



**Describing Aspects of Self and Social Agency Related to
Canadian university Athletes' Life Skill Development**

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Abstract

Gould and Carson (2008) called for research to uncover the underlying mechanisms related to how positive development occurs through sport. The purpose of this study was to identify who is responsible for university student-athletes' development of life skills, through the lens of student-athletes. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with fifteen Canadian university athletes (5 male, 10 female; $M_{age} = 22$, range = 17-26). Data were analyzed using deductive and inductive thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Athletes identified other athletes, the head coach, the coaching staff, and their parents as the people who influenced their development. However, athletes felt they themselves were the ones who contributed the most to their own development in the context of university sport. Our findings provide a preliminary summary of how aspects relating to self-agency and various social agents influence athletes' acquisition of life skills through their participation in university sport.

Keywords: university sport; positive development; life skills; qualitative Research

Résumé

Gould et Carson (2008) affirment qu'il est important de mener des recherches visant à mieux cerner les mécanismes de développement positif par le biais du sport. Le but de cette étude est d'identifier les personnes responsables du développement des habiletés de vie d'étudiants-athlètes au niveau universitaire, du point de vue des ces étudiants-athlètes. Quinze athlètes d'universités canadiennes (5 hommes et 10 femmes, moyenne d'âge de 22 ans) ont réalisé une entrevue ouverte semi-structurée sur ce sujet. Une analyse thématique inductive et déductive (Braun et Clarke, 2006) a été utilisée pour l'analyse de ces entrevues. Les répondants ont identifié les autres athlètes, l'entraîneur-chef, le personnel d'entraîneurs, les parents comme les personnes ayant influencé leur développement. Cependant, les répondants estiment qu'ils sont eux-mêmes ceux / celles qui ont contribué le plus à leur propre développement dans le contexte du sport universitaire. Ces résultats offrent des données préliminaires quant aux apports de divers agents sociaux à l'acquisition d'habiletés de vie dans le milieu du sport universitaire.

Mots clés: sport universitaire; développement positif; habiletés de vie; recherche qualitative

Introduction

Recently, Gould and Carson (2008) highlighted several limitations in the literature on life skill development, or positive development in sport. Specifically, they addressed the need for more research to uncover the underlying mechanisms related to how life skill development occurs through sport. Life skills are defined as “skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and in their neighborhoods. Life skills can be behavioral (communicating effectively with peers and adults) or cognitive (making effective decisions); interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals)” (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004, p. 40). The aim of this study is to understand life skill development in university sport settings.

To our knowledge, no conceptual framework exists for understanding life skill development in the context of university sport. Therefore, we elected to frame our study using notions borrowed from an established framework found within the youth sport literature (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Petitpas and colleagues (2005) put forward four characteristics of sport programs that foster the development of life skills. Having caring and supportive adults, peer, and community members who challenge athletes to improve themselves and provide supervisory boundaries to activities is one of these characteristics. The current investigation examined this tenet; more specifically, our research focused on exploring the extent to which student-athletes believe certain social agents influence their life skill development through sport in university programs.

When looking at the youth sport setting, research has identified coaches, parents, and peers as having the greatest influence on athletes’ sport experiences (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009; Lavoie & Stellino, 2008; Steelman, 1995). Much of the current empirical knowledge on coaches comes from a small number of qualitative studies that have examined the strategies and behaviors of outstanding high school coaches (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). Consistently, these studies found that outstanding coaches incorporated athletes’ life skill development within their annual coaching plans, had clear and consistent rules, acted as role models, developed close relationships with athletes, customized their athletes’ experiences, and provided developmental opportunities in environments that were psychologically safe for their athletes. Less information is available on the roles of parents and peers in fostering life skill development. However, research suggests that parents often serve as the initial socializing agent for children entering sport, and peers begin to take on a more prominent role as children enter adolescence (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

Currently, little is known about who influences athletes’ development of life skills at the university level. Rathwell and Young (2016) found university athletes believed they developed a number of important life skills through their participation in university sport. Specifically, athletes felt their participation in university sport helped them develop self-regulatory capabilities related to goal setting, effort, planning, and discipline, improved their creativity and ability to find new information, and taught them important teamwork and social skills. Although preliminary, these results suggest that university sport programs may offer potentially fruitful environments for fostering life skill development. Still, a dearth of information exists on how athletes acquire their life skills and who fosters such development, from the athletes’ perspectives.

