

‘One door closes, a next door opens up somewhere’: the learning of one Olympic synchronised swimmer

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ABSTRACT

Although training in sport is necessary to reach Olympic status, a conditioned body is not the only outcome. Athletes also learn how to be Olympians. This learning involves taking on certain ways of acting, thinking and valuing. Such learning has implications beyond competition, as athletes eventually retire from elite sport and devote their time to other activities. This paper examines processes of learning and transition using the case of Amelia, a former Olympic synchronised swimmer. Through two in-depth interviews, empirical material was generated which focused on the learning that took place during this athlete’s career and after, during her transition to paid employment. A cultural view of learning was used as the theoretical frame to understand the athlete’s experiences. Our reading suggests that the athlete learned in various ways to be productive. Some of these ways of being were useful after retirement; others were less compatible. In fact, Amelia used a two-year period after retirement to reconstruct herself. Key to her eventual successful transition was to distance her-self from the sport and to critically reflect upon her sporting experiences. We thus recommend that those involved with high-performance athletes foster a more balanced perspective that acknowledges and promotes ways of being beyond athletic involvement.

Keywords: Olympic athletes; cultural learning; communities of practice; identity reconstruction; critical reflection

Introduction

The training of Olympic athletes advances physical performance. Usually beginning in childhood, participants condition their bodies to excel in their chosen sports. In artistic sports such as gymnastics, figure skating and synchronised swimming, training begins at a particularly young age and often peaks during adolescence. These athletes’ childhoods are spent in gymnasiums, ice rinks or swimming pools, where they often train over 30 hours per week. During such years of training, athletes’ conditioning goes beyond physical training and includes the informal learning of social skills.

Research examining informal learning has predominantly emerged from psychology. Within this perspective, scholars have focused on the learning of specific skills such as stress management (see for instance Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), teamwork (see for instance Bloom & Stevens, 2004; Bloom, Stevens, & Wickwire, 2003) and motivation (see for instance Naber, 2006). This view of learning has been criticised, mainly by scholars who adopt broader constructivist frames of understanding learning, arguing that the cognitive notion of learning is too narrow.

In sport science, the constructivist view of learning has found resonance, particularly research on school physical education (for useful examples see Kirk & Kinchin, 2003; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998; Kirk & MacPhail, 2002). Learning in non-school sport settings, however, has received much less attention. Constructivist learning theories have the potential to be highly generative, but until now have been underutilised in analyses of athletes' participation in sport. Three exceptions which involve a process of learning that is inseparable from the development of identity are recent research by Barker et al. (in press), which explores and relates learning during Olympic sporting careers to Olympism, Krogh Christensen's, Nørgaard Laursen's and Kahr Sørensen's (2011) study on learning processes in elite sport talent development and Light's (2006, 2010) research, which has demonstrated how long-term participation in practices of sports clubs (surf lifesaving and swimming in Australia, rugby in Japan) influences identity.

In terms of transfer of learning from sport, both cognitive and constructivist camps have debated this issue. With regard to the former, a number of scholars have discussed the transferability of skills learnt in sport (see for instance Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009). From within the constructivist camp, the idea of transfer has been rejected and replaced with notions such as embodied learning, transition and reconstruction (Hager, 2004; Hager & Hodgkinson, 2009). However, very little research on how athletes' learning relates to non-sport areas of life has actually emerged from this perspective. Fleuriel's and Vincent's (2009) study of one French rugby player's career-change difficulties, Carless' and Douglas' (2009) research on career transition in professional golf, as well as Brown's and Potrac's (2009) and Sparkes' (2000) research into identity disruption following premature retirement due to de-selection and illness, are attempts in explaining retirement experiences. These studies do not, however, examine processes of learning related to identity (re-)construction.

This paper sets out to address learning, career transition and identity reconstruction in sport from a cultural perspective of learning. It does this by exploring the becoming of one former Olympic synchronised swimmer and to relate her experiences to life after competitive sport. The specific research questions are: (1) How did Olympic sport shape the athlete during her athletic career? (2) How did the athlete experience her move away from high-performance sport? and (3) How did the athlete adjust to life outside of sport? In the following, we present the cultural perspective we have adopted to make sense of learning. We then describe the methods we employed to generate data and interpretations. Finally, we present the athlete's sporting career, and

discuss her learning during and after her time in sport.

