and thus the local milieu that is linked to the internal unity of the club). On this 'onion skin', we can talk about the city and its immediate

environment, where the external stakeholders of the club can be located (city, sports schools, university, supporters, sponsors and other supporters). The next layer is the *club* itself, representing values “to where it is good to return”, because in some cases the athlete remains with the club. At this level, the history and traditions of the club have a decisive influence, whether we are talking about youth and talent development, or about keeping in touch with the fans or signing a new player. The unity within the club is linked to the internal cohesion of the team. This cohesive force can also be called *local milieu*. At the centre is the success-hungry core, a “*core where values are shared, who can embrace the club's philosophy, goals and successes*” (Expert 1). The existence of a link can clearly be understood as a link between the coach-athlete and the coach's thinking and the athlete's thinking, as this will make it easy to integrate any newly connected players. In addition, an important aspect of such a success-hungry environment is the family atmosphere and the presence of club traditions in a well-functioning system. In addition to fitting into the environment, participants stressed that a certain hierarchy is established in the unit, which may depend on roles, responsibilities, power relations, experience and personality traits within the team.

Figure 2: The athlete's operational environment in handball



Source: own editing

Selection criteria for women's handball players

Several things inspired the creation of the athlete type value typing model.

- On the one hand, every year you have to plan ahead for the next season. This can raise questions such as: what is the management's goal in terms of positioning;

how many seasons are there to achieve performance; what criteria are used to place a player on the horizon. In these cases, the value-for-money ratio can make the difference.

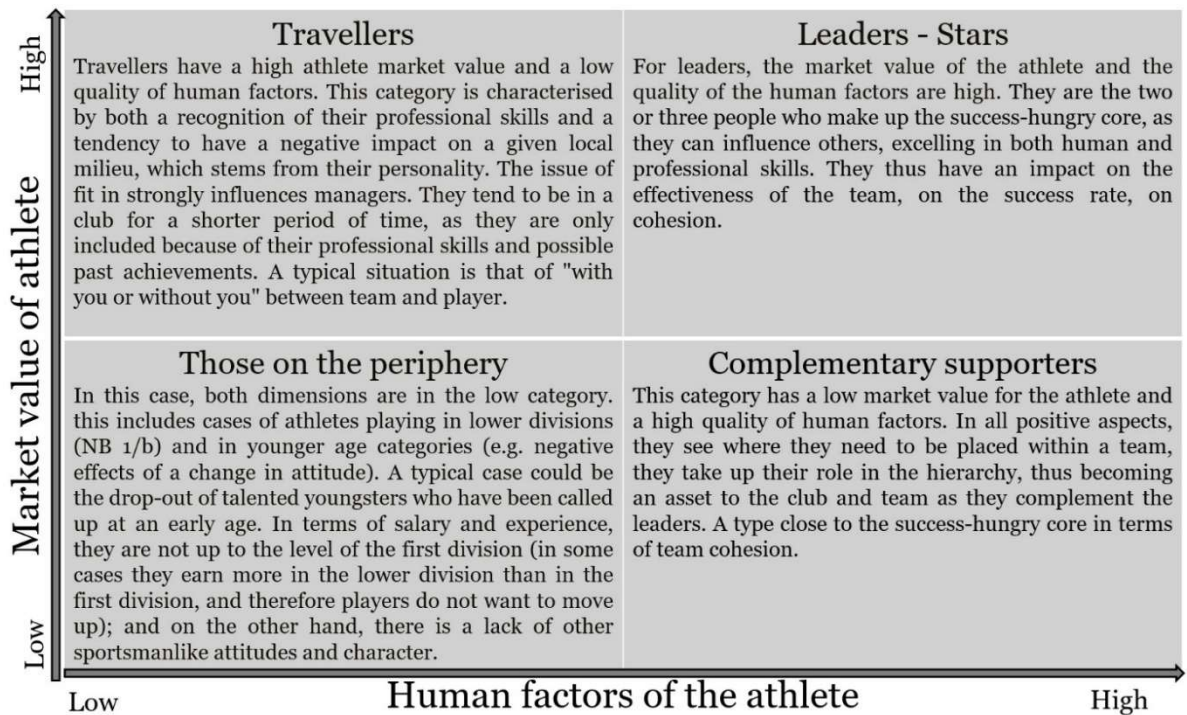
- On the other hand, Kynsburg's (1998) study identifies athletes with positive personality traits, the so-called "stars", whose qualities can be exploited by clubs.
- Thirdly, in the process of formulating the local milieu and processing the interviews, a portfolio was created in the authors to concretise the theme of inclusion, which can illustrate the hierarchy within the team.
- Finally, from the research side, the value-price ratio is presented as a portfolio analysis similar to the BCG matrix (Henderson, 1970 in: www.bcg.com). Driskell et al. (2017) propose a comparison of team roles and team composition models, as we can get an idea of how roles in a team optimize team composition and then team effectiveness.