A few studies have found that head university coaches claim that the personal and socioemotional development of their athletes is their responsibility (Flett, Gould, Paule, & Schneider, 2010; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2014; Vallée & Bloom, 2005), although, none have specifically addressed how coaches foster such development and whether athletes can explicitly acknowledge these efforts. There is also some evidence that assistant coaches might have a role in athlete's development of life skills (Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2014; Sinotte, Bloom, & Caron, 2015). However, this was not the focus of Rathwell and colleagues' (2014) or Sinotte et al.'s (2015) studies. Further, how assistant coaches foster development and whether athletes acknowledge their efforts remains unknown. As to other agents such as parents and peers, little is known about these people and the roles they have in fostering university athletes' life skill development.

The purpose of this study was to identify the agents responsible for university student-athletes' development of life skills through university sport, and to describe how athletes perceived each agent's influence on their development. Specifically, we asked a) who was responsible for athletes' development or acquisition of life skills? and b) what role did each agent play in athletes' acquisition and development of life skills?

Method

Participants

Fifteen Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) athletes (5 male, 10 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 22$, range = 17-26, $SD = 2.71$) agreed to participate in this study. The athletes lived in six different Canadian provinces (i.e., Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia) and came from 12 universities. The sample consisted of three first-year, two second-year, four third-year, one fourth-year, and five fifth-year eligible student-athletes; all were registered in full time studies. Athletes represented a variety of team and individual sports: cross country ($n = 3$), soccer ($n = 3$), ice hockey ($n = 2$), rugby ($n = 2$), volleyball ($n = 2$), football ($n = 1$), curling ($n = 1$) and track and field ($n = 1$).

Recruitment and screening

Ethical approval was granted from the host university. Following ethical clearance, the first stage of our research was an online survey in which 605 university athletes participated. In the survey, athletes were required to answer questions related to their perceived positive developmental experiences using a modified version of Hansen and Larson's (2005) YES 2.0 survey, a popular quantitative measure of life skill development experiences. The quantitative survey data are reported fully elsewhere (see Rathwell & Young, 2016). For this study, we were only interested in CIS athletes who answered the survey and who had reported positive experiences in sport. In the second stage of the recruitment, athletes' data were screened to purposively identify candidates. In order to be classified as an athlete who had positive developmental experiences, athletes needed to have average scores of five or above (out of seven) on the positive dimensions of the YES 2.0 survey. In total, 34 athletes met our screening criteria and were invited to participate in this study. Of the 34 athletes invited, 15 agreed to participate.

Collection of Data

Data were collected through semi-structured open-ended interviews. Interviews lasted on average 57 minutes (range = 40-77 minutes). Seven interviews were conducted in-person and eight were performed over Skype. Prior to data collection, the interview guide was piloted with two university athletes to ensure that the wording and sequence of probes were constructed in a way that allowed athletes to take responsibility for their own development, or to assign responsibility to others without leading them. For a description of how the wording and sequence were constructed see interview guide section below. The primary researcher conducted all interviews.

Interview Guide. The interview guide consisted of four sections. The first section was designed to establish rapport and introduce the topic (i.e., what does it mean to you to be a varsity athlete?).

The second section was designed to capture life skill development associated with university sport. The life skills that we explored were informed by seven themes derived from the YES 2.0 (Hansen & Larson, 2005); they were identity, initiative, emotions, cognitive skills, adult network and social capital, positive relationships, and teamwork and social skills. Themes derived from Hansen and Larson's (2005) positive developmental categories have been shown to be valid estimates of positive development within Canadian university sport contexts (Rathwell & Young, 2016). In order to maintain the integrity of the YES 2.0, the first author familiarized himself with the items in each scale and created interview questions that captured the overall themes of each scale. Next, the second author acted as an external check and reviewed the interview questions to ensure that the wording was coherent with each respective YES 2.0 subscale theme.

