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1 **Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport**

2 Running head: Vocation in sport

3

4 Dr Noora J. Ronkainen (corresponding author)
5 School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
6 Liverpool John Moores University
7 Byrom Street
8 Liverpool L3 3AF, United Kingdom
9 n.j.ronkainen@ljmu.ac.uk
10
11 Dr Olli M. Tikkanen
12 Shanghai Jiao Tong University
13 Exercise, Health and Technology Center
14 Shanghai Dongchuan road 800, 200240 Shanghai, China
15 olli.tikkanen@sjtu.edu.cn
16
17 Dr Mark S. Nesti
18 School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
19 Liverpool John Moores University
20 Byrom Street
21 Liverpool L3 3AF, United Kingdom
22 m.s.nesti@ljmu.ac.uk

23

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25 **Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport**

26 **Abstract**

27 In the present paper, we explore the notions of vocation and calling and their implications for sport
28 psychology research and practice. We first discuss conceptual issues and outline existential
29 psychology as one potential framework for understanding vocation in sport. Through a review of
30 growing body of literature on vocation and calling in vocational psychology and reflections on
31 applied sport psychology practice, we identify a number of ways these concepts can be used to
32 advance our understandings of athletic career development, motivation, and mental health in sport.
33 Vocation can also help applied practitioners understand athletes' strive for authenticity and
34 commitment to sport. In summary, we propose that the concept of vocation can be useful for
35 studying meaningful lives and careers in sport.

36 **Keywords:** identity, athletic career, motivation, meaning, existentialism

37 **Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport**

38 Many athletes start developing their athletic careers in their childhood or youth and continue to
39 be involved in competitive sport for a number of years, some as professional athletes, and others as
40 amateur or recreational participants, coaches or volunteers. A number of researchers have sought to
41 describe and understand the sporting life project, most commonly known as an athletic career (see
42 Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009, for a review). Most often the writings on athletic
43 careers are framed within linear models of lifespan development, "as consisting of stages, phases or
44 periods and change is from one to another, rather like going up a ladder with the rungs as invariant
45 stages" (Adams, 2006, p. 261). Consistent with this view, we have a growing body of literature
46 exploring the reasons (e.g., resources, barriers and demands) for why some athletes might be more
47 'successful' than others in transitioning from one stage to another (e.g., Morris, Tod, & Oliver,
48 2016; Park Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). However, less is known
49 about the subjective career journeys of athletes – that is, what it means for them to inhabit the
50 sporting life-world and how the sport practices connect with their broader sense of life meaning.
51 The stage models (e.g., Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and definitions (e.g.,
52 Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) of an athletic career contain an underpinning assumption that the
53 sporting life project is ultimately animated by the drive or desire to reach an ultimate physical peak
54 of athletic performance (i.e., the "career orientation" described by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan,
55 Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). After reaching that pinnacle of athletic performance, athletes are
56 invariably expected to disengage from competitive sport – a normative assumption which permeates
57 lived culture (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013) and also research texts on athletic retirement
58 (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).

59 Although career is currently the dominant metaphor for journeys both in sport and in the world
60 of work (especially in highly skilled occupations), several scholars in vocational psychology have

61 argued for revisiting the old concepts of vocation and calling as they can address some important
62 shortcomings in career theory. The notion of an occupation or a life role as a vocation has been
63 present in Western discourse at least from the 16th century (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Traditionally, it
64 was understood as a religious concept and can be traced to the Protestant reformer Martin Luther,
65 who argued that earthly occupations and not only ministry should be seen as service to God and,
66 therefore, as equally valuable life roles with a spiritual purpose. For Luther, vocation manifested an
67 individual's relationship with God, but it also involved a moral commitment to treat other people in
68 a just manner (Young, 1984). A key difference between the metaphors of vocation and career is in
69 their implicit assumptions about the underlying motivation to pursue the chosen activity; vocation
70 historically connotates to an activity aimed at serving (God and the society) and experiencing
71 meaningfulness in and through the chosen life role, whereas career is most often understood as a
72 project animated by a desire for personal advancement and progress (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland,
73 2006).

