

“Not everyone gets the opportunity to experience this”: Swedish elite athletes’ perceptions of quality of life

CAROLINA LUNDQVIST*, MALIN TRÄFF**, ABBE BRADY***

(*) Department of Behavioral Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping

(**) The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Stockholm

(***) St Mary’s University, Twickenham, London

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This study explored the essence of Swedish elite athletes’ experiences of their quality of life (QOL). Eight individual elite sports athletes (3 men and 5 women; mean age 25.5 years, range: 20-32 years) were interviewed twice. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, findings showed the essence of QOL to consist of four categories. Category 1: An inner striving to move forward in athletic development. Category 2: Perceived gratitude for the opportunity to invest in the sport and value-driven behaviors. Category 3: Good prerequisites for sport investment (satisfaction with opportunities for goal achievement, having a goal directed plan, and perceived relief from stressors). Category 4: Emotional states which encompassed durable and transient emotions linked to training, performing and goal achievement. Discussion is presented regarding the importance of future research and applied sport psychology practice considering elite athletes’ holistic subjective experiences in context to better understand well-being, mental health and QOL for this population.

KEY WORDS: Elite athlete, Mental health, Mental illness, Positive psychology, Well-being.

The traditional approach within the psychological literature has been to emphasize the investigation of problematic aspects of the human mind (Maddux, 2005), a feature which has also been noted in sport psychology (Brady & Grenville-Cleave, 2018). In line with this tradition, the number of studies investigating various symptoms associated with mental ill-being among elite athletes have increased over recent years (see Gouttebauge et al.,

Correspondence to: Carolina Lundqvist, Department for Behavioral Research and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden (e-mail: carolina.lundqvist@liu.se)

2019; Kuettel & Larsen, 2020; Rice et al., 2019). Concerns are expressed in the literature about elite athletes being vulnerable to mental health symptoms and disorders because of stigma and a high number of stressors and demands inherent in the elite sports context (e.g., Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). The majority of mental health studies performed in sports have however been cross-sectional using a variety of generic self-report inventories to assess mental ill-being (see Kuettel & Larsen, 2020) which prevents a closer examination of the psychosocial context or circumstances in which various psychological symptoms arise. As was noted by Henriksen and colleagues (2020, p. 3):

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Few studies have to date adopted qualitative research designs which would enable an increased understanding of the complexity and idiosyncratic experiences of athletes' mental health in their lived context (Kuettel & Larsen, 2020). In contrast to the study of negative psychological conditions or symptoms, limited efforts have been made to explore elite athletes' broader experiences of their quality of life (QOL). Together with knowledge of psychosocial resources and risk factors, an investigation of elite athletes perceived QOL can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of their complete mental health status (e.g., Keyes, Fredrickson, & Park, 2012; Wright & Lopez, 2009).

The association between exposure to various life-events and mental health is known to be complex, because mental health outcomes are influenced by a great number of psychosocial factors (Hammen, 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017). Some researchers suggest for example that moderate exposure to distressful challenges or adversity, which is often naturally present in high-level and elite sports, may not always be negative but may also act to stimulate personal and athletic growth and future psychological resources (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2012; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015). People who report some lifetime adversity have also reported better mental health and well-being compared to those reporting either no adversity or a high life-time history of adversity (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). Complex patterns between life-events, mental health and development were in addition found by Hardy and colleagues (2017) who interviewed British super-elite and elite athletes as well as their coaches and parents. Super-elite athletes (i.e. medal-

lists at the Olympic Games or World Championship) described to a greater extent than elite athletes (i.e. UK Sport funded athletes with no medal at major championships) experiences of severe critical negative life-events combined with positive sport-related events during their developmental years. Positive events in sports were viewed as preventive for potential mental health problems commonly predicted by adverse life events. The combination of negative and positive life-events was also explained as essential for forming the high dedication required among the super-elite athletes to become successful in their sports (Hardy et al., 2017).