Figure 3 shows the grouping of athletes with detailed definitions, and Annex 2 quotes Expert 1 as an example to illustrate the logic of the model design. The two dimensions are: (a) the *market value of the athlete (intangible)*, which in the case of professional handball can be measured in terms of sport experience and salary and other benefits; (b) *the human factors of the athlete (intangible)*, where the value of human personality traits, attributes and other non-sport related skills can be measured. This dimension can be said to have a degree of subjectivity (e.g.: coach's eye see Lath et al., 2021) and an important aspect is the adaptation to the composition of the current local milieu. Thus, the overall aim of the model is to help sports companies to plan the right composition of their player pool for the next season, increasing their chances of achieving sport and business economic success and reducing unnecessary costs and expenses (e.g.: justifying the wrong player). The four segments are: leaders – stars; complementary supporters; travellers; those on the periphery.

As Driskell et al. (2017) suggest in the team profile model (Mathieu et al., 2014), effective teams need a balance, which requires that the personality traits of all team members fit the team's set of conditions. The results of the present study confirm this, as a healthy, successful and balanced portfolio of athletes, which can be planned on a value-price basis (Figure 3), is essential for the survival of a sport company. The sport company must align its sport and justification strategy decisions accordingly, determining which category should receive how much attention and how much resources, especially financial

resources. At the same time, situations that can be interpreted as constraints, such as injuries and pregnancies, must be taken into account. We also agree with the insight of Driskell et al. (2017) that having multiple members in a team with the same role can lead to redundancy and conflict on the one hand, and inefficiency and inefficiency on the other

Figure 3: The athlete value typing model



Source: own editing

Furthermore, the authors of the present study compared the four segments (3) with the different roles that emerge along the three dimensions of behaviour (Driskell et al., 2017, p 495), because they take a different approach to examining team members' characteristics. Table 1 illustrates this, making clear the intensity (high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, low) of the effect of each dimension on the roles (*in italics*). On three occasions, the authors identified multiple roles for a segment as they appeared in the participants' narratives. The descriptions in Table 1 detail the inferences of the roles that appeared in the athlete value types and behavior dimensions.

In conclusion, the empirical results are useful for practice, as they identify the operational environment of handball players and the main characteristics expressed by managers/coaches during the selection process. Its scientific novelty lies in the fact that it has created a novel framework based on existing literature.

