

A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE INTO THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT OF JUNIOR ELITE ATHLETES TO SENIOR ELITE LEVEL

Pursuing the top in an athletic career is a long and complex developmental process. Within this process, the junior-senior transition in sport is suggested to be the most crucial transition for athletes who want to reach senior elite level. During this transition athletes are, as presented in the Holistic Athletic Career (HAC) model, simultaneously confronted with transitions at athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, financial, and legal level of development. The general aim of this PhD study is to explore elite athletes' junior-senior transition from a holistic perspective. This PhD consists of four studies, in which a mixed methods exploratory sequential design was adopted.

In **Study 1** (Chapter 3) semi-structured interviews based on the HAC model were conducted with 10 successful athletes, 10 parents, 10 coaches, and 10 high performance directors to explore the factors influencing the junior-senior transition of Flemish elite athletes. All participants perceived changes and demands at the different levels of the HAC model. Furthermore, the demands at the different levels were interconnected.

In **Study 2** (Chapter 4) semi-structured interviews based on the HAC model were conducted with seven Flemish athletes who dropped out from elite sport during the junior-senior transition to explore which factors contributed to this dropout. This study highlighted that dropout from elite sport can be considered as a summation of different factors at different levels of development.

For **Study 3** (Chapter 5) a survey based on the results from Studies 1 and 2 was developed and completed by 214 elite athletes from five different

countries. The results confirmed and generalized the findings of the previous research phase. Exploratory factor analysis yielded five factors: Mental Competencies, Academic Demands, Social Support and Activities, Athletic Demands, and Pressure. The factor 'mental competencies' was identified as a significant predictor of elite athletes' perceived degree of adjustment to senior athletic level.

In **Study 4** (Chapter 6) the influence of the legal level on the junior-senior transition was explored. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four experts to explore the legal rights and obligations relevant during the junior-senior transition. The results of this phase were used to develop a survey for the second, quantitative phase which was completed by 38 student-athletes. Although different legal rights and obligations were identified, their impact on the junior-senior transition was rather small. Obtaining a driving licence and being allowed to decide things without parental approval had the most positive impact on the junior-senior transition, providing athletes with more freedom and independency.

In conclusion, this PhD contributed to a deeper understanding of the junior-senior transition by systematically investigating athletes' holistic development throughout this transition. The findings provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence for the use of a holistic perspective and support the usefulness of the HAC model when considering the junior-senior transition. Moreover, mental competencies were highlighted as an important resource to cope with the transition. This study provides practical implications to assist athletes before, during, and after the junior-senior transition, such as creating awareness and providing holistic support.

This dissertation was written within the research group Sport Psychology and Mental Support (SPMB) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Its main research topics are related to (a) the holistic career development of talented, elite, Olympic, dual career and retired athletes, (b) the provision of sport psychology support and the development of sport practitioners, (c) the development of mental skills in young, talented, and elite athletes, and (d) the participation of children and youth in sport. SPMB has conducted research and developed projects for the Flemish elite sports community, the Brussels-Capital Region, the European Union, and for international elite sport organisation (e.g., the IOC, WADA). The current PhD is part of the 'SASO/SPMB' series, which involves PhD studies of both the SPMB and SASO research groups.



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Nathalie Rosier



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Nathalie Rosier

Promotors: Prof. dr. Paul Wylleman
Prof. dr. Veerle De Bosscher
Dr. Jan Kegelaers

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