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Narrative Inquiry: Life Experiences of Elite Athletes

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Narrative Inquiry: Life Experiences of Elite Athletes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Human Environmental Sciences

by

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Bachelor of Science in Human Environmental Science in Human Development and Family
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Abstract

Elite athletes face numerous personal and professional pressures and high-stress experiences; however, there is a gap in the literature connecting identity development with these life experiences. Using narrative inquiry analysis with six emerging adult athletes competing at professional and Olympic levels, this study identified self-narratives they created from life experiences within the context of sport and analyzed when these meanings were formed. Athletes described experiences causing great psychological disturbances as a normal risk within their sport and needing to regulate or compartmentalize their emotions to get through those experiences. Participants discussed various roles they play within their team but lacked identifying roles outside of sport context. Results from these interviews suggest potential psychological benefits from participating in humanitarian activities. Following a humanitarian intervention, athletes were able to identify characteristics within themselves that could be labeled as performance-based identity attributes. Additionally, athletes described how volunteerism gave them an opportunity to satisfy their individual needs for purpose. Findings are relevant for applied work with athletes, coaches, and parents, as well as prioritizing athlete identity work as an important research focus.

Keywords: Elite athletes; identity development; purpose; humanitarian intervention

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Narrative Inquiry: Life Experiences of Elite Athletes

Elite athletes deal with many high-stress situations that they are expected to be resilient and overcome in the competitive atmosphere. These situations include pressure to succeed, fear of failure, social pressures, fear of injury, and higher risk for diminishing mental health, among other stressors (Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020; Walton, Purcell, & Rice, 2019). As an athlete progresses through their career to achieve an “elite” status, such as the transition from high school to college athletics or collegiate athletes transitioning into professional sports, these high-stress situations only intensify (Stambulova et al., 2020). Additionally, it is important to understand the co-occurrence of an athlete’s peak of performance and their developmental transition into emerging adulthood (broadly from 18-30 years; Saxon & Etten, 1987). In the unique environment that an elite athlete encounters, this puts them in a position that increases their risk of psychological issues, such as anxiety and depression (Beable, Fulcher, Lee, & Hamilton, 2017).

In the last few years, athlete identity development has trended within the sports research world, specifically targeting the struggle of post-sport retirement. This has led to more comprehensive approaches to working with athletes to better care for their long-term well-being and life satisfaction (Stambulova et al., 2020). Studies have shown that the nature of an athlete’s developing identity can contribute to, or sabotage, their performance and well-being (Stambulova et al., 2020). For example, an elite athlete who shows high rates of performance-based identity (a self-perception that is contingent upon successful sport performance; Houlberg, Wang, Qi, & Nelson, 2018) may also demonstrate poorer performance and an increased risk of poor mental health (Houlberg et al., 2018). In comparison, elite athletes who identify roles or purpose beyond their athletic performance show higher rates of overall well-being, resiliency,

life satisfaction post-retirement, and reduced risks to mental health (Houltberg et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2020). Together, these findings enable coaches, sports psychologist, and other researchers to better understand key factors that relate to athletes' overall well-being, as well as understand psychosocial factors that impact their sports performance. However, additional qualitative research is needed to understand how the self-narratives of elite athletes intersect with their athletic performance, mental health, and developmental needs as an emerging adult (Houltberg & Scholefield, 2020).

The aim of the current study was to expand on the understanding of purpose and identity in relation to high levels of focus and expectation related to athletic performance. Utilizing qualitative methodology to develop thematic profiles of athletes, the present research will identify the narratives athletes hold that help explain quantitative findings from previous research (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). Consequently, the goal of this study is to gain insight into the life experiences of elite athletes that shape their self-view. A narrative approach to understanding young people's sports experiences will provide a novel analytical and psychological lens to understand elite athletic identity and emerging adult development. This new understanding will benefit coaching personnel, health professionals, educators, and parents who are invested in athlete well-being and performance.

Identity Development and Elite Athletes

It was not until the early 2000's when sports psychology research began seeking more comprehensive approaches to investigate performance of elite athletes (Stambulova et al., 2020; Chen, Wu, & Chen, 2015). Meaning, before the early 2000's the research lens was mainly focused on enhancing performance of professional athletes or positive developments from involving youth in sports (Gardner, 2001). Presently, that lens has expanded to a holistic

approach to studying athletics (Stambulova et al., 2020). Additionally, current research is emphasizing mental health components among elite athletes as new studies continue to reveal the vulnerability this demographic has in relation to declining mental health (Walton et al., 2019; Beable et al., 2017). A consistent key ideology throughout this trending topic is identity development.

Identity development is an important aspect of human development as it is a crucial process to understanding individual roles and purpose in micro and macro environments (Morgan, 2012). It is cognitively important as it gives better understanding to a person's self-schemas and group schemas (Howard, 2000). A self-schema is "organized knowledge about oneself...characteristics, preferences, goals, and behavior patterns;" while group schemas are "analogues to stereotypes...gender, race, age, or class" (Howard, 2000, p 368). Developing better understandings in both of these schemas is crucial and necessary, especially during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett further specifies that identity exploration begins in the adolescent years (10-18) and continues throughout the transition to adulthood. Identity exploration is vital to emerging adulthood as young people are of age to make pivotal life choices independent of parents, caregivers, and other key adults (Arnett, 2000). To contextualize this to the athletic demographic, most elite athletes fall within the age range of emerging adults, as that is often being the peak of physical performance (Saxon & Etten, 1987).

Constricted Identity Development

According to Erikson (1968), an individual's identity is a process that bridges the individual's behavior to their social environment. Present research has since expanded on this ideology by suggesting that "individuals are composed of multidimensional identities" (Moazami-Goodarzi, Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2020, p .132). This means individuals identify

themselves in more than one role, such as identifying oneself to being a mother, sister, daughter, and businesswoman. Identity exploration in emerging adulthood often centers around those things that are most important to the young person. This process of exploration across different roles can also create a self-awareness of what is most meaningful to the young adult (Arnett, 2000). Challenges can emerge when a person restricts their sense of identity to one particular domain and is unable to identify the importance of other roles they fulfill (Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2020). Elite athletes are particular risk of a constricted identity to sports because their worlds have often revolved around this domain for much of their lives (Brewer et al., 1993; Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2020). However, a more multidimensional view of athlete identity is necessary to examine potential areas for intervention.