Athlete value types	Roles identified along behavioural dimensions								
1.	Dominance			Sociability			Task Orientation		
	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low
	<i>Team leader (K1)</i>			<i>Team leader (K1)</i>			<i>Team leader (K1)</i>		
	<i>Coordinator (K8)</i>			<i>Coordinator (K8)</i>			<i>Coordinator (K8)</i>		
Leaders - Stars	<i>Problem solver (K12)</i>			<i>Problem solver (K12)</i>			<i>Problem solver (K12)</i>		
	<p>Description: On the one hand, athletes move in leadership roles (directing, organising and leading the team, creating order), where dominant behaviour, the ability to adapt to the community and a conscientious focus on the task are typical. On the other hand, athletes may also take on coordinating and problem-solving roles, sometimes being an "extended hand" of the coach on the field, and thus able to see through the different activities and make decisions. It is important to emphasise that they are able to demonstrate behaviour that is accepted by their peers and that enables them to perform to a high standard when dominating. The presence of these competences is valuable for sports managers and coaches, both from a human and a sporting point of view, as these types of athletes have an impact on the team's performance, success and cohesion.</p>								
	Dominance			Sociability			Task Orientation		
	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low
2.	<i>Task motivator (K2)</i>			<i>Task motivator (K2)</i>			<i>Task motivator (K2)</i>		
	<i>Social (K7)</i>			<i>Social (K7)</i>			<i>Social (K7)</i>		
	<i>Teamwork support (K10)</i>			<i>Teamwork support (K10)</i>			<i>Teamwork support (K10)</i>		
	<p>Description: On the one hand, athletes have the personal ability to influence their peers to perform tasks and thus to motivate them to take action, and on the other hand, they contribute to the achievement of team goals and support teamwork. At the same time, they are able to bring a high level of social traits to team life (creating harmony and maintaining interpersonal relationships - tension relief, praise, involving young people. Although these athletes are close to the leaders - stars type, they are of a completely different value to sports managers and coaches, as they have high social traits, see where they fit in the team hierarchy and fall in line to complement the leaders.</p>								
3.	Dominance			Sociability			Task Orientation		
	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low
	<i>Power seeker (K3)</i>			<i>Power seeker (K3)</i>			<i>Power seeker (K3)</i>		
	<i>Critic (K4)</i>			<i>Critic (K4)</i>			<i>Critic (K4)</i>		
Travellers	<i>Negative (K6)</i>			<i>Negative (K6)</i>			<i>Negative (K6)</i>		
	<p>Description: Taking into account the behavioural dimensions, athletes tend to move in the medium-low or low category. This is reflected in the fact that, although their professionalism is recognised by the sporting community, when taking into account their human factors, they tend to have a negative impact on the life of the team in the long term (such as: commanding authority and showing superiority, judging others, showing negative emotional behavioural traits, generating tension). The issue of fitting in has a considerable influence on sport leaders when making decisions.</p>								
	Dominance			Sociability			Task Orientation		
	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High	Average	Low
4.	<i>Follower (K9)</i>			<i>Follower (K9)</i>			<i>Follower (K9)</i>		
	<p>Description: Athletes are on the periphery compared to other members, which may also result in them being a follower (cooperating, listening to others, adapting), typically with a lower intensity in the life of the team. On the one hand, this can be seen along behavioural dimensions (such as: non-dominant, more passive behaviour; less open to peers), and on the other hand, it can be seen from practice that they have low levels of sporting experience and human factors.</p>								
Those on the periphery									

Table 1: Relationship between the roles identified along the behavioural dimensions and the athlete value types

Source: own ed. based on Driskell et al. (2017, p 495); (note: K1,..., Kn denotes the number of clusters based on theory. Omitted clusters mostly show traits describing coaches or did not appear in participants' narratives.

6. Conclusion

The results of the present research can be interpreted not only in a narrow sense, such as the study of selection processes or the experience of managers, but also in a broader sense, as they can have an impact on the functioning of sports organisations. Typically, 60-70% of the annual budget of handball companies is spent on salaries, mainly for the remuneration of the sports staff (players and coaches). Player market decisions are critical factors in the management of a sports business, alongside and through sporting performance - they have a significant impact not only on sporting success, but also on the image, revenue and value of the organization. This justifies an exploration of the mechanism and rationale of player signings and their impact, in particular from the point of view of how, in addition to professional qualities, the personality and career stage characteristics of athletes become critical factors in the success of a sport organization.

It is also important to recognise that dealing with handball players is a complex, multifaceted process, which involves the so-called "black box" phenomenon: From a management point of view, the input side is the selection of players and the output is the performance of the team during the season. The authors emphasise that this kind of object-oriented logic has been amplified by the development and commercialisation of sport. They argue that athletes are not only assets in the life of the club, but also value-adding employees, whose human factors are as valuable as their sporting skills and experience.

There are two trends in the selection of Hungarian women's handball players. On the one hand, the influence of the players' agents (including information exchanges and communications with the management) has become dominant, resulting in a case of "choosing from a catalogue or a video". The question of a sporting aspect may arise: is it enough how high a player jumps, how hard he shoots? Another case of selection is the selection of a known player. The interviewees agreed that the player's ability to fit into the environment is key to creating value. The logic of selection was described by the participants as the sum of human factors and attributes, playing ability, health status and other selection factors (background, fitting in, constraints), in the light of the sport club's traditions and sporting objectives.