Theoretical perspective

We adopt an embodied view of learning, which a group of English scholars has recently put forward (Hodkinson, 2005; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007, 2008; James & Biesta, 2007). Basic to their understanding is that learning involves the construction of embodied subjectivities. That is, who one becomes is a process of incorporation that involves the absorption of skills, knowledge and values. As Hager and Hodkinson (2009) stated: 'People become through learning and learn through becoming whether they wish to do so or not, and whether they are aware of the process or not' (p. 633, emphasis ours).

Seeing learning as embodied reflects a cultural view. On the one hand, the frame proposes that learning is about the participation of people in what Lave and Wenger (1991) called, 'communities of practice' (CoP). These communities are defined by agreement on what comprises the group's 'work' and the ways members should go about this work. Lave and Wenger (1991) explored the notion of apprenticeship to explain how communal characteristics and practices emerge. Several scholars have adopted this idea to explain learning in various workplaces (see for instance Billett, 2001; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). On the other hand, learning as a cultural phenomenon points to how the features of a CoP do not exist in a vacuum, but rather reflect social context. Relations of power shape these communities and affect what individuals learn (Hodkinson et al., 2008). That is, relations of power and processes of normalisation shape what practices, knowledge or values emerge and are perceived valuable and normal. Learning thus not only involves practices (as in practical activity and intelligent action), through which, for instance, an athlete learns to become proficient or adopt particular ways of being that are expected within her sporting community, but also about social structures that provide frames of legitimation. That is, the knowledge and values existing within sporting communities offer its members ways to make sense of the practices, relationships and expectations common-place within them. The proficient athlete, who has adopted her CoP's expected ways, can draw on the underlying values of her community and the practices within it to understand her experiences.

What happens when the athlete retires and enters a new CoP? Hager's and Hodkinson's (2009) 'becoming within a transitional process of boundary crossing', as well as their metaphors 'transition', 'transformation' and 'reconstruction', offer explanations on how the learnt can be moved from one area of life to another. The concept of embodied subjectivity is key, as it explains how a transition is about learning (or change in an individual), rather than a transfer of knowledge. As our athlete from above retires from sport and enters a new CoP, her embodied subjectivity includes the experiences she made in and the ways of being she adopted through sport. Her opinions, beliefs and values will become part of the new situation, and influence how she experiences it. Learning will continue in the new location, as what the now former athlete has brought with her may need to be adjusted or even changed in order to achieve efficient and successful participation.

In this paper, we present the becoming of a two-time Olympian. We explore how the CoP shaped her and how this relates to her life after sport. Before we do this, we describe the research methods and analytics we employed to generate data and interpretations.

Methods

Thinking about learning as situated and embodied has implications for how the topic of learning and career transition should be approached empirically. In the case of our study, it necessitated a detailed understanding of the characteristics of the athlete's CoP, the practices the athlete experienced, the ways she acted in her social world, what was important to her and how others treated her. We felt that extended conversations would fit this purpose. Amelia, the synchronised swimmer presented in this paper, was recruited as part of a larger case study of eight former Olympic athletes. Amelia was a synchronised swimmer for 16 years (9–25 years of age). During this career, she trained at a high-performance level for approximately 10 years and attended major international competitions (Junior and Senior European and World Championships, World Cups), as well as two Olympic Games. We chose to present the case of this athlete because her accounts provide particular insight into career transition and the reconstruction within the professional sphere she entered after retirement. Furthermore, the career transition of female artistic athletes, although little explored, offers particularly informative insight as their athletic training is intense and at a time when impressionability is considered high (Kerr & Dacy-shyn, 2000).

As with all participants in the broader study, two semi-structured interviews (Rapley, 2004) were held with the former synchronised swimmer. The first inter- view covered topics relating to her athletic career progression, learning and social relationships. The schedule included questions such as: 'How did your sporting participation change over time?' and 'Who was important to you in your sporting con- text?' After the verbatim transcription of the interview, and in line with Alvesson's and Skolberg's (2000) notion of reflexive methodology, key areas of learning and being were identified. These guided the second interview, within which the interviewee was asked to consider how particular aspects of her sporting experiences played out in her life after high-performance sport. The second interview thus took a more individualised form, in that the questions reflected the comments she had made in the first interview. Both transcripts, as well as the paper that emerged from the data, were sent to the participant for comment.