74 The fact that career replaced vocation as the leading metaphor in the U.S. in the late 19th century
75 is tied into industrialisation and urbanisation, which led to profound changes in the organisation of
76 work and loosening of communal ties (Savickas, 2000). Cherniss (1995) argued that many
77 traditional vocations have been transformed into careers and jobs, and suggested that this has come
78 about because a moral-religious paradigm was replaced with a scientific-technical one. That is,
79 much of contemporary career discourses focus on self-marketing and career progression, and such
80 changes have resulted in a focus on competence and control, and a diminishment of compassion and
81 moral commitment. In our age, in turn, we have witnessed an increasing prevalence of burnout in
82 occupations that have been traditionally seen as vocations such as teaching and nursing (Cherniss,
83 1995). Given a large number of studies into burnout also in sport (see Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, &

84 Harwood, 2007, for a review), the work of Cherniss could be also highly relevant for understanding
85 this worrying phenomenon and its relation to ideas around vocation and calling.
86 In addition to reflecting the societal changes in the world of work, the concept of career was
87 also better aligned with modern psychology which was grounded in positivism and individualism.
88 The focus of modern psychology on promoting individual control and autonomy aligns well with
89 the discourse of a career, focused on individual career choice and advancement on the chosen career
90 path (Young, 1984). The academic discourse of athletic careers is largely underpinned by this
91 modernist logic of early career theory in vocational psychology and often focuses on describing
92 normative stages and transitions in an athlete's developmental pathway (Stambulova et al., 2009;
93 Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).
94 In vocational psychology, however, several scholars have expressed discontent with the
95 modernist career theories and associated metaphors (e.g., career ladders, career pyramids) and
96 suggested that they are insufficient for describing many people's journeys in the world of work –
97 both in terms of objective trajectories as well as in subjective meanings that people assign to what
98 they do. Although career has become the dominant and broadly accepted word to describe
99 individual journeys in the world of work (and also in "serious leisure"; Stebbins, 1982), it has been
100 noted that the way in which the individual is oriented towards their work/career can vary
101 significantly from the focus on personal advancement (career), simply making a living (job), or
102 fulfilling a deeper sense of purpose and meaning (calling) (Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski,
103 McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). The concepts of vocation and calling have been proposed as
104 a means to complement and extend existing career theory by addressing the neglected subjective
105 meanings and values that people assign to their careers (e.g., Young, 1984; Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge,
106 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). Scholars advocating the study of vocation and calling
107 have pointed out that many people search for a deeper meaning in work (or in a non-paid life

108 project) beyond personal advancement and seek to experience and express their overall sense of
109 purpose in life through their work (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). The
110 notion of vocation addresses questions such as, "Why are you doing what you are doing? Why is it
111 worthwhile for you (and for society)?" (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006, p. 149).

112 Given an extensive recent interest in the concepts of vocation and calling in vocational
113 psychology (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik et al., 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-
114 Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), it is surprising that there is yet no
115 research examining these constructs in sport psychology. After all, athletes frequently talk about
116 their love for their sport; about their hobby becoming a paid profession, or feeling privileged to be
117 able to play sport (rather than work in sport). Whilst there is a growing body of literature on what
118 facilitates success in athletic career development and transitions, few researchers have explored why
119 athletes do what they do and how it connects to their sense of life meaning. Therefore, this article
120 sets out to review the literature on vocation and calling in vocational psychology, explore its
121 potential relevance for sport, and offer recommendations for future empirical research to address
122 this gap in sport psychology. Although we do not suggest that all athletes experience a vocation in
123 sport, and there are some sociological studies to exemplify this (e.g., Roderick, 2006, 2014), we
124 argue that it should be explored as a potentially relevant concept for a number of athletes and others
125 involved in sport. The current paper is inspired by our different experiences as sport researchers,
126 athletes or applied practitioners, and a number of interviews we have conducted with athletes and
127 coaches who have told us about why sport is important and worthwhile for them (e.g., Nesti, 2011;
128 Ronkainen, Ryba, Nesti, 2013; Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood, & Nesti, 2015). In the following,
129 we proceed to explore conceptual issues in the study of vocations and calling, review the growing
130 body of literature on these concepts, and discuss their implications for psychological studies in
131 sport. We identify some ways in which vocation and calling can complement existing perspectives

on athletes' careers, and propose directions for future research and applied sport psychology practice.