Quality of life. As a holistic construct, the study of QOL offers the possibility to establish a contextual frame for understanding individual variations within a population from which a greater theoretical understanding can be obtained (Rapley, 2003). Embracing the contextual frame of QOL in elite sports can contribute to our understanding of what is viewed as normal, desirable and well-being enhancing, and by contrast, what could be regarded as deviant, undesirable or precursors of ill-being within the elite sports landscape. The construct of QOL has long been recognized in a variety of fields, for example, in economics, policy, health, medicine, sociology and psychology (e.g., Cummins, 2000). Associated with this widespread and interdisciplinary use, there is no single universally accepted definition or assessment approach applicable for QOL (Post, 2014; Rapley, 2003). In the literature, there is a distinction between the relative value of objective and subjective accounts of indicators of QOL. Objective accounts have traditionally been used for population-level applications in socio-economic and policy contexts. The adoption of objective indicators assumes that there are favourable and unfavourable conditions, which can be evaluated based on comparisons with normative levels or expectations (Cummins, 2000; McCrea, Shyy, & Stimson, 2006; Rapley, 2003). Subjective accounts of QOL are generally found in social and psychological applications most notably in medicine, health, and physical activity contexts (e.g., Côté-Leclerc et al., 2017; Green-Shortridge & Odle-Dusseau, 2009; Post, 2014). From the subjective view, QOL has been regarded as an evaluation of a general well-being which involves the objective circumstances in the person's life in combination with the subjective evaluations of life linked to the person's inner values system (Felce & Perry, 1995; Green-Shortridge & Odle-Dusseau, 2009). Goode (1994) recognizes for example that "QOL is experienced when a person's basic needs are met and when he or she has the opportunity to pursue and achieve goals in major life settings" (p. 418). In an attempt to understand QOL among elite athletes from a mental health and performance perspective, this study was

informed by the World Health Organisation’s (WHO, 1999) broad definition of QOL:

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The complex and dynamic nature of QOL allows researchers to gain an awareness of peoples’ experiences within their lived environment. As such it represents a valuable heuristic through which to gain meaningful insights into the distinctiveness of the elite athlete population with its own norms and imperatives.

To our knowledge, only one study, presented as a conference abstract, has investigated what elite athletes competing at an international level perceived as characterizing their QOL (Brady & Shambrook, 2003). Adopting a phenomenological approach where the question asked was: “What is the essence of quality of life for international athletes” (p. 342), Brady and Shambrook (2003) identified five central themes: (a) a strong self-interest and drive to satisfy personal needs, (b) acceptance of the need to sacrifice things that others have or do, (c) a perception that success makes life feel good, (d) appreciation of the support and assistance from others (e.g., the coach), (e) and a perception of an inner autonomy associated with being able to cope with things and manage situations yourself. The findings of Brady and Shambrook (2003) provide important initial insight into QOL concepts viewed as meaningful by elite athletes but the study comprised few participants and called for extension through further investigation.

The WHO (2004) have stressed the need to build better accounts of well-being and what people do well as a preventive resource in contrast to a mere focus of decreasing or treating ill-being. Within the field of applied sport psychology, understanding athlete well-being is now emerging as a vital consideration for supporting elite athletes in the pursuit of excellence (Brady & Grenville Cleave, 2018). Advancing our present understanding of well-being and mental health among elite athletes is supported through the concept of QOL because it captures the complexity of their lived experience with an emphasis on personally relevant and holistic accounts of context.

Study purpose. A comprehensive understanding of how athletes themselves experience QOL is needed to establish rich and grounded insights which can contribute to more holistic and comprehensive accounts of mental health and well-being appropriate for the athlete population (Brady & Shambrook, 2003). Limited empirical knowledge exists about what consti-

tutes the subjective experience of QOL among elite athletes involved in a high performance-oriented and demanding context. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore how Swedish elite athletes perceive the essence of their QOL through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2010; Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Method