The transcripts were read repeatedly in order to extract aspects and processes of learning. A table, within which aspects of learning, as well as actors involved in the learning, was coded and sub-coded, and aided the analytic process. This table included columns, detailing the ways the athlete reconstructed herself after retirement, and/or how new aspects and processes of learning emerged. After this process of data collation, a collective element of analysis followed. Dialogue took place between the four researchers, leading to alternative and more sophisticated ways of understanding. Importantly,

collaboration was not used as a triangulation-type strategy to ensure convergent interpretations (Cresswell, 2003), but as a way to explore divergent and competing explanations. In what follows, we briefly describe Amelia's sporting career and transition away from Olympic sport and then delve into key characteristics and practices, through which she learnt to be an Olympic synchronised swimmer. We will then relate these ways of being to her life after elite sport.

Amelia's Olympic career

Amelia began synchronised swimming at the age of nine. She recounted how she had grown bored with ballet and track and field and said that she wanted to do a more intense activity. She chose synchronised swimming and began training once per week for between two and three hours. From the age of 10, she trained three to four times per week. Amelia described how at first, her father struggled to accept her 'commitment', but eventually understood that she enjoyed this relatively intense participation. Her dad stipulated, Amelia remembered, that she could participate as long as she made her own way to training (a train ride to the next village) and maintained her school performance.

As a teenager, Amelia achieved various national titles and quickly moved from national development to junior and senior teams. She competed at a number of international competitions, including European and World Championships, and Olympic Games. Nationally, Amelia frequently held the top ranking and internationally, she consistently placed within the top 10. During her account, Amelia stressed that she received little financial support and paid her own costs.

A number of individuals comprised Amelia's immediate community during her athletic career. From the age of 16, she lived away from home so that she could train with two national coaches. Amelia described these coaches, both from the former Soviet Union, as extremely tough and authoritarian. Other influential members were Amelia's team partners. During the preparation for her second Olympic Games, she lived together with her team partner. She recounted how they used to laugh about their closeness, describing it as more intimate than a romantic relationship.

Amelia retired after the second Olympic Games she participated in. She described how she was glad that her career was finished. A two-year phase, during which Amelia had to adjust to life after sport, followed. Today, she regards herself as happy, having found permanent employment and generally living a 'normal' life.

Becoming Olympic: discipline, self-control and submission

Amelia brought ambition and focus to her training of synchronised swimming. Even as a novice synchronised swimmer, she had the goal of becoming good: 'I wanted to train a lot and I was disciplined, I don't think I could ever have strayed off the path'. She recounted that she did not need somebody to push her; on the contrary, the drive to achieve seemingly came from within. Nevertheless, Amelia described her coach of her early years in the sport as

influential in teaching her the basic attitude to high-performance sport. She viewed this coach as being central to a community which she wanted to be a part of; an elite community of synchronised swimmers. This coach adopted particular coaching methods to teach her athletes discipline:

She also made me mentally strong. At the age of 12 we had to, I still remember it was pure horror. Sometimes we really were scared to go to training. We would come to training and then: “Shit, help, I don’t want to” and “Oh, how can I do this?” But, [the coach] led you through that, she also gave you the strength that you can achieve a lot if the attitude is right. We had to, for example, swim 50 metres under water two times, we were only 12. Physically, we could do it, we were ready to do it. But mentally, we hadn’t had to do it ever before and she just said: “Two times 50 metres under water and a one minute break in between”. We already started hyperventilating before we even started and then she said: “If one of the team doesn’t manage it, the whole team has to do it again”. And then we did it every training until we made it. And we were thinking: “Shit, if I’m the one who comes up too early then the whole team will have to do it again because of me”. You already went down thinking that and you had barely swum four metres when you thought: “I’ve got to go up, I don’t have any air left”. And we really had, we walked out of training weeping and crying because we didn’t know how to carry on, but she always got us back and showed us that you can go through something like that. It has to work in your head. So that was more of a fight with myself.

The coach shaped Amelia to realise that pushing her limits beyond what she thought she could endure, was possible. Indeed, it was made clear to Amelia that if she was to become an Olympic standard athlete, she must push beyond what she felt she was capable of. Amelia referred to this process of emotional dismissal as ‘tricking’ herself, because she understood that she had ‘to get through this, there was no other possibility’.

The form of discipline Amelia learnt was a method for her to control her reactions to the physical and emotional demands placed on her. Amelia provided an example to illustrate her self-control:

The water was 23 degrees, which isn’t very warm if you’re in there for seven hours. And I lost eight kilos in five weeks. I couldn’t keep my weight. I was already very slim when I got there. I froze for seven hours and I was really close to being anorexic. That was psychologically one of the most difficult moments in my life, because I had to get through it. Because I wasn’t allowed out [of the water] and I ate as much as I could. But I also totally lost my motivation. I went into hell and that was so crappy. And I wish someone would’ve just said: “Come out, you don’t have to do it”. But I was in a team and I had a commitment and I didn’t want to go. But that was absolutely horror, it really was.