The present study aims to contribute to the national practice, where the research focus is to examine the perspectives of sport managers and coaches through thematic analysis, which will present the specificities of professional women's handball players. The results include an elaboration of the four themes (*Characteristics of managing handball players;*

Handball players; Sport-specific aspects; Other influencing factors) of the thematic map (1) presenting the full dataset from the coded transcripts. By continuously refining the themes, the authors have generated clear definitions for each theme. These include the definition of the local *milieu* (Figure 2) and the *value typology model of the type of athlete* associated with player selection (Figure 3). A comparison of the categories in the latter model with the literature confirms the interpretations obtained in the research (Table 1). For the future, the following questions may be asked: What are the values of the athlete (in particular the human factors) that would qualify a young person to become a professional athlete? How can athletes from different athlete value cells contribute to (collective) value creation? Do fans and sports companies choose their favourite along the same value dimensions? Can the athlete's value type influence his/her career path? If so, can this be consciously addressed? It could be interesting to look at more completed careers through portfolio cells. Based on these findings, the authors propose to investigate in detail, using a qualitative method, aspects of athletes' career paths not only in the sport of handball, but also in other team and individual sports in the future.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the coaches and managers who dedicated their time to this research. Thanks are also due to our colleagues and reviewers whose insights and suggestions were valuable during the revision process.

Annex 1: Main characteristics of participants and the local milieu-related narratives

Expert	Occupation	Number of years in the occupation	Defining the local milieu - Expert narratives
1.	leader	14	„ [...] a lot of good individuals may not make a team, [...] Obviously, you need to be able to run, you need to be able to shoot, you need to be able to play without injuries, but you also need to have the individual, social skills. She <u>has</u> to be able and willing to work together as a team. She should strive for continuous improvement, know the traditions of the club and, what is very important, she should be dedicated and motivated, success-oriented, set goals for herself, because this sport is monotonous. [...] It's very difficult in this environment because you have to find the right players so that they don't tip the balance from the good side to the bad side”
2.	coach/leader	42	“For me, it has always been important in my work to go to a place where I have some kind of connection. You have to be good at choosing leaders. You know, from there, you find those three or four or five people. [...] I've been very lucky in that in the sport, obviously it was conscious of course. So that there were always people that I knew in the locker room that would defend the work that we were doing, put the young people in their place, clean up the mess, and so on. After that, it was more the players who wanted to come out there.”
3.	coach	8	" [...] in a team that can achieve really good results, you need individuals - you can't achieve good results from average. [...] we used to say that in addition to the water-carrying roles, you need to be able to pick the people who fit well together and you need leaders. A leader type of player who can get in the line a little bit, find her place. I can put these players in a hierarchy system like that."
4.	leader	23	.. [...] we try to create a kind of family atmosphere in that respect, so that they feel they are in the right place. They feel that to some extent they can make the most of their own potential. They can develop well, they can move forward.[...] Our foreign goalkeeper clearly differs in personality. So obviously and as far as I can see, her acceptance in the team has dropped enormously [...] this international player says: yes, I consider myself a serious player, she puts himself on a different shelf, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But to perceive it in training sessions, in matches with young players who are doing better, that's not good."
5.	coach	22	" [...] that if you have a lot of people on your team who know how the coach thinks, what makes the team work well, then that team will hand over to the newcomer and they will come into a good system. Then, wittingly or unwittingly, you have to fall in line."

Source: own editing

Annex 2: Examples of segments of the athlete value typing model

<p style="text-align: center;">Travellers</p> <p><i>"The Romanian shooter, who is one of the best players in the world, has an amazing hand and she really wanted to come here. We never brought her because she is not a real team player. She wanted to build a team around herself, and that's not what we needed here because we had two great players. I don't think all these pipers in one tavern would have been good." (Expert 1)</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Leaders - Stars</p> <p><i>"The setting of sporting goals (ed: different motivation for a given championship for a minor team and for a top team) determines the nature of the core [...] and this core depends on money. If there is a secure financial background that can keep the core, the replacement of other players has not affected the performance and success of our team." (Expert 1)</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Those on the periphery</p> <p><i>"It's often easier for club managers to go after a foreign player at a lower level than to replace him with a Hungarian talent. Which is a problem because it's cheaper to buy foreign than Hungarian, which is a problem because managers have overpriced the market, which is a problem because Hungarian talent doesn't get enough opportunities to prove itself." (Expert 1)</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Complementary supporters</p> <p><i>"Individual sporting ability can take players to a very high level. The biggest stars become stars with a good team. An important factor is how she behaves in the team, in the community. It's also very important to see how sensitive she is to social issues, how involved she is in team tasks, what her attitude is to work." (Expert 1)</i></p>

Source: own editing

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8. Conclusions

The main research question of my thesis proposal is: What factors within the culture of the sport of handball can be identified in terms of career management that determine players' career paths and what traits characterise their career paths and key decisions at the end of a successful career?