Self-Narrative Profiles of Elite Athletes

Athletes often derive a story about themselves or a narrative identity that emerges from a more multidimensional self-view. There has been some research that has examined these self-views at an aggregate and variable level but there is a need for further work to understand the intersection of these self-views at a person level. Houlberg and colleagues (2018) examined narrative identity profiles of elite athletes with multiple measures of self-views (e.g. contingent self-worth, perfectionism, fear of failure, global self-worth, purpose, post-career self). They found three profiles of elite athletes. The performance-based narrative identity has been defined as athletes who value their self-worth based on performance, fear of failure, and have perfectionist tendencies (Houlberg et al., 2018). Athletes with this self-narrative also reflected the “lowest level of life satisfaction” and “highest levels of depression, anxiety, and shame” (Houlberg et al., 2018, p. 1). Purpose-based narrative identity is held by athletes who show high sense of purpose, “global self-worth,” and self-confidence post retirement (Houlberg et al.,

2018). Contrasted with performance-based narrative identity, purpose-based narrative shows the best mental health outcomes (Houlberg et al., 2018). Lastly, mixed-type profile which was showed to be better than performance-based narrative identity by better psychological well-being but falls short in comparison to purpose-based narrative identity (Houlberg et al., 2018 p. 1). This person-centered approach to understanding self-narrative holds promise for intervention as narrative identities can be revised especially for young adults as an active time for identity exploration.

Self-narratives of elite athletes can also include the way they interact with social media. This has become a growing need to understand as most elite athletes are required by their contracts to post on their social media for increasing brand awareness of sponsors.

Mental Health and Elite Athletes

Elite athletes also face a tremendous amount of pressure to perform as their livelihood often depends on their performance, which often require a personal and relational sacrifices to reach their goals (Coker-Cranney, Huysmans, & Swary, 2020; Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015). Elite athletes often necessarily have to create a world that revolves around their own training, eating and recovery schedule that can create challenges for a focus on anything outside of that sport. The high stakes coupled with the constricted identity around their sport can create psychological disruption (e.g. eating disorders, anxiety, depression) when they feel they have fallen short of their goals or they may also find shortcuts to reaching their goals such as using banned performance-enhancing substances (Coker-Cranney et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2013; Reardon et al., 2021). However, there is need for more research to understand the biopsychosocial factors that promote and undermine the emotional health of elite athletes (Reardon et al., 2019).

Elite athletes are vulnerable to psychological disruption and poorer functioning (Walton

et al., 2019; Coker-Cranney et al., 2020). Specifically, recent research states that “peak physical condition among athletes obscure their mental health needs” (Walton et al., 2019, p. 1530). More elite athletes have turned to social media or other public outlets to speak on their personal mental health journey and struggles (Walton et al., 2019). Walton et al. (2019) argue that sporting organizations are not promoting psychosocial well-being enough, as well as not providing enough access to mental health resources. It is important for this to shift, as athletes tend to not be perceived as weak or vulnerable (and certainly avoid appearing so), which inhibits seeking help for internal struggles (Walton et al., 2019). The present study will explore concerns of disruption of psychological well-being among elite athletes and, in turn, give more credibility to the need of promoting and providing mental health risk prevention resources.

Thriving in Sports

It is also important to note that many elite athletes have community and individual strengths that help them face the tremendous pressure of elite competition. Recently, there has been a focus on promoting thriving in sports that is defined as the perception of high levels of performance *and* well-being over a sustained amount of time (Brown et al., 2018; Brown, Passaportis, & Hays, 2021). This is important as research has focused on either performance or well-being and there is growing body of work as well as high profile athletes speaking up in the media on how well-being impacts performance. Although the concept of thriving is fairly new in the context of sports, there is a robust amount of work from positive youth development and positive psychology that may provide an additional contribution to this important area of research. Mainly, the concept of thriving in these fields moves beyond “well-being” to include a self-orientation around making a positive contribution and connection to others and beyond the self (Schnitker, King & Houlberg, 2019).

There has been some research examining “transcendent motivation” and connection within sporting contexts. For example, adolescents and emerging adults that ran a charitable marathon that grew in transcendent motivation experienced growth in positive character strengths compared to runners that had more instrumental motivation (e.g. get fit, lose weight; Schnitker et al., 2019). In another study with the same sample, Shubert and colleagues (2020) found self-control was predictive of marathon race times and runners that found their self-worth contingent on performance showed the largest decreases in self-control throughout training and post-race. This was not the case for the runners that had a values-based self-worth. The themes of social connection, purpose, transcendent connection, and identity also emerged in a qualitative study of runners in this sample (Terrell et al., 2021).

The above studies were related to indicators of thriving in non-elite samples, but they also correspond to the benefits of a purpose-based narrative identity for elite athletes cited earlier (Houlberg et al., 2018). Additionally, there have been some studies that have examined the impact of transcendent connection and spiritual practices on elite athlete self-narratives and mental health (Schnitker et al., 2020; Houlberg et al., 2017). These studies highlighted the importance of elite athlete perceptions of the divine and importance of spiritual practices associated with both indicators of thriving and psychological disruption. However, further research is warranted to explore these themes in elite athlete samples.

Taken together, these studies suggest that a strong support system and sense of purpose can help elite athletes expand their self-narrative and turn to others for support. The sense of connection to others and to cause bigger than the self may provide opportunities for elite athletes to gain bigger understanding of themselves and the value they can have in the world beyond just their athletic performance (Houlberg & Scholefield, 2020). With the high level of demand on an

elite athlete's time, it may be difficult to prioritize meaningful relationships or have meaningful experiences that expose them to contributing to something bigger than themselves. It is important to get a greater understanding of how elite athletes integrate the sources of support and inspiration into their narrative identity to inform future research and non-sport related prevention and intervention strategies.

Relationship Quality and Thriving

It is hard to overstate the importance of relationships to deal with adversity and thriving in life. There has been a tremendous amount of research that has shown that healthy relationships have lasting psychophysiological and neurological impacts throughout the lifespan (Benson & Scales, 2009). Relationships are identified as central to thriving through strengthening coping with adversity and promoting opportunity for growth and meaning (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Benson & Scales, 2009). The perception of social support has been consistently linked to positive outcomes for the general public but there are fewer studies examining this correlation in elite athlete samples. There have been mixed findings from studies on the role relationships for elite athlete thriving in terms of performance and coping with stress (Brown et al., 2017; Malinaukas, 2010). The perception of social support by athletes has been linked to wellbeing and life satisfaction (Malinaukas, 2010); however, another study found that perceived social support was not enough to predict elite athletes having a thriving profile (e.g., wellbeing and performance; Brown et al., 2017).

In sports environments, there is an abundance of high stress situations (Malinaukas, 2010), but fewer resources for emotional or social problems that might be difficult to express. Malinaukas (2010) defined social support as the "social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them by a non-professional in the context of both

formal groups and informed helping relationships” (p 743). This social support can come from fellow teammates, peers, or family members (Malinaukas, 2010). It is imperative to the psychological well-being of the elite athlete to maintain or create this social support system, as research has found support to buffer the high stress they endure (Malinaukas, 2010). It achieves this by having more of an affect through psychological adjustment in comparison to the psychological disruption that the stress can cause (Malinaukas, 2010). Social support has such a powerful impact that it is suggested it can even eliminate the stress reaction by directly affecting physiological processes (Malinaukas, 2010).