The discipline to push physical and emotional limits was necessary, on the one hand, to improve athletically, but on the other, to overcome the desire to stop training. Amelia referred to this purpose in training:

I think the main goal of our trainer, or actually the goal of any trainer, is to bring you to a point emotionally in training, so that you can manage competitions no matter what happens. Or just say if you've got a migraine or if you puke before the free exercise, if you have to puke during the free exercise or if you puke after it. So that you know you can swim the free exercise, maybe not perfectly, but optimally.

In this sense, Amelia developed into a 'training machine', one that continued practising even when she would have preferred leaving sport. Amelia further needed to be disciplined and self-controlled in order to handle her coaches' criticism. She learnt this early on:

When I was 9 years old [the coach] dealt out blows to the swimmers. One of them was a bit plump. And you have to tread water to stay up, right? And then, she said: "Why are you so low?" and she said: "I don't know". The coach responded: "I always thought fat swims on top". We were nine or 10 years old at the time and when you hear comments like that, that probably influences you. And just to accept it and say nothing at all.

Again, Amelia said that she needed 'to be able to accept criticism ... and to make it positive', a practice her coaches used to get their athletes to 'function'. This self-control, Amelia thought, was even more important than physical pre-requisites: 'We saw a lot of people, who had a great body, but they were mentally just weaker and at some point they just didn't make it'. Amelia described how her body suited synchronised swimming, however, she pointed to the mental control she needed to develop in order to succeed in this sport. These practices highlight how Amelia learnt to continuously push her limits, a characteristic that she termed 'sport thinking'. Amelia's description further highlights the utility in adopting a situated view of learning in which learning processes are indivisible from the performance being learnt (Culver & Trudel, 2008). To Amelia, 'sport thinking' was necessary to handle the demands of her sport. In turn, Amelia felt that the mental strength she developed was necessary to achieve. She saw it as the foundation of high-performance sport, a framework that explained and justified her focus and efforts. On the level of the community of synchronised swimming, 'sport thinking' legitimated its characteristics and practices. Although Amelia occasionally questioned the assumptions and conduct, and even left one coach for another because she could not identify with her training philosophy, on many other occasions, she remained in the sport even though she would have preferred to retire. Regardless, other ways of being, such as for instance learning social skills for life after sport, were excluded as they were not seen as useful for the improvement

of performance. This is similar to learning in other contexts where the influence of central community members and the prevailing culture mean that certain ways of working and performing are privileged at the expense of other (often more appropriate) ways (Billett, 1994).

The disciplined and self-controlled athlete Amelia developed into involved a further characteristic, namely submission to others. To Amelia, the acceptance of her coaches' authority involved respect and responsibility:

Not for yourself but for others, also your coaches and also towards your fellow swimmers in the team ... because it really was a working together, it sometimes was a sub-ordination, but also very consciously so, I always respected it in that sense, because I just knew, it's the only way we'll be successful. You're in a team, so there's a boss who has the say.

The power relations inherent in coach-athlete interactions have led some to suggest that it is more appropriate to conceptualise separate coach CoPs and athlete CoPs (see for example Galipeau & Trudel, 2006). In Amelia's case, the community formed by her teammates was highly influential on her learning and practice. For example, submission was necessary as Amelia was part of a team. At a training camp prior to the qualification phase for her second Olympic Games, Amelia was forced to continue training, despite having fallen seriously ill and being unable to eat. After a blow-out with her coach, Amelia's boyfriend convinced her to continue training. It was at this moment that she swore to herself: 'I'll do it for the others. I'm not doing it for myself, because I don't need all this any- more'. Despite the physical strain and mental demands, Amelia complied so that her duet partner (and her coach) could have a chance at qualifying for the Olympic Games. A fear of regret influenced her decision to continue training. Not surprisingly, all Amelia could feel after her performance at the Games was relief that she 'had gone through with it' and that her duet partner had been able to compete at the Olympics. It was not 'about feelings of happiness' as Amelia described, but rather that 'it was all over' and that she could go home and start planning her new life.