To answer this question, I first explored the characteristics of the career path of a Hungarian women's handball player, in order to illustrate the challenges and decisions that athletes face in professional sports culture. In doing so, I have inductively established the main factors influencing sport careers, which can be used as a starting point for future research. As a second step, we examined which variables influence the long-term performance of a sample with strong handball sport success at specific career transitions. This allowed us to identify points where conscious career management could intervene. Finally, we approached the question from a managerial perspective of the decisions made and experiences gained when dealing with athletes as a workforce in the life of a sports club.

The added value of an article-based dissertation is highlighted in several aspects. On the one hand, the chosen topic focuses on a timely problem, where holistic research on the business economics and management issues of professional athletes' careers is conducted. These are of particular importance due to the impact of a number of factors

that nowadays make it a suitable field for sport business economics research. On the other hand, through my personal life story and observations, I was able to bring unique value to the research on this topic. In addition, the relevance of my findings may appear in the future to achieve the objectives of certain areas outlined in the sport strategy of the Hungarian Handball Federation.

Thirdly, I would like to highlight that the three studies contribute to the existing literature and the methodologies used, as already highlighted above, reveal a current phenomenon in a real context, relevant to international career research (Andersen & Wagtmann, 2004). The forward-looking application of the autoethnography research methodology can serve as an example for further research in the field of sport, as the context of sport culture is presented through personal experience. Finally, I see as an added value the fact that in my research the athlete as a stakeholder is not objectified, by consciously applying the athlete's perspective a different perspective is revealed. Consequently, there is some tension between the pillars presented in the literature. Instead of a leadership, strategic approach, the focus has been on people, while instead of a normative approach, I can argue for bounded rationality as a result of my research.

Figure 9 shows the set of my research results. Within the micro-environment of sport business, the holistic sport career model of the athlete (Ekengren et al., 2020b, p 162) can be found in the players market of professional sport. The direct and indirect decision and support relationships that emerge in the stakeholder network associated with the athlete are shown (where the dashed line is weaker and the continuous line is stronger in effect). The importance of this can both impact on the athlete's different career stages and influence their subsequent decisions and experience in a way that makes them self-direct their own career in the knowledge of new information.

The challenges, constraints and opportunities created by the choices and support of key players in the sporting environment and other career influencing characteristics have a major impact on the career choices and career path of the athlete. The career influencing factors of the more successful handball players are the same, differing only in the extent of the variables, which suggests that a unified career pathway can be concluded, where the internally derived athlete attitude can be illustrated. (In short: youth sport success => self-belief => courage and risk-taking => availability of opportunities (using it, exploiting it) => motivation => active age success => inevitability of change => wellbeing after sport). Other variables that exist from the beginning to the end of a career, such as the role of parents, the influence of coaches, the role of destiny, the role of community, the

nature and depth of motivation, vary over the years, but their presence is constant. The availability of opportunities itself is not only seen as a way out (from post-graduate to adult success) but also appears in several instances over a career, referred to as the luck (factor).

Thus, the local sports culture (with grassroots, the existence of an adult team, parental field of interest), the direct stakeholders at each stage of the career (parents, coaches, peers and the role of the community, managers, etc.) are crucial in the career path and player selection. The personal qualities of the athlete (motivation, commitment, courage, humility, self-belief, perseverance, dedication, ability to fit in the environment, etc.) and the quality of his/her sporting and professional qualities and, secondly, the ability to respond to 'unseen opportunities' with the appropriate preparation.