This impact is disabled unless the individual athlete perceives that they have the social support. This is a key understanding. Current research emphasizes this by suggesting that *perceiving* social support was more impactful in comparison to “actual social support” (Malinaukas, 2010, p. 743). This means if the individual does not believe they have access to social support (or does not feel comfortable using it), then it has no affect. In having this perceived view of social support, research findings show higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction post-retirement (Malinaukas, 2010). There is plentiful research on how social support can impact the general public, but there is still much to explore in the context of sports with this new key understanding of perception of social support. The present research will not only explore athletes’ support systems (within and outside of sports), but also their perceptions of these supports and willingness to rely on them.

Opportunities for Beyond-the-Self Motivation

Research suggests that humans are programmed to be egocentric, but these tendencies slowly decrease as we age and become more altruistic (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). In fact, research by Twenge (2013) suggests that emerging adulthood is a peak period of self-focus and

narcissistic tendencies (which coincides with peak athletic performance). As these tendencies decrease with age, a desire to help others emerges, “even at the cost” to ourselves (Haski-Leventhal, 2009, p 275). This can be seen under certain circumstances such as in the athletic world in a team atmosphere when each individual is helping one another to attain a similar goal (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). This could be considered mutual altruism, which is sensitive to others and focused on fulfilling responsibilities associated with the different roles a person embodies (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). Each individual on the team has a specific role in achieving success.

In transitions to a career outside of the athletic context, through volunteerism and charity work, it can be suggested that the individual will continue to move through the stages of altruism from mutual altruism to conscientious altruism, which is defined as pro-social behavior guided by internal sense of social responsibility (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). This is important to note as there is lacking research on interventions designed to shift athletes’ self-narratives based on performance to a healthier one based on purpose. This suggests the possibility of utilizing altruistic experiences such as volunteering, to give a new role or motivate new purpose for the elite athlete to explore. Additionally, volunteerism can generate a “psychological sense of community” (Haski-Leventhal, 2009, p. 278). This is imperative to note in relation to sports context as this means it can provide a sense of belonging to individuals outside the context of sports. Volunteerism research suggests such experiences facilitate belongingness through the process of altruism by giving meaning to their life as well as a sense of connection and community (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). The current study will expand on this limited research by exploring if humanitarian work can be seen as an intervention tool to help elite athletes shift from a performance-based narrative to a more purpose-based narrative.

Current Study

The purpose of the present research with elite athletes is to identify self-narratives they created from life experiences within the context of sport, as well as to explore when these meanings were formed. The study aims to address specific research questions. First, does participating in a humanitarian intervention give them a sense of belonging to a community? Additionally, does it provide a new sense or awareness of purpose to identify with or explore? Currently, there is a lack of research on interventions that may shift athlete's performance-based narratives to more of a purpose-base (Houltberg et. al, 2018). Research suggests that participating in community-building and altruistic interventions should grant some sense of purpose as athletes work together to achieve a motivational goal outside of the sports context (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). Lastly, do athletes' life experiences within the context of sports show concern about or struggles with psychological disturbances? Through exploring elite athlete narratives, it is expected that patterns will emerge that will provide insight into their identity work, how humanitarian activities may interplay with these identities, and whether athletes are concerned about or have struggled with psychosocial or mental health problems.

Crafting thematic profiles through utilizing story-telling or self-narratives from athletes will give depth and expand the limited research currently available. Specifically, the goal is to expand understanding of elite athletes who may prioritize their athletic identity over other domains. Findings will provide insight into how athletic identity relates to psychological well-being and life satisfaction from the perspective of the athlete, using a qualitative, narrative approach.

Methodology

Participants

Following IRB approval for secondary data analysis, data for this study came from a

previously conducted, larger-scale project that included interviews with 10 elite athletes from 2017-2019 surrounding a humanitarian activity. Six of the 10 transcripts had sufficient detail to be utilized with a narrative analytic approach. All six participants were emerging adult males from a single professional/elite sport between 18-30 years of age. Race and ethnicity were self-identified as follows: Caucasian (60%), Multiracial/Multiethnic (30%), LatinX (10%). See Nelson (2020) for a more complete description of the overarching study from which present data was drawn.

Procedure

Participants were recruited into the study with a reward of a 20\$ Amazon gift card, if non-NCAA athlete (Nelson, 2020). NCAA athletes received a 20\$ Amazon gift reward as well, but per NCAA regulation, were provided the opportunity to donate it to a charity of their choice (Nelson, 2020). One interview was conducted during the humanitarian experience and all remaining interviews were completed after the humanitarian service trip. Eight of the 10 participants were interviewed within two weeks following the trip. The last two interviews were conducted within the year following the service trip. Interviews of participants were conducted following a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions (Nelson, 2020) grouped in broad categories as follows:

- Introduction (Identifying information)
- Background Self- Narrative (life story and athletic highlights)
- Charitable Experience (motivation to volunteer, personal meaning related to participation)
- Self-Narrative (description of self, views of self, feelings toward self, personal motivation and meaning)
- Struggle (experiences of challenges, how challenges are approached, relationships during

challenges, feelings towards oneself during challenges)

- Social Media (behaviors related to social media, feelings towards the self and others during social media use)
- Future Narrative (view of the future, anticipated duration of competition)
- Purpose (articulation of purpose)

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with constant comparisons to the audio to ensure transcript quality.

Analysis

Using Nvivo qualitative software, transcripts from each interview were analyzed using a modified narrative inquiry approach (Priorer & Aryes, 1997). This approach is a compatible and useful method of investigating meanings from individual's voiced life experiences. This methodology is grounded in "overreading" or meticulous reading within each individual case (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). This narrative tool is used to identify implicit meanings, rather than explicit (Ayres et al.), which involves looking for patterns within and across the narratives that participants shared. Narrative inquiry identifies the repetition of phrases or words, when a question is avoided or evaded by answering another question in depth (treated as omissions), and incongruences when cases contradicted themselves (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). Sensitized from research on purpose and performance (Houltberg et al, 2018), these meanings and patterns were identified within the context of each individual case, with no assumptions, through annotation and tracking using Nvivo. Analyzing "with no assumptions" means that what experience happened in one story, may not be interpreted the same or appear at all in the next story. Each participant's profile was analyzed and described independently and thematically. Then, these themes were compared/contrasted across profiles. Each individual

profile provided implicit meaning in relation to the participant's athletic career and life experiences through the narrative of storytelling (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003).

Results

Across the six participant profiles, 11 themes were identified with varying frequency and importance in each athlete's narrative. Table 1 lists each theme based on presence in individual profiles. Themes of self-awareness, community and relationships, attitude toward sport, resiliency, perception of social media, and family role were present in all profiles, while purpose, psychological disturbances, financial stress, generosity, and faith were only present in a few. A detailed summary of each profile was recorded for analysis and cross-profile comparisons, with description and exemplary quotes corresponding to each theme present in their narrative. After profiling each athlete, each theme was read across profiles to illustrate how profiles experienced and described each concept within their narrative (see Table 2). Results from comparing themes across profiles is detailed below, beginning with the most prevalent theme of self-awareness, which was key for athletes to have in order to share their self-narrative during their interview.