Transition away from sport: perspective, independence and ingenuity

In the first year after retirement, Amelia worked in various jobs to pay off debt and 'finding something [she] would really like doing'. It was a time that she needed for 'peace and quiet' and to 'just do the job and be and live'. This time was spent with her family and friends. The way she described it was as if she had spent over 10 years overseas and had now returned home. Suddenly, she had a lot of spare time to spend with a multitude of people. This included her resuming contact with friends. The community with whom she was associating, and the practice in which she was engaging, had changed dramatically.

Physical adjustments included a change in her perceived need to exercise, which in the beginning included 'training' (e.g. cycling, running, fitness, weight training, swimming) for up to three hours per day. Over time, she exercised

less and today, Amelia is happy to be active regularly, but moderately. In contrast, the emotional adjustments appeared more complex and long lasting. Her integration into permanent employment played a key role in this process of change and self-(re) construction. On the one hand, Amelia felt insecure about her professional capabilities. She had been an expert in the synchronised swimming community; in the employment setting, however, she had very little expertise and was a fairly peripheral member. During the application process for permanent employment, she felt that she needed to prove her value as an employee, but also to herself, because this is what she was used to from sport:

In the company, at the beginning, I had to prove that I could do it. But then I realised, I don't have to prove anything to anybody, all the more to myself. That gives me serenity. Often you can see things from a bird's eye and realise, ok, it's actually not so important, there are other things.

In keeping with workplace studies using situated learning approaches (see for instance Billett, 1996), Amelia's time in employment afforded opportunities to engage in different contexts and with different 'others', enabling her to (re)set her expectations about herself and those around her. But while Amelia's time in employment assured her that she is a capable worker, her Olympic past cannot be ignored. While aspects of her synchronised swimming self could be adjusted and developed in life outside of sport, others need(ed) releasing and involved a process of transformation and renovation. As Hager and Hodkinson (2009) suggested, Amelia had to transform her identity and learn new ways of being. Yet, her embodied sporting self cannot be ignored, as it formed the basis from which Amelia had to reconstruct her identity.

An important feature that Amelia identified as being 'new' after retirement from sport, was that of being able to show weakness and emotions:

Yes, now I'm actually allowed to show them. I find that's the hardest part. To let it happen, to be able to show weaknesses. I was never allowed to. That was out of the question for us. If you cried, you had to put on your goggles, because the coach didn't want to see you crying. And that's really difficult, on the one hand because, well, I like people, who are strong. I don't want to end up appearing like a greyhound or something weak. But sometimes, it's also good to show weaknesses and also to accept it and to say: "Today, it's just not going to work out and yes, maybe you should just leave me alone". I'm still only learning that to be honest. I'm still in the process of letting that happen.

The practice of being mentally strong had taught Amelia to ignore emotional reactions. As her site of learning had changed, this custom was no longer relevant and Amelia had realised that she did not need to embody mental strength. In a similar way, Amelia was learning to let go of her submissive self:

What I definitely took with me that is something I still think of today: “You have to stop subordinating yourself”. And that’s difficult to really achieve. I still carry that in me. And it takes a while until I get rid of it or just realise: “You don’t have to do it, why are you doing this?” you know. So now I question things. But [in synchronised swimming], to question things wasn’t good.

While Amelia has to reconstruct aspects of her being, she is also able to expand ways of being from sport to her non-sport life. First, her experiences of having to continuously push her emotional and physical limits, has given her perspective. Her employment, for instance, appears easy to Amelia compared with her former training demands:

Going through the training wasn’t always nice. From time to time, someone had to rescue me, because you stayed under water. And to push yourself to this limit requires a lot of overcoming. And it wasn’t nice in fact, such a long time. Sometimes I had enough of holding my breath.

With this perspective, Amelia does not look for fulfilment through work. Instead, she carries her sporting achievements with her and does not see herself depending on succeeding professionally in order to feel good about herself.

Another aspect that Amelia identified that she learnt through sport is independence. Various situations led to this confidence, one being that she became independent early on in her career:

When I went [overseas] I was 15. It was also interesting that my parents just said: “Yes, you are going [overseas]”. I still remember when I was standing on the [train] platform when I went away in September, I said to my mother: “Is it actually ok, if I already move out?” And my mother just stood there and probably thought: “What sort of a question is that? Did that only occur to you now?” Then she said: “No, you know, we have faith in you and we think it’s a great opportunity and we just want you to be happy!” And that was somehow really wonderful to take that with me on my way. And I knew I wouldn’t take advantage of their trust in me.