Conceptualising Vocation and Calling

Although several scholars have noted that a number of contemporary people across cultures describe their occupational life projects with the terms vocation and calling (for an overview, see Dik & Shimizu, 2018), a challenge for academic research lies in finding definitions for these terms that have evolved considerably since their inception. In Western societies, vocation and calling have traditionally involved a connotation of fulfilling a higher (religious) purpose, and some scholars have sought to preserve the historical origins in their definitions (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009). However, many modernist definitions tend to adopt a humanistic perspective and understand these terms within ideas of self-actualization, fulfilling a personal passion, or contributing to the society (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). A conceptual overlap has been noted between vocation and calling and the constructs of flow and intrinsic motivation. However, flow is not a necessary component for the experience of calling, and whilst people with a sense of calling are likely to be intrinsically motivated (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008), work can also be pursued for other intrinsic reasons than what are captured by vocation and calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Furthermore, some authors distinguish vocation and calling from each other (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009), others use them interchangeably, and many studies only refer to one of these terms. Latest studies have increasingly centred on the concept of calling only (e.g., Dik & Shimizu, 2018).

To illustrate the conceptual slippage, in contemporary language the concept of vocation is often used interchangeably with having any job, career or profession; in other cases, it has been described as a guiding life motive derived from within or beyond the self (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). There is also a debate over whether vocations and callings need to be other-oriented by the very definition, or whether they can simply refer to fulfilling one's personal

156 ambition or passion (e.g., Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). What the
157 different definitions of calling seem to agree upon is that it involves a sense of meaning and
158 purpose, whereas prosocial and transcendent dimensions have been included only by some scholars
159 (Dik & Shimizu, 2018). This diversity has been found also in research participants' accounts who
160 may have self-identified as having a calling regardless of their worldviews (religious or secular)
161 (Steger et al., 2010) and that callings may or may not be connected with a sense of transcendence
162 and having altruistic values (Hunter et al., 2010). The diversity of understandings of the concept
163 among both researchers and participants illustrates that vocation and calling are similar to the term
164 spirituality, which has been defined in various ways depending on socio-historical locations and
165 language practices (e.g., LaCour & Hvidt, 2010).

166 Since vocation and calling are constructs that are arguably under revision, we agree with Dik
167 and Shimizu (2018) that it might be unwise to propose new definitions unless a clear rationale for
168 doing so emerges. Instead, like in any good quality research, they recommend that researchers
169 explicate which definition has informed their work and provide as much contextual detail of their
170 participants as possible (e.g., religious background, personal life history, etc.). Furthermore, the
171 cultural appropriateness of questionnaires for conducting research in other contexts than in which
172 they were created need to be carefully assessed. Many of the commonly used questionnaires to
173 assess calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik et al., 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011;
174 Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) have been developed in the U.S. where Christian religion is an important
175 part of the cultural landscape and is likely to influence how people understand callings. Recent
176 scales developed in other national cultural contexts including Germany (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012),
177 Australia (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015) and China (Zhang, Herrmann, Hirschi, Wei, & Zhang,
178 2015) have provided research tools for assessing callings in these different contexts.

179 In addition to articulating a concept of vocation or calling that informs research, it is also
180 important that studies are grounded in paradigms and theoretical positions that can accommodate
181 ideas surrounding personal and transcendent meaning. Existential psychology is one potential
182 theoretical perspective for understanding vocations and callings because it is centred on a notion of
183 human beings as meaning-seekers that strive to fulfil this meaning through practical engagement
184 with the world through their life projects. In the following, we briefly outline the basic concepts of
185 existential psychology and how they can inform the study of vocations and callings.

186 **Vocation and Calling from an Existential Psychological Perspective**

187 Vocation or calling as a life role that provides a deeply personal source of meaning connects with
188 the fundamental assumption in the existential thought that our being is an issue for us (Heidegger,
189 1962). In other words, the search for meaning is seen as a basic condition of human existence (Frankl,
190 2010), and therefore we are compelled to throw ourselves into actions and life projects that hold the
191 potential to provide us with a sense of life meaning (Yalom, 1980).