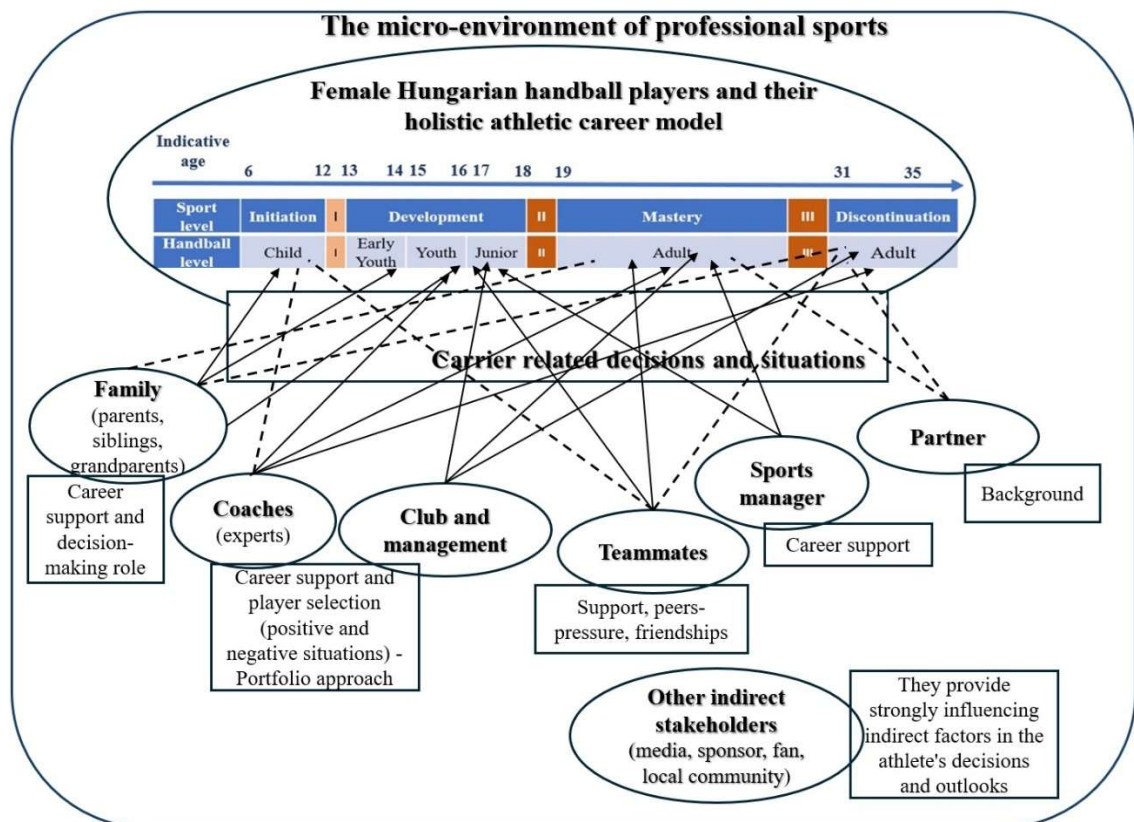


Figure 9: The main contexts of the article-based dissertation

Source: own editing

At this point, I must highlight the role of the club and the managers. Armstrong et al. (2022) state that managers who create a strong organisational culture (culture of excellence) can facilitate cultural transformation by providing a clear vision and introducing a set of values and principles that focus on the academic development of athletes, ultimately leading to success on and off the 'ice'. Organizational members must

align with the leader's vision developed, so that those who do not adhere to the organizational expectations must leave (whether as employees or even athletes). Leaders have held on to their vision even when life has presented challenges (fan unrest, change in ownership, lack of monetary support) (Armstrong et al., 2022).

The research propositions of my article-based dissertation are as follows:

- The results of this research have the potential to guide communication between decision makers and practitioners, thus enabling the organisation of personalised support (not only out of moral imperative but also to improve athlete performance).
- The findings call for stakeholders to move from a closed and one-sided perspective to a systemic way of thinking when dealing with athletes (by understanding the interconnections of a system map). One of the key findings of my research is that by summarising the variables that determine career development and illustrating their interconnections, a network that at first sight seems complex is drawn out. As this network goes beyond the research questions of the article-based dissertation studies, I can use it in the future to explain this complex picture.
- In a sporting career, attention must be paid to the activities of influencers, the existence of a local sporting culture, unexpected and rapidly changing situations (e.g. study, losing, winning and injury), for which professional and emotional solutions must be prepared and the possibility of a new start after sport must be ensured.
- Lazear (2006, p 247) recognised that luck matters and has an impact on the optimal payment structure. Luck, noise or risk from both external and internal environments can be observed in handball during different athlete transitions, the effects of which on incentives are highly dependent on the age (lived experience) and personality of the athlete. It can be argued that athletes can become successful professional sportsmen and sportswomen from other internal motivations (self-fulfilment, humility, hard work, achievement of goals) in addition to their need for wages. This calls for the attention of sport managers not only to motivate them with other models of pay incentives (the motivational role of money is more likely to appear in the pre-retirement period to facilitate the transition from being an athlete to being a non-athlete), but also to think in more holistic solutions (athlete as a whole person => the importance of mentoring programmes => the involvement of other professionals who can prepare athletes to be able to perform positively in the face of external influences and noise, with the appropriate knowledge).