A further way of ‘being’ Amelia is able to draw from is knowing what she is capable of. This includes the physical limits she had to push and the kinaesthetic level she reached, but also the belief that problems can always be solved. Amelia’s continuous financial struggles often caused more stress than the physical and emotional demands the sport posed and forced her to develop ingenuity:

Because I learnt how to cope with difficult situations. If you have to ring up an insurance [company] to say: “I’m sorry, but I can’t pay the bills because I don’t have any money” and you’re 17 or 18, that’s not that funny. But there’s always a way and that applied to every other area as well ... Falling over and standing up again. I think that hopefully I will be able to keep that for the rest of my life and that I have basic confidence in life and can keep that confidence. If one door closes a next door opens up somewhere. I think I will be able to go through life easily, I hope I can keep that attitude.

We consider this attitude significant and an aspect of Amelia’s self that she has embodied and was able to develop within and take with her from Olympic synchronised swimming. In a similar way, Amelia felt that her early move away from home to train with renowned coaches, as well as her ways of handling financial strains, taught her independence and ingenuity. She developed an ‘I can do any- thing’ disposition, an attitude she still embodies today. We suggest that this outlook was highly valued by her elite sport community, as well as the new communities she subsequently entered, and this ultimately helped Amelia reconstruct herself after retirement. Moreover, Amelia described how knowing her physical and emotional limits gave her perspective, which she interpreted as a trust in herself and life in general. Despite the perhaps counter-productive learning Amelia made in terms of discipline, self-control and submission, the perspective, independence and ingenuity she adopted through sport gave her confidence and a trust in life that served her after she retired from sport.

Outlook

In this paper, we have demonstrated the learning of one Olympic athlete and have pointed out how the person she became through sport related to her life after retirement. We have adopted learning as cultural and embodied to make sense of Amelia’s experiences. In so doing, we have shown how she developed to suit the demands and expectations of her sport and how she was able to use some of those ways of being outside of sport, while others need(ed) transformation and reconstruction.

Amelia’s case demonstrates how her Olympic past influences her current experiences, as well as her learning since retirement. With regard to the former, she is still looking for a professional and recreational passion. Synchronised swimming had filled her life and although she is giving herself time to decide what she would like to do, she is looking to find a new passion. In a similar way, Amelia said that ‘sport thinking’ is still part of her today, even though it causes conflict as her work col- leagues, for instance, do not share this attitude. Yet, she remains goal-oriented and highly motivated to work hard, as well as to channel her energy into a professional future. With regard to the latter, her Olympic learning influences her reconstruction after retirement, namely that she is learning to be less submissive and to accept mistakes and weaknesses. Time in a largely non-sporting community has fostered learning that has de-emphasised

the degree of discipline and self-control that was expected in her synchronised swimming community.

The reconstruction Amelia has undergone since retirement included her reflecting on what appeared a key value in Olympic sport: 'sport thinking'. We argue that several dispositions she developed in sport (perspective, independence and ingenuity) appeared to foster the gaining of distance from this value. However, and importantly, Amelia had described a two-year phase during which this realisation occurred. While she did not seem upset or remorseful for having to undergo such learning, we suggest that athletes' transitions from elite sport to a life without sport could be facilitated through their gaining critical distance during their careers. Two points are worth mentioning in this regard. First, gaining critical distance may be particularly necessary and beneficial for high-performance and/or Olympic athletes. Such athletes are involved in high-performance sport at the most intense level and for a significant period of their mostly still young lives. We thus argue, and this has been suggested by other researchers (see for instance Barker-Ruchti, 2011; Shogan, 1999), that the more intense sport participation is, the more the athletes have to adapt to the common values and practices of a sporting community. As Amelia's case has demonstrated, her long-term and intense involvement in synchronised swimming shaped her into a particular person, one that had learned what successful functioning in her sport required. Had she remained training at the club level, we can assume that she would not have become the person she became through elite sport.

Second, gaining critical distance from high-performance sport may not mean that athletes put less effort or focus into their career or training, but rather, that athletes understand that 'there is more to life' than high-performance or Olympic sport. We suggest that Amelia provides an example that illustrates how her distance from sport allowed her to experience communities that accept and embody other forms of being. We speculate that had Amelia been able to develop such a perspective during sport, she would have been able to construct a non-sporting self during her career. Her transition away from sport may have been facilitated. We thus recommend that those forming communities involving (future) Olympic athletes provide athletes with learning experiences that include gaining a more balanced perspective that sport is but one sphere and phase of life and that others will follow after retirement. Research that listens to how athletes learn is necessary, however, to further inform the high-performance community on how this balance can be achieved.

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