Self-Awareness (246 codes, 23% of coded thematic data)

Self-awareness or self-talk refers to each participant's descriptions of themselves or lack of description or self-understanding. Many, but not all, self-descriptions were physical in nature, meaning individuals were able to describe physically what their bodies could do and their role within the athletic context, such as how many miles they could cycle without stopping, understanding when they need to do more recovery sessions, and other general descriptions of their body's overall physical limitations and needs. In Profile 3's case, he speaks on how he views himself as an athlete,

“As an athlete, I would venture to say that I'm, I have a leader mentality but also very hardworking person. On my team at least I try to do this in life where you see something that you see a hole in and some kind of plan or something and anywhere you just have to be that person to fill that gap.”

Overall, there was a notable lack of self-description in relation non-physical or sports-oriented aspects of who they are, such as if they are patient, generous, or any other non-physical characteristics. Perfectionist tendencies (self-described or apparent) were evident throughout the narratives. For example, Profile 4 commented *“that's why I'll call myself a recovering perfectionist because I've probably once was a perfectionist and more tried to allow myself and give myself permission to be a mess.”* These tendencies were evident whether profiles self-disclosed their perfectionist tendencies, self-identified as a “recovered” perfectionist, or made contradicting statements about describing perfectionism (but were denying they were a perfectionist). All in all, there was more voiced descriptions of themselves within the athletic context focusing on their body’s physical attributes, versus the voiced descriptions of internal characteristics of who they are as a person in general.

Community & Relationships (240 codes, 22%)

When voicing their life experiences, the topic of community and relationships came up often. When referring to community, participants would mainly refer to their specific sport’s community. This could include their fellow athletic peers, their coaches, and the coaches’ staff. There was a lack of discussion of communities outside the athletic context. Defining relationships and how they invest in relationships varied among the profiles. There was consensus across profiles that being an elite athlete highly impacts your relationships. Being away for long periods of time, even as long as 10 months as Profile 5 discussed, can be very

straining and hard on relationships. Despite this, Profile 3 shares another perspective of this narrative,

“It's relieving. I know I have someone that will be there for me, someone that I can turn to and I will get a pure honest answer. They're not going to sugar coat it and also, they're there for me in times of hurt. When I said that, you know, when I lost a friend of mine in [deleted]... They reached out to me every day for almost a month to make sure I was ok emotionally, mentally, how I was doing... So, they're super supportive when it comes to crunchtime.”

If they are able to surround themselves with a support system, profiles voiced how their teammates were there for them during their lowest points in their personal or athletic life and relieved stress.

Purpose (216 codes, 20%)

Purpose can be interpreted in numerous ways. For this current study, purpose includes the desire to be a part of something bigger than one-self and was discussed in participants' plans post-retirement from sport and in descriptions of their current plans of how they are fulfilling their sense of purpose. Participants described that they are not only representing themselves, but their team and even some at the international level. There also appeared to be a universal understanding that this lifestyle of being an elite athlete is temporary, therefore they must fully focus on it and enjoy every fleeting moment. For example, Profile 6 expresses:

“So, I'm taking advantage of the opportunity now and that's something that really drives me, making the most of what I have at my disposal right now. And then also there's such a...I've really loved...I feel I've found a good healthy lifestyle balance between training and racing, but then also working to invest in relationships in my community and then

working on the side. Its kind is a lot to juggle but I love it. And chasing that balance is something that really motivates me, so that's big part."

In addition to this, across the profiles, there was consensus in understanding that being a part of the elite athletic community is an honor. When discussing and defining their purpose, the profiles almost exclusively framed it within their athletic context versus any aspect of life outside of it.

Attitude Toward Sport (105 codes, 10%)

Attitude toward sport reveals the reasonings voiced by the profiles as to why they have a passion for the sport. Overall, the common factor amongst the profiles is that the sport satisfies a certain want or need that the profile desires. For Profiles 2 and 3, they have a passion for travel and understanding other cultures. Profile 2 specifically discussed how when you are an elite athlete and you travel, you are not just another tourist. In fact, you experience a "*cultural immersion*" that he voices you cannot experience as a regular traveler,

"You know, like it's just areally fun way to see kinda new cultures that you wouldn't normally get to see. And I think for me, one of the big things that hooked me was that when you travel as tourists not [deleted] related, you always like, no matter what you do or how much you pay, you're always on the outside looking in."

Similarly, Profile 5 used sport as a means of travel until recently. Now he utilizes his sport as a form of self-care to reflect and meditate. Profiles 4 and 6 both voiced how they enjoy the psychology aspect of their sport. Meaning that, through their sport they are able to continuously practice or challenge their perspective by finding a lesson in their failures related to sport so that they may grow as an athlete. Lastly, Profile 1 continuously spoke with high gratitude toward the sport and feeling very honored to be a part of this elite community. The other five profiles echoed this perspective. All in all, each profile expressed an attitude toward their sport, but the

detail behind the reasoning varied.

Resiliency (86 codes, 8%)

According to participants, resiliency is a skill or mindset that is necessary to have as an elite athlete. It is the mindset that enables a person to recover quickly from difficulties, disciplined in training and overcome obstacles that are thrown their way. The specific obstacles varied among profiles, but the theme of resiliency was expressed the same. One of the stressors described was the pressures of how people perceive you. Profile 5 simply stated how resiliency skills need to develop and takes time, *“So yeah, it’s taken a while to not put that pressure on myself or worry about what other people are thinking.”* Profiles emphasized that, without a resiliency mindset, an athlete simply will not last at the elite level due to all the stressors within this environment.

Perception of Social Media (61 codes, 6%)

In recent years, usage of social media has turned into a tool to gain sponsors for many athletes. Usage of social media platforms varies from these profiles based on their comfortability and perception of the specific platform. Overall, it was consistently voiced that the platform Facebook was for personal usage to connect with others within their sport from either international or local levels. Instagram was seen as a tool for financial gain in marketing for sponsors to pay for their travels and competitions. For example, Profile 2 explained:

“Facebook for me it’s kinda interesting. It’s a really good way for me to stay connected with this international [deleted] community...I’m not like selling a product for me. Instagram on the other hand. It’s definitely like, it has a lot of value for my current team. I sometimes run my team’s Instagram when I’m traveling. So, with that I try to post every day or at least every otherday.”

There was a consensus of enjoying Facebook across the profiles, but mixed feelings

towards Instagram. Additionally, they all voice that social media platforms are now another added form of pressure onto them. There are various reasons they had for this, but the main two were the pressures of how they are perceived by others and insecurities from comparing themselves to other athletes.