192 In existential thinking, loss of meaning is considered as one of the main sources of psychological
193 distress (Frankl, 2010; May, 1983). Indeed, it has been observed that many contemporary people who
194 express career-related concerns in counselling are searching for a deeper sense of purpose in their
195 work (Dik et al., 2009). Due to observations that today's career challenges relate to key existential
196 concerns (e.g., lack of meaning in work, isolation and anxiety), existential psychology has started to
197 gain some attention in vocational psychology (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; MacMillan, 2009;
198 Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005). The fluid and competitive world of work poses not only the
199 challenge of remaining flexible and marketable and thus securing employability, but also a more
200 fundamental concern of finding personal meaning and continuity in one's potentially fragmented
201 career trajectory. From an existential view, vocation represents the ability to find meaning and

202 coherence in what one is doing, one which connects with and contributes to a more profound sense
203 of life meaning.
204 The concept of vocation is also inextricably linked to the existential psychological concept of
205 authenticity. Existential philosophers (e.g., Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre)
206 wrote extensively about authenticity or actually more often about inauthenticity which they
207 considered to be our dominant mode of being-in-the-world. In the context of a career, inauthenticity
208 would refer to unquestioningly following the norms and ideals of the society (”the they”; Heidegger,
209 1962) such as, choosing a career which is socially prestigious although not aligned with one's deeper
210 aspirations. Vocation, on the other hand, can be seen as a calling to an authentic way of existence
211 which is congruent with one's core beliefs and values (Homan, 1986). The authenticity of an act (or
212 a chosen life project), though, cannot be judged from the outside and can be also fully in line with the
213 ideals of society. Each individual, through self-examination, can assess the relative authenticity of
214 their life choices for themselves (Erickson, 1995). Maglio and colleagues (2005) observed that "career
215 is a project of one's adult productive life in which the struggle for authenticity is most acute" (p. 79),
216 referring to the importance of paid work for most Western adults. Experiencing a sense of vocation
217 in this life project means that it connects with one's sense of self and experience of purpose in life,
218 thus offering a possibility for experiencing authentic existence.
219 Drawing from existential ideas, Lips-Wiersma and McMorland (2006) proposed four core themes
220 that can allow for a deeper understanding of the notion of vocation. They suggested that vocation is
221 underpinned by animation (rather than choice) because it conveys the possibility that the guiding
222 principle of vocation may be experienced as something that is derived from outside the self. Second,
223 vocation involves dedication and long-term investment to this life role, involving not only satisfaction
224 but also doubts, sacrifices and sometimes exclusion of other life interests. This connects to the
225 existential psychological perspective that considers "boundary situations" and "negative" experiences

226 as vital for the search for meaning, personal growth, and our sense of intensity and aliveness (Cooper,
227 2003). Third, since vocation is intertwined with meaning-making, it involves continual evaluation on
228 the level of congruence between values and actions, and whether a particular life project allows one
229 to "feel at home" and "at one with oneself" (i.e., authentic). Finally, vocation provides coherence,
230 referring to the existential principle that we seek for a sense of purpose and a pattern of meaning that
231 can be sustained through career transitions and moments of uncertainty (Lips-Wiersma &
232 McMorland, 2006). Such broad description of the core existential themes of vocation is inclusive of
233 both secular and religious perspectives, maintaining that meaning, purpose and values can be derived
234 from any worldview that the person grounds their life in.

235 **Contemporary Vocations and Callings: A Brief Overview**

236 Although little is known about vocation and calling in sport, the academic interest in these
237 constructs has increased rapidly in vocational psychology and management in the last decade.
238 Between 2007 and 2013, Dik and Duffy (2013) identified approximately 40 studies on calling in
239 career development and vocational psychology. In March 2018, Google Scholar reported 557
240 citations to their earlier paper outlining the definitions of vocation and calling at work and future
241 research directions (Dik & Duffy, 2009), which indicates that the interest in the topic continues to
242 grow rapidly. This interest has been fueled by findings indicating that people who experience living
243 their calling in work report positive general well-being and satisfaction in life and work (Peterson,
244 Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010), are often the most committed
245 and engaged employees (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011), and experience higher
246 levels of meaning in work (Hirschi, 2012). It has been noted that vocations and callings may also
247 involve a sense of duty and sacrifices in other areas of life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Zhang,
248 Dik, Wei, & Zhang, 2015) and could have a negative influence on employability due to career
249 inflexibility (Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018).