The third section was designed to identify the agents responsible for athletes' development of life skills. In this section, questions were purposefully phrased to allow athletes to assign responsibility for their development to themselves, or to others. For instance, athletes were asked "Where did you learn this? Was this outcome self-initiated, or did you learn it from others?" If athletes mentioned someone who influenced their development, they were then probed about how that person influenced their development (e.g., how did this person influence your development?). Athletes were then probed about whether they felt anyone else helped shape their development (e.g., did anyone else have an influence?). This process continued until all influential agents were exhausted. Finally, if the coach had not been mentioned after naming all relevant influences, the interviewer probed the respondents about the role of their coach (What about your coach? Did he/she have an influence?).

The fourth section contained concluding questions which gave athletes the opportunity to add information they believed was relevant or missing from their responses.

Data Analysis

Our data were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis according to guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, the first author became familiarized with the data by transcribing each interview verbatim and repeatedly reading the finished transcripts. In the second phase, initial codes were created by segmenting the data into individual units of text that could be interpreted in a meaningful way. In the third phase, a deductive approach was taken, and the initial codes were grouped within the higher order themes derived from the YES 2.0 (i.e., identity, initiative, emotions, cognitive skills, adult network and social capital, positive relationships, and teamwork and social skills). In the fourth phase, an

inductive approach was used, whereby the data were scanned within each of the higher order YES 2.0 themes for identifying information on the agents responsible for athletes' development. In the final phase, we combined all of the information regarding each agent across all themes. By doing so, we created higher order themes related to each identifiable agent of influence within our data.

Validity

In this study, we attempted to enhance the accuracy of our findings by comparing independent researchers' coding and using participant feedback as an external check to the research process (Yardley, 2008). Both authors read all of the interview transcripts familiarize themselves with the data. The first author coded all of the data, but during this process, both authors met repeatedly to discuss the emerging codes in order to increase the consistency and coherency of the analysis. As a further external check, participants were allowed to verbally add, modify, or exclude any comments or ideas at two time points: a) at the end of their interview, and b) after receiving full verbatim transcripts of their own interview (Yardley, 2008). No athletes requested to add, modify, or exclude any comments or ideas at either time point.

Limitations

Although steps were taken to enhance the accuracy of our findings, our results presented below must be considered in light of their limitations. First, athletes were the only source of our data and these beliefs may not be shared or align with the perspectives of other agents found within athletes' sport context (i.e., head coach, support staff, parents, and athletic department). Second, for this study, we specifically selected athletes who had positive growth experiences in university sport. Therefore the results below represent a view of outstanding programs and may not depict the average experience and support system of university athletes.

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify who was responsible for fostering university athletes' development of life skills. Although we deductively analysed our data according to YES 2.0 themes, and we acknowledge specific life skills (i.e., identity, initiative, emotions, cognitive skills, adult network and social capital, positive relationships, and teamwork and social skills) in our results, our focus for the rest of this paper is on who was responsible for the development of athletes' life skills, and not the actual life skill outcomes themselves. Athletes identified *themselves*, the *support staff*, *family members*, and *head coaches* as the agents responsible for their acquisition and development of life skills. In this section, athletes were assigned a number (A1-A15) to credit their statements while protecting their anonymity.

Self as Agent

It was originally anticipated that athletes would speak primarily about how other agents influenced their development. However, what emerged from our data was that athletes felt they were the biggest contributor to their own life skill development within the context of university sport. They described that varsity sport exposed them to scenarios where they were forced to learn emotional regulation, time management, and social skills on their own through trial and error. For instance, one athlete described that the competitive nature of university sport required him to adapt and learn to regulate his emotions:

I would say it is just through experience. It is almost a survival of the fittest type thing. If you don't learn to regulate your emotions, you won't survive. Especially in university sport, if you can't perform under pressure, your career won't last very long. So you just sort of figure it out and learn to handle it, because if you don't, you are done. (A4; Football)