A researcher's philosophical worldview reflects their beliefs about what can be known and how it can be known and in turn, this worldview informs the chosen research design and the method(s) used to develop knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The present research is situated within a social constructivist worldview because it recognises that people make sense of their world through interactions with others and through the influence of historical and cultural norms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To access athletes' naturalistic interpretations of their QOL, we adopted a qualitative methodology using individual semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of eight individual elite athletes (3 men and 5 women; mean age 25.5 years, range: 20-32 years) competing in wrestling ($n=2$), cross-country skiing ($n=1$), karate ($n=1$), orienteering ($n=1$), canoeing ($n=2$), and triathlon ($n=1$) participated in the study. To obtain a homogenous sample of elite athletes, the inclusion criteria in the present study required that the participants should have experience in the Swedish senior national team and performed at an international elite top-level during the last 12 months. Using Swann, Moran, and Piggot's (2015) definitions of elite athletes, two ($n=2$) of the participants were competitive-elite athletes (i.e., competed at highest level of their sports but had not won a medal at that level), five ($n=5$) were successful-elite athletes (i.e., competed at the highest level of their sports and had won at least one medal), and one ($n=1$) was a world-class elite athlete who had repeatedly won medals distributed over many seasons. The sampled athletes' main competitive merits reported consisted of medals at the European Championships (EC), World Championships (WC), Nordic Championships (NC), World cups (W-cups), or the Olympic Games (OG). Within the boundaries of the general inclusion criteria, some heterogeneity in the sample was also purposively sought to enable variations in accounts of the concept of QOL to emerge. Thus, the participants were purposefully sampled to capture elite athletes of various ages, both genders, geographic variability, and years participating in the national team so that a comprehensive understanding of elite athletes' experiences and views of QOL could be generated.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Prior to data collection, an interview guide was prepared which was based on, and further developed from, the interview guide used by Brady and Shambrook (2003). To obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of the elite athletes' QOL, the interview guide was

focused on broad themes. These themes were further probed by the use of follow up questions based on the athletes' descriptions revealed during the interview and followed guidance by Rubin and Rubin (2005) for facilitating a progressive and respectful experience for the interviewee. The general themes included in the interview guide were: (a) Questions about demographic information, the current situation and the athletic career to date, (b) questions about QOL (i.e., the athlete's own experience of QOL and mental representation of what QOL consists of, (c) description and examples related to periods or situations when QOL had been perceived, and (d) examples of how QOL could be experienced and expressed in the elite context.

PROCEDURES

Suitable elite athletes were identified by inspecting Swedish sports federations' homepages and by a review of result lists of various high-level international events (e.g., WC, EC and OG) during the last 12 months. The sports federations were first contacted, whereby the federation representatives asked the athletes for permission to forward their contact information. Ten athletes were contacted and provided with an information letter describing the purpose and details of the study as well as ethical considerations including voluntary participation with no consequences of withdrawal from the study and the confidential treatment of data. Of those contacted, eight athletes agreed to participate in the study. In accordance with Swedish national ethical standards, all procedures were approved by the regional ethical board (No. 2014/1712-31) before the study was conducted. All interviewees also provided their written informed consent before the interviews started. Participants were interviewed twice, where the first interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and the second interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the second author of this article. To ensure that findings are "worth paying attention to" we undertook processes throughout the study to establish criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). To demonstrate credibility (truth value) we sought referential adequacy; i.e., showed how claims of meaning were supported by athletes' narratives (see the Results and Discussion section). Through the second interviews we undertook member checking which involved gaining athletes' feedback on the initial iteration of findings. Transferability (applicability) was achieved through rich description which facilitates the transfer of findings to other similar settings (see General Discussion). Dependability (consistency) was demonstrated through detailed reporting of the research methods and the structural coherence of the final iteration of categories.