250 Most of the early empirical studies were conducted in the U.S. and many of them had college
251 students as their participants. For example, Duffy and Sedlacek (2010) examined the prevalence of
252 calling with over 5,000 college students and found that more than 40% of participants responded
253 that "having a calling" to a particular occupation was mostly or totally true for them with no
254 significant difference across gender or different ethnicities. Hunter et al. (2010) reported that 295
255 out of 435 undergraduate students responded that calling was relevant for them in relation to their
256 career development. For college students, calling has correlated positively with a number of
257 variables including vocational self-clarity, career decidedness and satisfaction with one's career
258 choice (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007), career decision-making self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation
259 (Dik et al., 2008), and positive affect and existential well-being (Steger et al., 2010). Such findings
260 have encouraged career counsellors to focus on helping students to explore and clarify their
261 potential callings, and consequently help them pursue those life paths.

262 In the recent years, researchers have broadened the exploration calling and vocation to various
263 national and cultural groups and occupations and its relevance has been documented in European
264 countries (Coulson, 2010; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Hirschi, 2012), China (Zhang et al., 2015a, b),
265 South Korea (Park, Sohn, & Ha, 2015), and India (Douglass, Duffy, & Autin, 2016). Furthermore,
266 research has indicated that having a sense of vocation or calling is personally relevant for people in
267 very diverse occupations including, for example, administrative assistants (Wrzesniewski et al.,
268 1997), zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), musicians (Dobrow, 2013; Coulson, 2010) and
269 counselling students (Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014). Furthermore, parenting and other non-
270 career focused roles have also been described as callings. Therefore, Dik and Duffy (2009)
271 emphasised that we should not limit the study of vocation to paid work but to any salient life role
272 that the individual might be highly invested in.

273 To sum up, empirical studies with diverse research participants have indicated that vocation and
274 calling can be important for understanding a number of career-related issues including job
275 satisfaction, engagement, well-being and meaningful work. However, no previous study has
276 explored these constructs in sport despite the clear potential benefits it could provide for
277 understanding athletes' career experiences and behaviour. Moreover, studying the issue in sport
278 would moreover contribute to broader understanding of callings and vocations in early
279 specialisation careers (others including music and the performing arts). Lastly, sport involves a
280 large number of highly committed amateurs (athletes, coaches and officials) and would, therefore,
281 provide an ideal context for studying the underresearched dimension of callings and vocations in
282 amateur careers (but see Dobrow, 2013).

283 **Could Sport be a Vocation?**

284 While no studies in sport psychology have focused on concepts of vocation and calling, the
285 closest example of such research comes from Wainwright and Turner's (2004, 2006; Turner &
286 Wainwright 2003) sociological research on professional ballet. They argued that their participants
287 invariably understood dancing as a vocation rather than a job or occupation. As they observed,

288 Although it is true that ballet has many occupational features, our data unequivocally
289 demonstrates that classical ballet is a vocation, 'a calling', within which ballet dancers are
290 typically astonished that they are paid to do something that is characteristically described as a
291 'joy' (Wainwright & Turner, 2004, p. 312).

292 In their participants' accounts, injuries were often interpreted as tests of one's vocation, and
293 suffering could be even seen as contributing to artistic capital (Wainwright & Turner 2004, 2006).
294 Similarly, Roderick (2006, 2014) argued that soccer, at least initially, is often understood by players
295 as a vocation and an avenue for self-fulfilment. However, he also demonstrated how some players,
296 through experiences of job loss and unfair treatment in professional clubs, started to dis-identify from

297 their profession and to approach it more like a job without buying into the cultural values of the
298 organisation (Roderick, 2014).

299 Unfortunately, there are no psychological studies in sport to explore the concept of vocation.
300 Therefore, in the following, we will explore the applied experiences of the third author (MN) to
301 provide an account of how we might understand vocation in sport. These reflections are based on the
302 experience of working as a first-team sport psychologist for three professional soccer clubs in the
303 UK. The following account is subjective in nature and not a part of a structured research programme;
304 instead, these observations have been produced in long-term immersion into applied work in
305 professional sport. Studying elite athletes is notoriously difficult due to limits in access and time
306 (Balague, 1999); therefore, professional reports may complement research studies and involve better
307 rapport, several encounters with participants and a broader understanding of the work environment
308 (the club culture). In the following section, the third author (MN) will be referred to as "I".