Faith (60 codes, 2%)

Depending on the profile, faith was seen as a tool to enable a resilient mindset, as a guide of how they should live, or a way to regulate their emotions in relation to things that are out of their means of control. Not all profiles discussed spirituality or faith. Profile 1, 3, 4, and 6 go into detail of how faith is a strength of theirs that have helped lead them to achieve the status of an elite athlete. For example, Profile 3 states:

“So, there's emotional and physical downfalls to this sport, but uh, that's kinda where my religious background or my spiritual background of Christianity comes in where there's a lot of things out of my control that I have to kinda trust that God has the wheel on that. And that you know, I take safety in that that you've got my best interest at heart.”

For these profiles, faith provided a sense of security.

Family Role (22 codes, 2%)

Similar to community and relationships, families are a form of relationship that played an important, influential role in all the athletes' lives. The individual family roles varied from placing the participant in youth sports programs at a young age, bought them their first sport's equipment, the athlete's main support system, or even played the role as the athlete's trainer. A few expressed how some of their favorite memories from their career included a family member that was there and was able to witness their athletic successes. For example, Profile 6 shared:

“My mom flew out for I think like four days, in total there were 10 days of [deleted], but

she came out one day and it was so much fun, because she got to see hands on what this [deleted] looked like. And just had fun exploring a new place and so I think that was definitely a highlight, one of my favorite memories.”

All in all, family has played an important role that the athletes believe to have influenced them or helped them to get to where they are today and show gratitude towards that. They believe that their great successes would not have been possible without the help or partial help from their family.

Generosity (17 codes, 2%)

Participating in the humanitarian service trip sparked self-reflection in some profiles in understanding their privilege and desire to do more to ‘give-back.’ They specifically discuss how it brought about a need to become more generous. Profiles 2, 3, 4, and 6 voiced how their individual experiences have led them to more volunteerism or the desire to do more acts of generosity. For example, Profile 6 shared,

“A much more positive impact and there was a lot of...I don’t know. I’m much more motivated or driven or satisfied, if that’s the right word, leaving the trip because it’s more like, ‘Hey, I’ve had this opportunity to give back and I wanna do it more now because it’s like look at what I have at my disposal. Let’s use those resources to give back.”

Psychological Disturbances (16 codes, 1%)

Psychological disturbances refer to the high stressors that elite athletes endure that may impact their mental health. The profiles voiced intense experiences that they have endured, witnessed, or both. There are many high risks involved in elite sports, even the risk of fatality in some cases due to extreme injury. For instance, Profile 4 comments on simply the fear of

engaging in this sport and accepting the risks of injury, *“Injury is just hard just hitting the ground going really fast. Not having skin on your body.”* Profiles 3, 4, 5, and 6 voiced varying high-stressed situations that these athletes endure so that they can compete at an elite level.

Financial Stress (10 codes, 1%)

As previously discussed above, these elite athletes describe how they used social media platforms as another outlet for income or sponsorships for their travels. The main reasoning this usage is due to the low salary that they each received. Financial stress refers to the frustration that the profiles express in relation to their income from sport. Profile 4 voiced how most of the elite athletes he works with receive *‘\$15,000’ a year.* Profile 2 further describes how this salary is a *‘total joke’* and that it’s *‘not enough to live off.’* Profiles 1, 2, 3, and 4 all explained how this is why this the elite athlete lifestyle is temporary. They each would love to continue to be a full-time athlete, but it is simply not financially supportive enough. For example, Profile 3 stated,

“Yeah, [deleted] is kinda my cap for that [retiring]. Because at that point I realize that unless I’m making enough money to set myself up for the rest of my life, I need something just responsibly to be able to support a family and myself.”

They have other goals such as raising a family, and they do not believe it is realistic to be a full-time elite athlete while also supporting the family they desire.

Discussion

Using interviews to craft and compare qualitative profiles of six elite athletes, the current study emphasizes the value of narrative inquiry understanding and framing young athlete’s life experiences. This approach provided depth and extracted themes that give insight into patterns related to athlete identity development, how humanitarian activities may shift these identities, and the psychological disturbances that pose risks to elite athletes (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl,

2003). Looking at the first aim, does participating in a humanitarian intervention give them a sense of belonging to a community, this study shows how altruistic events can empower these elite athletes to have experiences outside of their “*athletic bubble*” and self-reflect to better understand themselves. Houltberg et. al’s (2018) research suggests that having athletes volunteer provides a tangible role outside the athletic context, and thus experiences to help further develop their sense of identity. This study exhibits how the humanitarian service trip enabled the athletes to self-reflect. In some, the self-reflection led to insight of comparing how they grew up versus those outside of their “*athletic bubble*.” In other profiles, the altruistic event not only provided a sense of belonging to a community but additionally sparked other possible avenues of purpose outside of the athletic context. For example, Profile 2 has always had this desire to give back to his own community and other communities in need of help but has been limited to doing so only in athletic context. He enjoyed this humanitarian trip as he was able to utilize other skillsets that he enjoys, unrelated to athletics. Since this trip, he has continued to be a part of volunteer communities. Profile 3 and 6 voiced how their experiences were very empowering and enabled them to better understand the resources they have in comparison to those they were helping. This sparked within them the desire to use their own resources or skill set to volunteer. In these specific profiles, they each self-reflect to understand better how to use their skills outside of athletics, and then thus discovering a new sense of purpose to further explore. Due to the profiles ability to identify a new role during this humanitarian service trip, they felt inclusion within the context of this community. Referring to the research question of whether altruistic activities can provide a sense of belonging to a community outside the athletic context and if it can help shift an elite athlete’s performance-based narrative, this study shows the possibility of it doing so. Not all profiles commented on an enlightenment with themselves, but over half did. This exhibits the

potential that utilizing altruistic events may have. More robust research is needed to analyze the potential of altruistic events in relation to this.

Results extend previous literature describing the hyper-performative environment that elite athletes live in and the psychological disturbances they may endure (Walton et al., 2019; Coker-Cranney et al., 2020). This study explored whether athletes' life experiences within the context of sports showed concern for or struggles with psychological disturbances. Findings show that there is a concern among some athletes for the psychological disturbances that elite athletes endure. Profiles 3 and 4 voiced how not only did they witness a fellow teammate die from injuries he endured, but Profile 3 was also a part of the incident that resulted in their teammate's injury and his own serious injury. Profile 4 witnessed the event, causing trauma that was difficult to cope with. Similarly, Profile 6 endured an intense injury. His injury was also hard to cope with but for different reasons. He described how athletes have a mindset where they almost feel invincible and how this injury was an "*ego-check*" for him. The injury, surgery, and recovery process, combined with the inability to play his sport, was excruciating for him. Profile 5 discussed the stressors from the public he endured. When he stepped back from being full-time, he received much criticism for his lowered performance as a result of him no longer training 40 hours a week. These findings suggest that athletes do endure psychological disturbances – often stemming from physical adversities, but further supports utilizing social support to minimize these stressors and overcome them. The fact that so many participants brought up traumatic experiences causing psychological challenges, but only minimally elaborated on them, points to a potential area for development in athletic culture – trauma-informed coaching.