DATA ANALYSIS

To understand the lived experiences of QOL among this sample of Swedish elite athletes, the data analysis was guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is an idiographic approach which is appropriate to adopt in studies on small samples where the aim is to explore people's perceptions of life-situations and articulate the complexity and the process by which participants understand and make meaning of their internal and external worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In the present study, the whole audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data-analysis fol-

lowed the IPA-steps described by Smith and Osborne (2008). Each transcription was first read multiple times to obtain a deep and detailed understanding of the language used, the context and content. During the reading, significant sentences, statements, and quotes were marked in the transcribed material together with comments. The units of meaning across the first and second interviews of each participant were also combined. Secondly, the meaning units in the transcripts were inductively grouped into broader and higher-level themes while also continually checking to confirm that these categories reflected the participants' experiences in the original transcripts. Thirdly, the categories were analysed to find connections or patterns between them, to identify if they could be merged into broader concepts or should be diverged to different categories and to explore if any hierarchical order of the categories was apparent.

Results and Discussion

The results of the data analyses are first presented as central categories and sub-categories of perceived QOL. A summary of the results is also displayed in Table I and to help convey the meaning of the categories, these are supported by quotes from the athletes in the category descriptions below.

Category 1: An inner striving to move forward

In the present study, an intrinsic and task-oriented motivation (i.e., self-referenced evaluation of ability with an emphasis on mastery of the task; Nicholls, 1992) emerged as particularly related to the athletes' experiences of QOL. This central and superordinate category of QOL, which was displayed in all interviews, was presented as a general perception of an inner striving to

TABLE I
Categories And Sub-Themes Of Quality Of Life Extracted From Interviews With Swedish Elite Athletes.

1 st category	2 nd category	3 rd category	4 th category
An inner striving to move forward	Gratitude and self-determination in sport investment Moving in a self-valued direction: "to become the best I can be"	Good prerequisites for sport investment Relief from disturbing stressors: – Physical and psychological ill-being – Life-demands/"musts" – Perceived insufficiency in ordinary life A goal-directed plan Experienced development through achievement of short-term goals	Relatively durable emotions E.g., harmony, calmness, happiness Momentary emotions E.g., happiness, satisfaction, feeling of a rush

move forward in the athletic development. This inner striving consisted of trust and belief in the body’s capacity and ability to be able to perform better than before. It was also related to a subsequent experience or confirmation of a movement towards personal goals, exemplified by the following quote:

The last time I felt that feeling was when I participated at a pre-camp a few weeks ago. I was in the best physical shape ever and I knew I had done everything I had been able to do to get where I was that day.

The inner striving described by the athletes in this study closely resembles findings reported by Mallett and Hanrahan (2004) where high-level Australian athletes’ motivation consisted of a strong intrinsic motivation to achieve personal goals combined with a high self-belief and a combination of a task and ego-orientation. Similar results were also found by Keegan, Harwood, Spray and Lavallee (2014) who performed a qualitative investigation of motivational climate experiences of national, international and world-class athletes. Their findings showed that coaches and peers contributed to behaviors relevant for both a mastery-oriented climate (e.g., task feedback and evaluation, collaboration and co-operation, a mastery precompetitive focus, friendship, closeness and affiliation, an autonomy-supportive leadership style) and a performance-oriented climate (e.g., competitive behaviors including rivalry and conflict between teammates; Keegan et al., 2014). Investigating childhood experiences of high level elite athletes, Hardy and colleagues (2017) found that both elite and super-elite athletes were commonly raised in families with a culture of striving (i.e., a competitive home environment with expectations of achievement and work ethic) where both mastery and outcome were highly valued. Thus, whereas the present study found a high level of inner striving to move forward as essential for the elite athletes’ present experiences of QOL, prior literature (e.g., Hardy et al., 2017; Keegan et al., 2014) suggest that various social agents (e.g., family, peers and coaches) and both positive and negative life- and sport experiences may act to stimulate this type of motivation. In order to fully understand the relationship between elite athletes’ motivation and experience of QOL, the driving forces and past experiences that may fuel this strong inner striving of elite athletes’ should also be explored to understand if driving forces are adaptive or maladaptive in nature and how they might affect health over time.