309 Professional Reflections: Encountering Vocation in Applied Work with Athletes

310 I have found the idea of sport as a vocation to be immensely helpful in my work as an applied
311 sport psychologist. Especially with professional athletes, it is common to hear them using words
312 normally associated with the types of occupations often described in terms of vocation. Like teachers,
313 medical doctors, and those called to the religious life, many of the players I have worked with talk
314 about the need to accept the sacrifices, hardships, and suffering that accompany doing something they
315 love. In my view, such a description should not be interpreted as positive thinking and attempt to
316 manage the encountered difficulties. Instead, this type of view connects closely to accounts in
317 existential psychology that describes how anxiety, loneliness, and suffering are often experienced
318 during tasks that the individual is passionately committed to (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

319 During the confidential one-to-one sport psychology sessions with over 200 professional players
320 I have often heard them describing how they do not expect success, achievement, and performance

to occur easily, or without difficult moments. They sometimes refer to “falling out of love” with soccer, at least with respect to the culture that surrounds the game. Whilst it is well known that the incredible extrinsic rewards of fame, money, and status are available to players in this sport, it is less well accepted or discussed that in order to remain at this standard, intrinsic motivation must remain strong. Based on my applied work I have argued that being intrinsically motivated is essential to top-level performance (Nesti, 2010); however, being a professional athlete also means delivering in less than optimal conditions and psychological states. Whilst Ravizza (2002) suggested that exceptionally talented athletes experience more episodes of flow than others, he also argued that most of the time, elite athletes are not in flow. That is, sports often present challenges that may exceed the athlete’s skills and abilities. Instead, in times of challenges, they still strive to do their best, because it is personally important, and is something many of them consider to be their own special calling. In this way, the lived experience of playing sport could be said to be like the experiences of others in challenging occupations who strive to do their best in demanding circumstances.

In the sport literature, there are recent examples where athletes are discussed in terms of how the abrasive culture of professional sport can undermine intrinsic motivation and love of the activity (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Roderick, 2014). For example, Roderick (2014) wrote about alienation and instrumental attitudes that some professional athletes adopt towards their work. Although it is undoubtedly the case that many professional athletes view their sport careers in these terms, in my applied work I have worked with many players, especially from outside the UK, for whom their involvement has sounded more like a vocation. And like with other vocations, these professional players have conveyed that they have a calling and what they are doing is deeply personal and important to their self-fulfilment. However, this does not mean that they have not faced demanding challenges, and hardships, alongside moments of deep satisfaction and joy. In my view, having a vocation does not protect the person from experiencing many struggles, but it does help to

345 understand why something is so personally important to someone that often they will dedicate their
346 lives to this task.

347 Working one-to-one over several seasons with professional players, much of what is discussed
348 has been centred around the importance of knowing who you are and understanding what can be done
349 to be that person, on and off the field of play. I have listened to players describing how important it
350 is to them that they can make sense of the, often, very extreme challenges experienced in professional
351 sport. In facing these moments, players talk about wanting to perform their best because of a personal
352 commitment to their sport. On occasions, this has been expressed as, "being prepared to give
353 everything I have to be my best because this is who I am, and what I do!" However, in my view, this
354 should not be taken to mean that their only identity is that of a professional soccer player. As we have
355 argued elsewhere (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), identity is not a quantitative concept; it is possible for
356 individuals to have several identities they are fully committed to. We would not find it strange to
357 describe a medical doctor as someone fully committed to her role as a mother, wife, daughter, and
358 physician. Why then do we accept ideas that the identity of professional and elite athletes can only
359 be defined in relation to their sport role? It seems to me that when my clients are talking about their
360 identity in this way, they are telling me about their vocation.