Many athletes discussed learning to manage their busy academic and athletic schedules through their failures. One athlete described how she learned from her academic shortcomings:

A lot of it was on my own. I remember after exams in first year being like 'wow, I was not ready for those at all'. So now when I have a test, I remember the times where I had five days to study for an exam and only studied for two. Back then, I didn't completely understand what it took, but I do now. (A2; Hockey)

Another athlete described learning after performing poorly at practice:

You definitely have to kind of learn the hard way for a couple of things, I guess. So the times where you leave things until the last minute and you can't go to bed until you are finished the paper, but you still have 6 AM training. Well, then you are up all night, you end up not sleeping, and then you go straight to training and you just suck out there. (A5; Soccer)

Athletes also discussed acquiring social skills through trial and error. Specifically, they said that interacting with teammates, who possessed a wide range of personalities, helped them learn different ways of handling situations:

The locker room has so many different people in it, so you really get a 'trial by fire' experience. You meet so many people who handle things in so many different ways and you get to see what works and what doesn't. You try stuff and see if it fits, and sometimes it doesn't. So you learn different ways to handle different types of people. (A4; Football)

Experiences in leadership roles on their teams were important for athletes' development of social skill. For instance, one athlete described how occupying a leadership position afforded her the opportunity to practice taking charge of groups:

When I was a rookie or a second year player, I didn't think I was in a position to say anything. But then, in third year, I was given a fitness captain role. That really helped me take on more leadership. So I really focused on my warm ups and cool downs and making sure that the other girls were doing what they needed to. That kind of was a first step in my leadership development. I was able to learn from how others responded to me in that role. After that I got a letter [captaincy] and that gave me even more responsibilities and opportunities to work on my leadership. (A2; Hockey)

Although the student athletes felt their life skills development was primarily self-directed, they described how they also had a network that consisted of support staff, family members, other athletes, and the head coach, who provided assistance when needed.

Notable Agents

Support staff. Athletes described how if they needed help, a number of university staff members were at their disposal. Specifically, athletes mentioned sport psychologists, assistant coaches, academic advisors, professors, trainers, and physiotherapists. All of the support staff members played an integral role in helping athletes form adult networks. As one athlete noted, her trainers purposefully tried to advance athletes' professional careers:

Both of the trainers that we have for all of the varsity teams are very inspiring. They also care about us and have a lot of connections and are pretty open about using them to help us build our careers. I think they definitely help with that. (A3; Hockey)

Of all the support staff, athletes' most often identified their sport psychologist as the person with whom they worked with to improve other skills related to a) social skills (e.g., "I learned about conflict resolution in the mental sessions that we have with our sport psychologist."; A3; Hockey), b) mental skills (e.g., "We have our own sport psychology consultant and she taught me over the past five years how to use imagery"; A8; Volleyball), and c) goal setting (e.g., "the sport psychologist for our team taught me how to set goals"; A2; Hockey).

Family. When asked about their personal development during their time in university sport, athletes rarely mentioned family members. However, one consistent finding was that family members were an important social support system. One athlete said:

My family's support has been key for me over the years. Because a lot of times, when dealing with things, I would just pick up the phone and call my brother instead of going and asking coach or a teammate. So, a lot of my personal development, even during university, has come from the support of my family. (A8; Volleyball)

Other athletes. Of all the agents within the university sport context, teammates had greatest influence on where and how athletes learned time management skills and emotional regulation. Athletes learned about emotional regulation by observing how their teammates dealt with emotional situations, or by learning techniques and strategies from them following an emotional event. One athlete said her teammates taught her to interpret events more positively:

I learned to manage my emotions by talking about it with teammates. If something happened, we would chat about how it made us feel. Then, if we had different point of views, we would try to understand each other's. So, if after a game, I was like 'oh my god, this game is going to ruin our season', and someone else said 'no it won't, we have three games coming up where we can really change things', then I would learn a new way of interpreting it, and that would calm me down. (A6; Volleyball)

Athletes also learned to manage their time through interactions with teammates. One athlete noted:

Everybody on the team manages their time differently, but everyone still has to manage their time in a sort of similar way. So we can ask each other for strategies for how to do it and things like that. Especially in first year, because you are new to the whole thing. So I learned from being on a team and learning how others were able to keep up with all of the school work we have. (A1; Soccer)

An important component to athletes' acquisition of life skills was peer mentorships. One athlete said:

A huge benefit about being a varsity athlete is that you have friends who are years above you, which is something you don't usually have if you are just a student. So I have girls on my team who are in my program and I can ask them how they coped with a class and what their strategies were for an exam. I think it is a huge help because it is like you can see into the future and know what is coming. So it makes it easier to deal with. (A3; Hockey)

Another athlete provided more insight into athlete mentorships by describing her roles as a mentor in her final year:

There were three younger girls studying in physiotherapy and I acted as an academic mentor. They would always ask me questions about a subject or they would ask for help with the material, or how I managed my schedule around courses and stuff like that. So it isn't just about helping with sport, it is also about helping out with their success in their studies, which makes the relationship special too. (A6; Volleyball)

Head Coach

How head coaches influenced athletes' acquisition and development of life skills was more complex than the other agents found within the context of university sport. Just like the other agents, head coaches could impact athletes' development through their direct interactions with them. However, unique to the head coach position, was the ability to influence athletes' development without interacting with them directly.

Direct influence. Head coaches were particularly important in creating a team identity that was consistent with the values of their university. Head coaches often created rules of conduct that facilitated feelings of unity amongst team members and fostered a sense of communal identity. One athlete shared:

Our program is very strict. For example, on Friday, we have to wear a jersey, shorts, and our socks pulled up. We all have to look the same. We can't roll our shorts or anything. So everyone is on the same playing ground. And our coach really emphasizes being respectful and stuff too. So if we go away somewhere, or even at a home game, we are expected to be on our best behavior. It is just little things like that. (A11; Rugby)

The athletes also felt their head coaches were instrumental in building their adult network. These connections with adults helped them foster summer and part time employment, internships, and future opportunities. For instance, one athlete described how her coach used his connections to improve her chances at getting into teaching college:

My coach used to actually be a teacher, and I am going into teaching next year. So the schools that I am looking at are all through connections that I have made through my coach. So it's just the little things the he helps with, but when you look at the bigger picture, it is not that little. (A9; Track and Field)

When it came to working with athletes on specific personal skills, athletes' perceptions regarding their head coaches were varied. For instance, only a few athletes said their head coaches worked directly with them on regulating their emotions. One athlete described how her head coach taught her strategies to help her overcome her negative thoughts:

I would sit with my coach after my game and we would go through how the game went and how I handled things. At first, I was extremely tough on myself, and I wanted to develop skills for dealing with that. So my coach worked with me on positive self-talk. She asked what went on in my head and what I told myself after making a mistake, and I realized I was often just saying 'I can't make a mistake again', or 'I can't do this again', or 'why did you do this?'. It was all very negative. So I learned to make my self-talk to be more positive, which helped. (A8; Volleyball)

In contrast, other athletes reported that they did not work with their head coach on emotional regulation. One athlete said, "I don't really work with my coach on that (emotional regulation). We have individual meetings, but I have never brought it up, so we never talked about it" (A3; Hockey).

Similarly, only some athletes had head coaches who assisted them with goal setting. One athlete described working closely with his head coach when planning his season:

We set up two or three one-on-one meetings a year where we lay out what our season will look like. So next year, we have university cross country Worlds and I told him that I am committing to them. So Worlds is the end goal and I will do whatever it is going to take to get there. So we set up some times and placings that we want to hit throughout the season. So we will make me a schedule that will get me there. Then it is up to me to put in the effort and to make the right decisions in order to get myself there. (A12; Cross Country)

Conversely, other athletes admitted their head coach had no role in facilitating their ability to set goals. As one athlete said, “I would say no, he (head coach) did not have a part in teaching me to set goals” (A14; Curling).