Category 2: Gratitude, Self-Determination And Value Driven Behaviors

Gratitude for the opportunity to invest in the sport. All eight participants described the sport investment itself as an essential part of their QOL

and gratitude for and enjoyment of the privilege to be able to invest in their sports. For example, one athlete expressed this gratitude in relation to special experiences conferred by being an elite athlete and explained: "Not everyone gets the opportunity to experience this". Gratitude has previously been described in the literature as both a fluctuating and stable state of gratefulness, appreciation and joy related to well-being and the interpretation of events in life as positive and meaningful (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Among the interviewed athletes in this study, the opportunity to invest time and effort in their sports careers was frequently expressed as important for experience of QOL. For example, in terms of "the feeling that you do what you want to do", "invest in myself", "invest in my sport to 100 percent" and "get the opportunity to train as much as I want and have nothing else I must do".

Value driven behaviors. Central to the athletes' experience of QOL was that their goals were linked to their inner values as athletes, where the primary value expressed by all participants was "to become as good as I can be". The descriptions of the athletes closely resembled the importance of experiences of perceived autonomy (i.e., the experience of determining one's own actions and that these actions are based on personal values) and the importance of perceived competence (i.e., the experience of mastery and development within the lived context). Both perceived autonomy and competence derive from Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and specifically Basic Needs Theory and research shows these concepts are strongly related to well-being (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, the descriptions of the athletes closely relate to the premise expressed by the Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) literature, suggesting that inner values are important for committed action to occur both in the presence of distressing and joyful experiences (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). Values that provided direction for the athletes' behaviors and efforts were described as ever-present and often as a kind of beacon or framework for the life of the participants, as one athlete explained:

I do not care if I do not get anything for it, it's not what it's all about. I want to be as good as I can be and hopefully, in my world, I can be so good so that I win a medal at the European championships, the World Championships and the Olympic Games. That's really what it's all about. I want to become the best I can be.

Reoccurring expressions in the interviews were related to the importance of perceived meaningfulness of goals. Meaningfulness helped participants to view each single training session as purposeful and to experience QOL through training performances:

What I want with my life is to become a better athlete so most of what I do is about performing or to make moves towards this goal. To take a step forward in the direction towards the goal or to do a good training session. Otherwise, it becomes just a fun hobby. Of course, it can also be quality of life, but then there is no real purpose attached to it. (...) For me, the purpose is to become a better athlete.

The participants described interchangeably a longing for and worry in relation to their chosen direction. The longing referred to the peace and calmness they expected to appear when the goal finally should be viewed as accomplished, for example: “To be satisfied. I will be satisfied with myself. (...) I have never had that kind of harmony, I have never had the calmness. I have always had to strive for something new.” The worry referred to doubts about whether the sought calmness would ever be achieved, and if it would be possible to ever reach a state of harmony:

You are looking for the rush to get the harmony. I think it’s a little bit dangerous myself. I do not get calm from sitting down and having an ordinary life. I have never been able to do it. I need to have something in front of me, a challenge, to feel satisfied.

Category 3: Good Prerequisites for Sport Investment

The third category was closely linked to the concept of perceived life-satisfaction (i.e., the perceived discrepancy of the actual life situation and how a person wants life to be) as described in the hedonic well-being literature (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2005; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). Important for the athletes’ experiences of QOL, and closely related to perceived gratitude for the opportunity to invest in the sport, was the experience of having the right prerequisites for the sport; such as having the opportunity to participate in an excellent and optimal training environment. Demands or various stressors that could disrupt the possibility of full commitment to reaching the valued sport goals could also reduce the athletes’ QOL.