361 Applied sport psychologists should take great care to recognise that for many athletes at elite and
362 professional levels their sport experience can be described simultaneously as a job, career, and a
363 vocation. Over the course of an individual's involvement in sport, they are likely to view their
364 experience differently depending on a number of factors, such as the frequency of competitive
365 success, proximity to retirement, and level of competence. It is conceivable that these will affect how
366 the athlete sees themselves and the degree which they feel alienated by their job, frustrated by their
367 career, or in love with their vocation, for example. In my applied encounters with elite professional
368 soccer players (Nesti, 2010), I have noticed how the relationship with their sport often fluctuates over

369 time and in relation to external events and internal perceptions. In future, it would be helpful to see
370 more applied sport psychologists recognise that an athlete's identity is not a fixed entity and that what
371 may feel like a calling at one moment in time, can very quickly appear more like a boring and tiresome
372 job on another occasion. In taking the concept of vocation seriously, sport psychologists will be able
373 to move beyond simplistic binary arguments that designate elite and professional sport especially as
374 either, "just a job", or as a beautiful love. Instead, we may see sport psychologists adopt a different
375 perspective when they work to support athletes, allowing them to tell their own stories on their own
376 terms. In relation to jobs. careers and vocation, we might find that for some athletes much of the time
377 these lived words do not fit into neat, tidy and positivist constructs that can be viewed as completely
378 separate from each other, but rather, that they are more often experienced as being fluid, interrelated
379 and subject to individual interpretation. Although not referring to vocation, Martens (1979) reminded
380 the relatively new profession of sport psychology that its focus at all times should be on the "person
381 first and the athlete second" (p. 97). Following this call could mean that we will take greater care to
382 approach the athlete as someone who has often chosen to play sport out of love for the activity and a
383 sense of calling and that this does not protect them from a great many personal challenges, especially
384 at higher levels and in professional sport.

385 In summary, the concepts of vocation and calling have many implications for the work of coaches,
386 applied sport psychologists, and career counsellors working with athletes, although two stand out as
387 most important. First, it is essential to understand that for those players who feel it is their calling,
388 there will be a greater acceptance that they must deliver their best even in difficult circumstances.
389 Second, it is more likely that these types of players will constantly attempt to become more authentic,
390 that is, to think for themselves, become more like themselves, and pursue the best path for them to
391 grow and develop. Many times they will be prepared to do this within the less supportive culture and
392 during personally demanding moments. However, coaches could help by providing a supportive and

393 professional environment, one that creates the optimal conditions for intrinsic motivation to develop
394 in players and enables them to build upon their sense of calling.

395 **Setting a Research Agenda**

396 In this paper, we have provided an overview of the concepts of vocation and calling and how
397 they have been used and studied in vocational psychology. Given the complexity of the concepts of
398 vocation and callings and their newness in sport, it would be first important for researchers to pay
399 attention to theorising and careful conceptualisation of these terms. This is a much-needed
400 development in sport psychology where some (e.g., Smith, 2010) have observed that the field, as a
401 relatively new academic discipline, has been sometimes too keen to engage in research at the
402 expense of sound theorising and conceptual analysis. Vocation and calling have a long history in
403 psychology, and there is a vast body of work that sport psychologists can draw upon to design and
404 implement their own studies in a sporting context. Future researchers should become familiar with
405 the findings of this research and build carefully on this whilst recognising the unique features of
406 sport. This is something that has not always happened in sport psychology in its rush to provide the
407 practically useful sometimes at the expense of the theoretically rich and methodologically sound
408 (Nesti, 2004).

409 As the reviewed literature has indicated, vocation and calling could extend our understandings
410 of many issues that have been at heart of sport psychology research agenda, including athletes'
411 career development and transitions, motivation, and mental health and well-being. Furthermore, the
412 investigations should not be limited to athletes, since the literature on vocations and callings allows
413 for proposing that these constructs could be even more relevant for those in helping and supporting
414 roles including coaching, sport psychology services, and various volunteer tasks in sport clubs.
415 Since retention of volunteer workforce including coaches and officials is one of the pressing