- Attention should be paid to human factors when working with players. In practice, the integration and selection of players in the local milieu is a very important factor, sometimes even taking precedence over professional sports aspects.
- For practice, the models and frameworks published in the articles can be used to help athletes or leaders make the right decisions to achieve their goals.

The main limitation of research is also the originality of the research. The unique sample included participants from the most successful eras of Hungarian handball. The research thus gives a picture of a positive performance trajectory. However, I cannot pass up the unique position of having access to successful professional handball players through my contacts made over the years in the sport that no other researcher would have. A limitation is the methodological characteristic that the query is not repeatable, generalisable to a certain extent. The focus of my research was consciously placed on female successful professional handball players, as my aim was to examine the most successful period of the sport of handball from a sport perspective to model how someone can become one of the best in their sport. The research process itself and the results prompted me to identify further research directions for the future:

- By repeating similar surveys at certain intervals, it is possible to detect changes in attitudes between generations, relationships between variables, and possible changes in behaviour.
- Research in other sports influenced by my results (e.g.: basketball, volleyball or even analysis of individual sports).
- A more in-depth look at the role of other specific stakeholders (e.g. the rise of players' agents in the sport of handball).
- Initiate other research that could be fitted to the models or framework of the article-based dissertation: what are the athlete values (especially human factors) that would qualify a young person to become a professional athlete? How can athletes who fall into different athlete value cells contribute to value (co-)creation? Is the fan or the sports company selecting its favourite along the same value dimensions? Can the athlete's value type influence his/her career path? If so, can this be consciously addressed?
- In subsection 2.2 I referred to the entrepreneurial spirit that is also present in sport. Although the concept is broadly understood, I would like to bring some interesting topics that may be relevant to my research area in the future. For practitioners and

decision-makers at different levels, it is important to know how the world of digital media in the fields of sports business and sports management is shaping, among others, the viewer experience, the social media use by athletes, or even the migration of athletes, (supplemented by other impact of COVID-19) (Leng & Zhang, 2023).

Furthermore, esports (video game competitions) are the prevailing trend of digitalisation. Esports are both a changing and dynamic phenomenon, combining aspects of sport, business, leisure, technology and digital media (Pizzo et al., 2022). Esports itself is a phenomenon: „Esports are no longer a youth phenomenon of the developed world; rather, they are a global phenomenon that fully embraces the digital augmentation of society. Esports are a part of a digital society and can contribute toward digitalization (Pizzo et al., 2022, p 9).” What are the similarities or differences between e-sport athletes and „traditional” athletes?

Other examples include: How the career paths of athletes and their different decision making positions are affected by the evolution of the areas of sport innovation, digital ecosystem (openness, generativity, and affordances) (Thukral & Ratten, 2021; Ratten & Jones, 2020); or even the issues of becoming an entrepreneur from athlete (Ratten & Miragaia, 2020; Boyd et al., 2021); or sustainability (Richardson and McKenna, 2020; Köves et al., 2021)?

- Systematic analysis of the broader context of the athlete's career (drop-out, unsuccessful career). The milestones of a successful sport career (system map, Annex 1) also show the sensitive points where it can become unsuccessful. As the research for the second article in my article-based dissertation does not empirically address this segment, it may be useful to investigate the same factors in unsuccessful athletes, which would lead to a theoretical grounding. As an example, I would like to highlight that it is exciting that talent as a factor does not appear in a taxonomy. One can think that talent alone is likely to affect the majority (80%) of unsuccessful athletes. After all, someone considers themselves unsuccessful because they say something like "I was never really talented." Until then, the successful do not overestimate talent because they have found it is not a major factor in their successful athletic career path. Then there is the situation where the 20 percent or so fail somewhere in the fifty-six factors. This could be measured back using quantitative tools: what are the factors where most athletes fail.

Other interesting sub-themes of the study of unsuccessful athletes may include drop-out or burn-out (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). Female athletes in particular are

more likely to drop out early in their careers. This can be attributed to the time spent on sport being considered as a rational actor for the athlete and the opportunity costs of playing sport (giving up education or civilian career opportunities) (Sterbenz, 2017). Research from an international sample has confirmed the effectiveness of participation in the post-school competitive system and the higher likelihood of drop-out among US student athletes (Sterbenz et al, 2016 in Sterbenz, 2017).