Relief from disturbing stressors. It is known in the literature that various stressors and adversities (e.g., injuries) are common in elite sports (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017; Lundqvist & Gustafsson, 2020). Participants in this study frequently expressed feeling relief when free from stressors which could prevent them from a full investment in their sports. Common stressors described by the participants were physiological or psychological ill-being, various demands and “musts” and insufficient time or opportunity to take part in life outside sports. Physiological stressors were foremost short- and long-term illnesses (e.g., getting a cold, asthma, allergy) and injuries. Theberge (2008) suggested that elite ath-

letes engage in a learning process about their bodily capabilities and limitations related to the risk of injury and illness. Similarly, participants in this study described a stressful struggle to push physical limits combined with a view that confronting physiological stressors are a natural part of elite sports. Athletes also reported using acceptance as a strategy to sustain QOL in times of adversity:

If I get sick I get really stressed. It's nothing you can do anything about, I just have to accept it. Do the best in the situation but of course, it's a stress that my competitors are practicing and maybe get even better. Maybe it's right now you improve, this week.

Research from an ACT perspective generally supports that acceptance strategies are valuable for various health-related issues in non-clinical populations (e.g., Eustis et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2012; Kohl, Rief, & Glombiewski, 2012). Physiological and psychological stressors were sometimes explained as related to the specific demands of the sport, for example, the need to diet in weight-class sports:

To know that my weigh must be 50 kilos in three weeks. That stress. The need to change my diet all the time. It's really stressful. I get hormonal disorders. To know that you do not have control of your body, it gets into my head a lot.

Stressors could also be linked to feelings of insufficiency in close relationships. Perceived relatedness, when viewed from the SDT-perspective, refers to the perceived connectedness to others within the context (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It was apparent among the interviewed athletes that perceived restraints in relatedness, for example having insufficient time to be able to spend time on close relationships, could be problematic for their QOL. Moreover, participants could perceive disharmony because of close others' lack of understanding for their sport investment and various demands put on the athlete, which also could affect their training:

What the hell. Are we going to the bloody relatives at twelve o'clock? It's difficult to train before and it's hard to train afterward. I cannot train as I want. Then it's stressful. Of course, I feel a need to do it, to train. And somehow, that's what makes me happy.

Some participants had also chosen to end close relationships in favor of the sport investment:

I broke up with my boyfriend this summer. I chose not to have it because it was too much. Of course, I can miss these things sometimes and get tired of not having it but in the end, I realize that I do the thing I really want to do. That is, put all my effort into my sport.

A single-minded identity and limited social support have for long been identified in the literature as a risk factor for an athlete’s mental health (Ronkainen, Kavoura & Ryba, 2016). A choice to abstain from maintaining or even to quit relationships for the benefit of the sport career in the short-term, as was mentioned by some athletes in this study, could impose an increased risk in the long-term for the athlete in the event of major setbacks because of the dual loss of support, including the opportunity to get support and to give care to another person.

The participants in this study also expressed threats to QOL in terms of difficulties in other important life domains such as school or work and the possibility make ends meet financially, which closely resemble the findings of Lundqvist and Sandin (2014) who interviewed elite orienteers’ about well-being and elite sports. One athlete in the present study stated:

In calmer periods, like now after the World Championships then you work more. (...) It’s an economical suicide to be on training camps all the time. If you have been on a camp for seven weeks, then you have to seven weeks [of income] to recoup.

Overall, perceived expectations or demands and “musts” in the athlete life, in combination with self-doubt about doing everything well enough could diminish QOL, as exemplified by the following quote by an athlete who is also a parent:

You always have this feeling that you are never good enough. It’s always expectations put on you. When I train it is expectations that I should do it 100 percent. That I should be fit to fight. When I drive from training and get into my home, well, then I should be 100 percent [asking the children]: What have you done in school? What have you done at day-care? Do you have any homework? I need to do the laundry and do the dishes. These kinds of shifts are all the time. I choose to do this myself and I think that my family should not suffer because of something I choose to do.

Development through the achievement of short-term goals and a goal-directed plan. Goal-setting has been recognized as an important psychological skill for competitive athletes to provide direction and motivation related to performance (e.g., Kornspan, 2009). Participants in this study expressed that knowing where they were heading, which included having an overarching goal combined with a plan of how to reach the goal, was important for their QOL. One athlete expressed this as follows:

Calm, satisfied and happy. You know where you are heading. Harmony. I can feel it right before I have started to work on the task a front of me. I can feel harmony when me and my coach have sat down and made the plan for the year. I know what my goals are and I will start working on them. Then I feel harmony because I have a plan, I know what to do, I know my goals. The dreams are sort of peaking.