While some studies frame sports as an outlet for young people with traumatic histories

(e.g., D'Andrea & Bergholz, 2013; Darroch, Roett, Varcoe, Oliffe, & Gonzalez Montaner, 2020; Massey & Johnson, 2020), an important future direction is coaching individuals who experience physical or psychological trauma *through the course of* athletic participation. Much of the literature on this topic focuses on athlete's physical recovery or biopsychosocial growth following career-ending injuries (e.g., Crawford, Gayman, & Tracey, 2014; Machida, Irwin, & Feltz, 2013). Other studies focus on the psychological distress of physical strain, being injured (especially gravely), or witnessing injuries or death. Among those studies, emotional trauma and adverse coping behaviors were prominent experiences among athletes (Mankad, Gordon, & Wallman, 2009). Studies building on this work focus on "hardiness," "self-development," and resilience and avoiding links between psychological disturbance and poor recovery or performance. Clearly resilience is an optimal objective, but this focus in an elite sports context could align with a performance-based mentality of "getting back out there at all costs" (Roy-Davis, Wade, & Evans, 2017; Wade, Evans, Hanton, & Neil, 2012; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). More research is needed in this area and to shape a framework that prepares coaches to not only work with athletes who may have experienced childhood adversity, but support youth who experience adversity and trauma within the context of their sport in ways that expand beyond sport achievement and promote continued performance and success (particularly at elite levels where personal wellness is often sacrificed for performance).

Combatting these types of psychological disturbances, present findings provide support for Malinaukas's (2010) suggestion of utilizing social support to reduce or eliminate stressors causing psychological disturbances. Participants voiced how they were unsure how they would have been able to push through stressors without the help of their social support. Specifically, Profile 3 voices how he is unsure where he would be without his main support system when

recovering from traumatic injury. Profile 5 used to identify highly with how his reputation was perceived, but through the support of his family and close friends, he was able to endure harsh criticism and is currently doing his best to switch his mental state to not worry what the public thinks of him. In each of the profiles that exhibited psychological disturbances (Profiles 3, 4, 5, 6), they described the importance of having social support (Community & Relationships, Family Role) to combat those stressors.

Lastly, this study warrants the potential of altruistic events being utilized as a means of assisting athletes' transition from performance-based identity to purpose-based identity. Throughout Profile 6's narrative of self-awareness, he discussed his love of achieving excellence and how he is naturally gifted in the athletic context. Competing within this sport context came easy to him. Profile 6's narrative demonstrated a mixed-based narrative with descriptions of perfectionist tendencies and internally motivated by joy (Houltberg et al., 2018). Similarly, Profiles 3 and 4 describe their journey with their perfectionist tendencies. In contrast to Profile 6, these profiles demonstrated more awareness of these tendencies. Profiles 3 and 4 described being "*recovering perfectionists*." Profile 4 recognized that he had already taken accountability of this characteristic and had been working on it ever since. His narrative discussed how he went from a fixed mindset to a progressive perspective throughout his athletic career - he is internally motivated from joy, and not fear (Houltberg et al., 2018). In contrast to Profile 4, Profile 3's narrative did not explicitly discuss his narrative as meticulously as Profile 4 did. Profile 3's self-awareness narrative was revealed through his description of why he enjoys his sport of choice. This revealed his desire to continuously progress in something that he excels at, motivated by joy and not fear, as well as his joy for adrenaline from high-risk situations. Together, study profiles further support for Houltberg et al.'s (2018) findings by voicing the story behind how the athletes

developed those mindsets, particularly over-identifying with the single athletic identity domain (Houltberg, Wang, Qi, & Nelson , 2018).

Profile 1's recollection of self-awareness highly contrasted with Profile 6. Profile 1 discussed how he grew up in a low-income family and had to work hard while being patient for the result. This resulted in him understanding that achievements and successes do not come easy to him. He described how he is strong-willed in ignoring surrounding peers who question his potential. He said he is a patient man, as he plays more of a long game strategically as he is very mentally strong. Profile 2 and 5 exhibited a different perspective of self-awareness in comparison with the other profiles. Profile 2 and 5 engaged in self-talk describing where they currently are in life. Profile 2 currently desired freedom and independence. He has a joy for sport and competition, but not a need for a win. This highlights how performance-based narrative differs from purpose-based (Houltberg, Wang, Qi, & Nelson , 2018; Houltberg et al., 2018). Profile 2's self-worth does not come from how he performs, therefore the overall need to win is irrelevant in relation to his passion for sport. He has a view that winning is a consequence, not an internal motivator. Profile 5 in comparison, has a desire to win but understands his body's current limitation. Previously, he had a great need for win similar to Profile 6's self-talk, but through the journey of being an athlete has come to understand that winning was not something he valued over being able to push his body to its limit in competition. He discovered he had a great love of competition and desire to help other athletes. Profile 5's narrative journey warrants an understanding that the shift from performance-based to purpose-based can be tangible (Houltberg et al., 2018; Houltberg, Wang, Qi, & Nelson , 2018).

Each profile summary suggested what type of athlete self-narrative they have as defined by Houltberg et al. (i.e., performance-based narrative, mixed type narrative, and purpose-based

narrative; 2018). Through the humanitarian service experienced by participants, findings suggested they were challenged to self-reflect outside of an athletic context. Due to this further exploration, each profile voiced further understanding of their competitive drive, in relation to their perfectionist tendencies. Additionally, as noted earlier, most of the profiles discussed discovering a new desire or purpose of generosity to use their skills outside the athletic context to volunteer. This suggests a shift toward a more purpose-based narrative, fulfilling their sense of purpose in more than one singular (athletic) domain.

Strengths and Limitations

Several aspects of this study warrant consideration. First, the sample for this study lacked diversity. All profiles were male, of a single sport, and most of the sample was Caucasian (60%). Second, this study only included six elite athletes. More representative samples are needed to extend findings to other demographics and sports. Participants were also primed to consider some of the themes discussed in this study through their participation of the service trip, as it included lectures or small gatherings discussing performance-based and purpose-based self-narratives. An interview prior to a humanitarian intervention would help compare the responses following the altruistic event to further understand growth or change and better understand responses.

Previous research in relation to athletic identity has relied on numerical data showing how many elite athletes follow negative pathways, such as depression or substance abuse, as a consequence of their performance-based narrative. There is limited research prioritizing the voiced life experiences from athletes performing at the apex of their sport, telling their own stories and rationale as to why and how they follow different paths. The current study filled this void to provide insight into potential strategies and interventions to help shift maladaptive

narratives, disrupt adverse pathways, and promote resiliency (Ayres, Kavanaugh,& Knafl, 2003). The narrative inquiry approach is a compatible and useful method of drawing meaning out of individual's voiced life experiences (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). More narrative approaches are needed to identify specific interventions and approaches of working with elite athletes to promote performance, develop healthy purpose, and support post-sport retirement transitions.