Overall, the characteristics of the career paths of the Hungarian women's handball players I studied are in line with international literature concepts that map and frame career stages in terms of career development and career transitions. Furthermore, it demonstrates the career support or career modification decisions and actions that can be detected from the stakeholder's groups network that can help or guide women's handball players' athletic and post-sport career trajectories.

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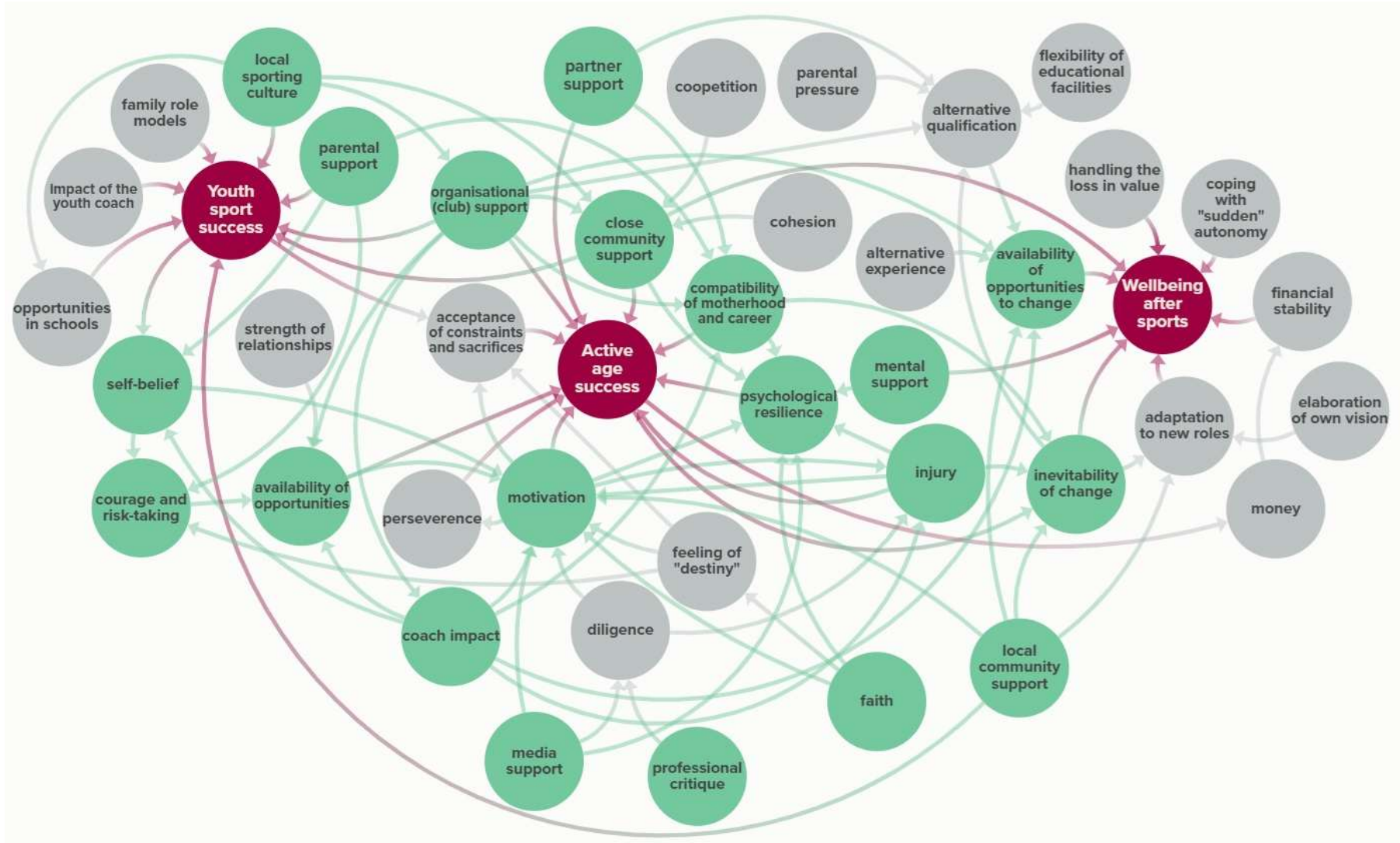
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10. Annex

Annex 1: System diagram of variables related to the career of handball players



Source: own editing based on Barbrook-Johnson & Penn (2022)