The goal-directed plan helped athletes to dream or look forward to what was personally important in terms of inner values. Moreover, it increased the durable and long-term experience of QOL when they perceived they were moving towards the goal. The metaphor "pieces of a puzzle" was used by many participants to describe the striving to reach short-term goals to obtain a closely linked long-term goal. However, despite successful participation in major events and achieving a long-term goal, when no new challenging and future-oriented goals are in place, elite athletes may experience great emptiness and depression-like symptoms (e.g., Gordin & Henschen, 2012). Similar experiences were expressed in the present study where the athletes described how achieving a long-term goal could bring mixed emotions and increase the urge to set new goals to continue the inner striving:

Somehow it can be hard when you have achieved a challenging goal. I managed to win gold in the European Championships and afterward I remembered it was like... But now what? I have strived for this for many years. And you are really happy because you managed it, but at the same time, you miss the feeling of what you were striving for. Now I have done it but it is mixed feelings.

Apparent in the athletes' descriptions was that athletes used both ego- and task-oriented evaluations (Nicholls, 1992) to follow their goal progress. Ego-oriented evaluations were continuously adopted both in training and competitive situations and comparisons against other athletes were used as a yardstick for the evaluation of the current level of athletic capability. Thus, a successful performance against others was considered by the athletes as proof of a movement towards the long-term goal and expected achievements. One athlete explained the combination of a task- and ego-orientation linked to QOL as follows:

It's like a challenge, it's the small pieces of the puzzle that will make me master a sort of new skill to get good. I will not succeed at the first try and maybe not the second one, but I get better and better every time. I feel that, wow, now things start to happen. I can master this and I start to understand. It's quality of life for me and it's really fun. (...) Others may say that "oh my God, this is really tough" and I say, "yes it's tough but it's because we have not mastered it yet".

Category 4: Emotional States

Durable and momentary emotional states. The fourth category was closely linked to the concept of subjective well-being in terms of the balance of negative and positive emotional states (e.g., Diener, 2009; Diener et al.,

2005). When describing various emotional aspects of QOL, all participants referred to both durable and momentary states. The durable states involved general feelings of, for example, calmness, enjoyment/happiness, harmony, and balance similar to a flow state (Swann, Crust & Vella, 2017) as one athlete explained:

For me, it is when everything in a way goes like a clockwork. You may not reflect on how good everything is. (...) You are in some sort of condition when you feel you don't have to make an effort but it all goes automatically. (...) That you find a balance.

QOL was also expressed in terms of reoccurring momentary emotional states (e.g., feelings of happiness, satisfaction, as a "rush" after a tough training session or competition and as momentary experiences of flow). Immediate emotional states were commonly related to the experience of having pushed the body to a maximum of its ability:

To practice hard to be really exhausted. The feeling afterward is unbeatable. And I guess that's what you feel after a competition when you have had a good race. Then you are completely exhausted and feel sick. But it's still a really nice feeling.

The elite athletes in this study particularly emphasized the emotional "rush" they experienced when they managed to push themselves to the limit in their goal achievement efforts: "To push the body and try to challenge yourself, both muscularly and physically as well as mentally. See how much you can push yourself and try to chase the feeling of rush". Thus, in a broad sense, the goal itself was not the most essential component for the athletes' QOL. Although goal achievement could bring momentary joy, the journey towards goals and the subsequent experience of a "rush" were significantly valued because of the frequent occurrence in the lives of these athletes. Some participants stressed nevertheless that the emotional state related to QOL was highly linked to the rest following the completion of practice or competition: "It's not fun to train. Really not! But somehow it's a thrill. I like to push myself and my body. But actually, there is no enjoyment in it. It's when you are finished you can relax."