Conclusion

Although conclusions from this study must be tentative, due to the small, specific sample, a clear finding was repeated throughout the narratives and analysis: young people involved in athletics (especially at the elite level) would benefit from expanding their self-knowledge, community support, and sense of purpose beyond the athletic context. Particularly among individuals facing retirement from their life's work during emerging adulthood. Athletes themselves described their career as temporary and elite status as "fleeting," but were unable or unwilling to focus on a sense of purpose, resiliency, and support outside of their current athletic context. Potential implications are to educate practitioners such as coaches and sports psychologist who work with elite athletes to ensure the athletes are on track in developing purpose-based narrative. This will benefit the athlete's well-being, as well as increasing their physical performance (Stambulova et al., 2020). There are opportunities to educate elite athletes on holistic benefits volunteer work may provide – within and outside of the sports context. Ideally there will be an emergence of focus on purpose-based narratives at collegiate and professional levels of sport competition to simultaneously promote achievement and wellness.

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Appendix

Table 1. Theme Comparison Across Profiles.

<i>Themes</i>	<u>Profile 1</u>	<u>Profile 2</u>	<u>Profile 3</u>	<u>Profile 4</u>	<u>Profile 5</u>	<u>Profile 6</u>
<i>Self-Awareness/Self-Talk</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Community & Relationships</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Purpose</i>	X	X	X	X		X
<i>Resiliency</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Perception of Social Media</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Faith</i>	X		X	X		X
<i>Attitude Toward Sport</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Family Role</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Generosity</i>		X	X	X		X
<i>Psychological Disturbances</i>			X	X	X	X
<i>Financial Stress</i>	X	X	X	X		

Table 2. Summary of themes found across profiles. Words deleted to protect privacy are denoted as [X]; profile source is noted as (P#).

Theme	Summary	Exemplary Quote(s)
<p>Self-Awareness / Self-Talk</p>	<p>Profiles described themselves in various aspects such as where they are currently within their sport, their defined role in sport, their body’s physical limits, their competitive ranking compared to peers and/or competitors, and overall comments in relation to self. Overall, the athletes self-talk was in relation to athletic context. Individuals rarely commented on roles and self-talk outside of their sport.</p>	<p><i>“I think I was always... Nothing ever came easy for me. I always had to work extremely hard for what I had, and it never came quickly so I, even when I was expected to do well, more often than not it didn’t happen when it was expected. It always happened a little bit later so just the determination to keep challenging myself. I also knew in my own way, I knew that I was capable of more, so I was always, it didn’t matter what anyone else said or felt or thought or questioned, or anything like that I always knew in my heart that I was capable of doing of any result. I always took the mentality that I was very comfortable in a war of attrition.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve fully realized that I’m at a very selfish point in my life. And I have this ability to travel and kind of, almost do whatever I want because I don’t have a real job, I don’t have like a 9-5 job, no kids and no wife and so I’m able to do this really cool traveling [X] bum thing. And so right now, definitely my compass is like I do what I want. You know?”(P2)</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t see myself ever probably winning the highest level of [X] again and it is discouraging sometimes but then I have to think and look back and say, ‘You know, I had the opportunity to [X] full-time and that’s what I did. I train my butt off and did everything right and now my circumstances in life right now are different.’ So, at first it was a bummer realizing that I might not win, but I’m still in the sport just because I love it and I want to compete. And now it’s like, I want to try to help others have that feeling or that result and if I’m able to do that while still working, that would be a big achievement for me.” (P5)</i></p>
<p>Community & Relationships</p>	<p>Athletes discussed how support from their athletic community and family members was very important to them for their overall well-being. They clearly described high dependency on support individuals to enable resiliency within themselves. The supporting relationships discussed were mainly teammates, coaches, and peers within the athletic context. Individuals named as social support outside the athletic context were rarely non-family members.</p>	<p><i>“As I’m sitting there on the couch with a busted [X] after surgery and so bummed and disappointed and people telling me, ‘Hey, it’s okay to be sad now. It’s okay to be disappointed. But rest now and when the time comes, you’re going to train really hard and you’re going to rebound, and you’ll get there.’ Which is really cool to not believe that in the moment but have faith in the people that are telling you that, and then sure enough, see the process and see everything come around, it was really cool.”(P6)</i></p> <p><i>“It’s relieving. I know I have someone that will be there for me, someone that I can turn to and I will get a pure honest answer. They’re not going to sugar coat it and also, they’re there for me in times of hurt. When I said that, you know, when I lost a friend of mine in [X]... They reached out to me every day for almost a month to make sure I was ok emotionally, mentally, how I was doing... So, they’re super supportive when it comes to crunch time.” (P3)</i></p> <p><i>“Well, the nice thing about [X] is that you’re never really alone with this. Almost everyone has been in these moments when you’ve been on the road for a month and you just want to get home and the whole team is getting the same results. In these times, you usually come together</i></p>

		<i>as a team and say, this is what you have to do to get through it.” (P5)</i>
Purpose	All but one profile defined their roles, purpose, and self-motivators in abstract ways, lacking meticulous details. If details were included, it was within goals in relation to athletics from winning a specific athletic event to leadership and/or coaching transitions. Comments closely align with an athletic identity development.	<p><i>“I don’t think I’ve figured it out 100%, you know... I don’t know. I feel like there’s more. You know, I think it’s funny. I do a fair amount of talking and speaking to students and school groups and things and while I have a lot of experience and stories, I don’t have that one moment where everything changed. That one moment when I won an Olympic medal or I came close to losing my life, you know. So as far as purpose you know, I had many significant moments over the course of my career, but I can’t say that I’ve got – this is the reason that I’m here and that I’m doing what I do. I see a lot of opportunities in my experience and I, people that I meet and those that I can share with and things, but I don’t know. I think I’m still trying to figure that out. I just. I don’t know.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t know that I’ve really met someone that has known you know, ‘this is my purpose in life.’ I think that’s an excellent question, but you know, my rough answer is basically like to enjoy life and to help other people enjoy life. We’re so, so insignificant in the grand scheme of things. It’s like really like we don’t matter that much, so it’s like yeah.” (P2)</i></p>
Resiliency	Resiliency is a clear skill that athletes described through overcoming many obstacles to get to the level they are currently at. The athletes discuss experiences of where they overcame certain obstacles, as well as the type of mindset one must have to get to this level of competition. A notable “no gain, with no pain” mindset emerged.	<p><i>“Naturally, I just want to turn around and go home. But it’s one of those things that I’m like, ‘I’m out here already. I fixed [X] already. I might as well keep going.’ It’s almost the same thing. What picks you up in the high points is also what picks you up in the low points. It’s that visualization - ok if I go home, is everybody else going home now too? Or can I be greater by not going home and just getting it done. I think that when I feel days and there are days when you’re out and you don’t feel like training and you gotta [X] really hard, and you just don’t feel it, it’s that same mentality that this is what separates me from everybody else.”(P3)</i></p> <p><i>“I think as an athlete it’s super easy to think like, ‘I’m invincible and I can conquer everything by myself.’ But then you have what didn’t seem like a serious [X] and then sure enough, you’ve broken bones and you’re out of commission. It was a good lesson, and it was a good ego check...So it was a really good lesson and learn that. And then come back and to be able to win a [X]. And that whole process of getting the super, low, disappointing moment and then building back up, it was pretty special.” (P6)</i></p>
Perception of Social Media	Social media was overall viewed as a tool. This tool was either used to connect to the athletic community, or to gain financial support to enable travel for sport.	<p><i>“I use social media quite a bit I use it mainly to reach out to the [X] community and between making sponsors happy and reaching out to the people who follow my [X] career. I have a lot of local people who either look up to me or their kids look up to me that [X] and I find that really cool. I try to keep my social media very professional.”(P3)</i></p> <p><i>“Facebook for me it’s kinda interesting. It’s a really good way for me to stay connected with this international [X] community...I’m not like selling a product for me. Instagram on the other hand. It’s definitely like, it has a lot of value for my current team. I sometimes run my team’s Instagram when I’m traveling. So, with that I try to post every day or at least every other day.”(P2)</i></p>