416 questions in non-elite sports, vocation and calling could be important avenues for better
417 understanding the commitment that some individuals develop to these roles.
418 The concepts of vocation and calling extend the ways in which how athletic careers are
419 conceptualised and researched. Sport psychology research could explore existential meaning and
420 values (i.e., the core themes of vocation and calling) in relation to athletes' career decision-making,
421 adaptability, career commitment, motivation, and career identity. Sport psychology research on
422 athletic careers has recently focused increasingly on dual career construction (the combination of
423 sport and school/work; e.g., Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015), and the concepts of vocation and
424 calling could provide additional insight into how student-athletes negotiate commitments and
425 sustain motivation in these two domains. Research with college students have linked the perception
426 of calling with vocational self-clarity and confidence in career decisions (Duffy & Dik, 2013), but
427 little is known about how vocation and calling may play out with individuals who are invested in
428 pursuing two careers simultaneously. With their clear links to career and organisational
429 commitment (Duffy et al., 2011), these concepts would be also highly relevant for studies focused
430 on talent development environments and organisational culture in sport.
431 Another important direction for sport psychology research is the potential link between
432 vocation/calling and mental health in athletes. It has been noted the elite sport involves additional
433 mental health risk factors including stressful lifestyle, high training loads and tough competition,
434 and there are growing concerns about mental health problems in sport including depression,
435 overtraining, eating disorders, and identity crisis (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017). The
436 literature in vocational psychology, on the other hand, has indicated that people with a calling are
437 more likely to experience general well-being, satisfaction in work and life, and meaning in life as a
438 whole (Peterson et al., 2009; Steger et al., 2010). Therefore, vocation and calling could be explored
439 in relation to various mental health issues in sport as a potential protective factor, thereby

440 responding to International Society of Sport Psychology's recent call to further develop lines of
441 research into athletes' well- and ill-being and their sources (Schinke et al., 2017).
442 To start exploring vocations and callings in sport, various methodological options are available.
443 At the nascent stages, researchers could benefit from the scales developed in vocational psychology
444 (Dik et al., 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) and use them to get an
445 indication the relevance of vocation and calling for various actors in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches,
446 sport psychologists and volunteers) in different cultural contexts. Yet, gaining a deeper
447 understanding of vocations and callings in sport requires that researcher-led career models would be
448 replaced more often by research that commences from the perspective of the athlete. Greater
449 application of methods such as those used in phenomenology, narrative, and/or ethnography would
450 help researchers capture more fully the lived experience of athletes, and the struggles and joys that
451 they experience in their sport life projects. Longitudinal studies are also needed to go beyond the
452 limitations of the static "one shot in time" methods that have tended to dominate sport psychology
453 research into athletic careers. Research carried out over a season or a number of years could help
454 reveal what types of changes take place in terms of vocation, career and job in sport, and more
455 important, help us to understand why and how these occur.
456 From an applied perspective, awareness of vocations and callings may be important for coaches
457 and sport psychologists for developing a trusting relationship with the athlete. As stressed by
458 Balague (1999), if the sport psychology consultant (or the coach) does not understand the meaning
459 and value that athletes assign to sport, the relationship is unlikely to work and it can have
460 detrimental effects on the athlete's sport commitment and experience. The highly individualistic
461 and outcome-oriented sport culture may be experienced to be in conflict with other-oriented and/or
462 spiritual values (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2015), and athletes who are seeking to experience a vocation
463 in sport may need to explore and solve these tensions before they can fully commit to their sport

and the work with coaches and sport psychologists. Although it was not the focus of the current paper, it should be also noted that some athletes draw upon their religious and spiritual beliefs in bringing meaning to their experiences in sport (Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015; Nesti, 2011). For a truly holistic approach to take place, it is important for sport psychology practitioners and coaches to create spaces where athletes feel that they can express deeper aspects of their identity and values and why they want to pursue their careers in sport.

Conclusions

This paper has introduced the concepts of vocation and calling as new ways to conceptualise and study careers in sport as an alternative to the traditional view of athletic careers framed within the linear models of lifespan development. Given the growth of research into vocation and calling in vocational psychology and the findings surrounding their importance for understanding career experiences and behaviour, it is timely that sport psychologists start to explore vocations and callings with athletes, coaches, and others involved in the sport life-world. Developing an understanding of whether and how sports people approach sport as a vocation and how this may shape their careers and lives would add dimensionality to our theorising and provide a new element to career counselling and applied work with athletes.

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