General Discussion

In the present study, Swedish elite athletes' holistic experiences of the meaning of quality of life (QOL) were investigated to increase the knowledge of the concept within this high-performance oriented population. The findings suggested that the essence of athletes' experienced QOL could be

understood by four broad categories; the first category was expressed as a strong inner striving, or a high intrinsic motivation, for continuous athletic development. This striving was also combined with gratitude for the opportunity to invest in the sport aligning with the athletes' inner vital values. The experience of various sport-related and general stressors or obstacles in the athletes life were however also found to impede the experience of QOL.

Overall, the findings in the present study show similarities with the QOL categories (e.g., a strong self-interest to fulfil own needs, autonomy and the need to make sacrifices in life in favor of the sport investment) found by Brady and Shambrook (2003) in British elite track and field athletes. Some categories (e.g., the inner striving for development and achievement) also resemble findings by Hardy and colleagues (2017) who investigated psychosocial factors experienced through British super-elite and elite athletes' development and careers. It would be premature to draw any major cross-cultural conclusions based on the current level of scientific knowledge, but similarities across the studies indicate that the essence of experienced QOL among elite athletes may be rather consistent between Swedish and British athletes. Readers should therefore be aware that whilst there is certainly transferability between this study and the two studies noted above, caution must be observed about generalizing the results. However, like the Brady and Shambrook study, participants were selected with consideration of heterogeneity among the population of high-level elite athletes (e.g., various ages, genders, geographic variability) which increases the diversity and thus representativeness of findings. This research and Brady and Shambrook's study both involved elite athletes from individual sports and so the QOL findings presented here may be most salient among this population. Thus, further research may be warranted that examines the experience of QOL for elite athletes from team sports and considers how, QOL may be similar or different among athletes from team and individual sports.

Elite sports enable participants to have a distinct life-style where their own potential can be explored and unique experiences may be obtained (Martindale, Collins, & Richards, 2014). The results from this study are in line with previous contentions in the literature that elite athletes during their elite sport journey are likely to experience both positive and negative psychological, physical and social challenges or outcomes (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2012; Schinke et al., 2017). The majority of studies among elite athletes have nevertheless approached the problematic side of the mental health continuum using a quantitative approach (e.g., Kuettel, & Larsen, 2020). By contrast, the present qualitative study examined the perspective of QOL and found that athletes regarded the opportunity to

develop and progress towards their personally valued long-term goals as essential for their QOL. Whereas various stressors were also experienced, these stressors were to a large extent viewed as expected when doing elite sports. The stressors were also highly distressing particularly when they constituted blockages for the athletes' opportunities to move forward to and achieve the sports goals. The findings are in line with the proposition by Goode (1994) who suggested basic need satisfaction and sufficient opportunities to approach and achieve life goals as essential components of QOL.

Future researchers are encouraged to understand the multidimensionality of mental health across the entire continuum ranging from complete mental health to mental health concerns and disorders, embracing also the complexity of this construct when studied among elite athletes in a high-performance context. Linked to the debate about the construct of QOL and its assessment, Rapley (2003) raises the question whether academics or people themselves are best placed to judge QOL. We would argue that hearing from the elite athletes themselves, as conveyed in the present study, provides unique and more complete insider accounts of elite athletes' lived experience unobtainable elsewhere. Thus, various behaviors or symptoms can also be understood in context. In contrast, if QOL is based on norms, life-circumstances and goals derived from populations significantly different from elite athletes (e.g., “normal populations” or “clinical populations”), researchers and sport psychologist practitioners are at risk of misunderstanding how QOL may be expressed in an elite sports context. We do not suggest researchers, however, to study a one-dimensional positive approach only. Instead, we encourage that both negative and positive experiences and conditions should be considered to improve the holistic understanding of athletes' QOL in the elite sports context. By doing so, the possibility to provide effective and proactive support to elite athletes tailored to their specific life-circumstances, goals and values would increase together with a greater understanding of individual variations that may be present within this population. The qualitative nature of the present article contributes to the broader literature by providing idiographic and holistic perspectives essential to enable a comprehensive understanding of experienced QOL in elite sports.

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