<p>Faith</p>	<p>Athletes described themselves as spiritual or religious, relying on their faith to enable resiliency. Additionally, they looked to faith as a guide to make choices as well as a strength to overcome stressors.</p>	<p><i>“There was no doubt in my mind when choosing the opportunities that I had. I always knew what made sense to me just trusting that God had me and His word and that He wanted me at this time, at that time, and I can look back and see that all throughout that things worked out. Not always necessarily how I had wanted them to. They worked out in the way that only be God doing what he does. It’s an interesting thing that had I made decision differently, things might not have turned out how they did.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“So there's emotional and physical downfalls to this sport, but uh, that's kinda where my religious background or my spiritual background of Christianity comes in where there's a lot of things out of my control that I have to kinda trust that God has the wheel on that. And that you know, I take safety in that that you've got my best interest at heart.” (P3)</i></p>
<p>Attitude Toward Sport</p>	<p>This theme refers to athletes’ opinions and feelings toward their sport. The comments in relation to this theme were gratitude towards being able to travel and better understand cultures. It allowed for them to push their physical limits and understand themselves individually. Athletics also allowed them to enter another world that they would not have experienced within normal (non-elite sport) society.</p>	<p><i>“I’m in this very interesting zone right now in my life where I’m like [X] in these international community [X] and it’s turning into like a full-on passion for me because I’m able to travel to these countries where I’d probably never visited you know, in normal life. You know, in normal life I wouldn’t be like, ‘Uh let’s go vacation in China.’ You know, like it’s just a really fun way to see kinda new cultures that you wouldn’t normally get to see. And I think for me, one of the big things that hooked me was that when you travel as tourists not [X] related, you always like, no matter what you do or how much you pay, you’re always on the outside looking in. You know what I mean, you’re a tourist. But when you go to these [X] and stuff, you all of a sudden become the focal point so you get this cultural immersion that you can’t get as a tourist.” (P2)</i></p> <p><i>“It’s just joy and working, it’s a good way to disconnect from all the stress in my life...It’s just second nature for me and I can just train my butt off and just climb up a mountain, but my mind is just in the zone and not all over the place. So it’s kinda like therapy and just relax and discharge everything.” (P5)</i></p>
<p>Family Role</p>	<p>Family played varying roles for each athlete. The roles they could individually play were navigating athletes to the sport of choice and being the reason they got into the sport. Family was also described as their main social support, and because of this they were also aligned with their greatest achievements with their sport. Many athletes described families as both instrumental in beginning their sport and their</p>	<p><i>And did one [X] in particular up around [X], and it was a 10-day race...My mom flew out for I think like four days, in total there were 10 days of [X], but she came out one day and it was so much fun, because she got to see hands on what this [X] looked like. And just had fun exploring a new place and so I think that was definitely a highlight, one of my favorite memories from [X] so far.”(P6)</i></p> <p><i>“Both my grandparents and all of their kids pretty much came from nothing, from [X] with nothing and built up. They all have happy lives, happy families and I think that putting themselves in that role, in that hardworking, grit, pushing for everything really grew on me.” (P3)</i></p>

	achievements.	
Generosity	This theme aligns with the desire to volunteer and give back to others. These were comments in relation to how the humanitarian intervention was able to allow these athletes to develop a new self-developing desire to be generous to other. Comments noted actualizing generosity through coaching and passing down certain skills and motivations to non-sports communities.	<p>“Something that I have thought about a lot like you know, it does change my life and it's something that I think repeatedly doing is good for. I've been more blessed in life. You get to step back and realize how fortunate you are in life with people you have in your life and what you are pretty much sometimes born into. Where I think one of the guys in the group when we were in [X] said, it was [X], he said ‘When we were passing around the [X], he told the family- you didn't have to do anything to earn this just as we haven't earned where we are. It was just something that we were given.’ It's something that I just look at now knowing that I'm just more fortunate than so many other people and I get to see that but also give back through that where it's like- ‘ok I don't need this, I'm going to get this instead.’ And things like that.” (P3)</p> <p>“It was something I'd always wanted to do - give back and especially build something.” (P2)</p>
Psychological Disturbances	The athletes made various comments to high risk for psychological disturbances. They each either discussed an injury – sometimes severe – that they personally endured or witnessed. These comments showed that elite athletes have high risk of enduring emotional or physical trauma stressors from fear of injury with pressures to win.	<p>“Injury is just hard just hitting the ground going really fast. Not having skin on your body.”(P4)</p> <p>“Just fear and competitors that are still holding me to the standards of [X] so, I don't know, people still don't realize that I have a full-time job and I'm not [X] anymore. I think when I'm not getting the results that I used to, they look at me like, ‘what happened?’ I hate bringing up the subject of doping and all of that, but I feel like people are like, ‘Woah, two years ago you were really, really good.’ It's crazy what it will do when you're not training 40 hours and you're getting only 10 hours” (P5)</p>
Financial Stress	The athletes commented on how financials are a stressor in relation to paying bills, paying travel for sport, and reasons in correlation as to why they do not plan to make their sport into a long-term career.	<p>“And, you know it's interesting because I don't, I kinda, I almost chose not to dedicate my whole life to it. Because I think being a professional [X] is not a sustainable lifestyle. I could dedicate my whole life to it and probably be an ok continental or ok professional [X] – which is the lowest level [X]. I'll make 5-10 thousand a year. Which is a total joke you know. That's not enough to live off.” (P2)</p>