Some athletes also reported that their head coaches helped them manage their busy academic and athletic schedules. One athlete described how her coach eased her transition into first year in university:

This is the first time I am away from home and doing school and soccer on my own. So my coach was supportive and helped me plan stuff. If I needed anything then he would help. Whether that involves choosing my classes or helping identify when I can get something done. He also offers to moderate our exams and midterms [on the road], and was super helpful about scheduling. Even beforehand, when I was picking my course schedule, he was like ‘we are going to have training here, so you are going to want to go more on this day and less on this day’ (A7; Soccer).

On the other hand, other athletes said their head coaches had no influence on their ability to manage their time. As one athlete explained:

At university, the head coach mostly expects you to figure your own stuff out. If you are going to university and have no idea what you are doing in terms of studying or time management skills, you are pretty much screwed (A5; Soccer).

Finally, some athletes believed their head coaches taught them important social skills related to teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution. For instance, one athlete described working with her coach on her approach to giving feedback to teammates:

Every two weeks I sit down with coach and we meet about what is going on with the team, what I can do better, what I am doing well, and how I can address certain issues. I give a lot of tough love and I am very straight forward with people. And I have learned through the years that girls don't necessarily react the best to that. So the ‘Oreo technique’, you know, say something good, then something negative, and then finish with something good. That is something I learned from my coach. She has worked with me over the years and has helped me become the leader I am today. (A8; Volleyball)

Others athletes noted that their head coaches valued their ability to work with teammates, but did not directly teach them how. One athlete described, “Our coach hasn’t really helped us with that (working with teammates), but he does think it is important” (A10; Cross Country).

Indirect influence. Head coaches also had the ability to affect athletes’ development without having to interact with them directly. For instance, athletes discussed how their coaches often delegated the task of teaching life skills to their support staff. As one athlete summarized at the end of the interview:

I thought that you were going to ask more about my coach and I was going to honestly tell you that, as much as he does help, he doesn't really interact with us directly very often. So I think this interview was good because he does help, but it is kind of hard to

answer questions about that because he runs the team. So we don't have that much time to just sit down and have chats with him. So I think the questions were good, because a lot of what my coach does is through other people and is more indirect. (A3; Hockey)

Coaches also indirectly influenced their athletes' development by mandating and monitoring their attendance in programs offered by the athletic department. Many athletes told us they were required to volunteer, for instance, "We have a varsity mentor program where we work with at risk kids. It is mandatory in the first year, but I stayed on because I liked it." (A15; Rugby). Others commented on their attendance at coach-mandated study hall: "Every team has study hall twice a week for two hours, which is mandatory for first years. Ours is Tuesday and Thursday from 7:30 to 9:30 at night." (A5; Soccer). Often, these mandatory programs occurred in athletes' first year of university sport and were positioned to help them transition into their roles as student athletes. Athletes later described positive outcomes related to their experiences in study hall (i.e., time management) and volunteering (i.e., networking).

The most commonly reported method through which head coaches had an indirect influence on athletes' development was through the designation of a leadership position on their team (i.e., captain or leadership group). Interestingly, some athletes were aware of their head coaches' indirect influence on their development, while others were not. On one hand, one athlete recognized his coach set the stage for him to become a leader:

I am a guy who never misses a workout, never fails in school, and is never late for a meeting. By my third year, my coach took notice and started looking to me in certain situations or used me as an example of what people should be doing. By doing so, he sort of set the stage for me to take a leadership role. So at the beginning, I was timid, but once I knew that people saw me as a leader, I began to embrace it and started to own it. So it all started with the coach giving me the opportunity to take on a leadership role and then once it caught on, it was almost like testing the water and I ran with it. (A4; Football)

On the other hand, other athletes did not attribute their leadership assets to the coach. For instance, one athlete described how his experience as captain helped foster his leadership skills:

I think being the captain gives me the opportunity to try to set examples for the younger players. Especially, as a student doing my second degree I am the oldest on the team by quite a fair margin. So having that as well as the title of being the skip gives me those opportunities to develop leadership skills. (A14; Curling)

When the same athlete was subsequently asked whether his coach helped develop his leadership skills, he said "Not this particular coach. Maybe, earlier on, some of my coaches would have but not this current coach." (A14; Curling). However, when probed whether he was voted into this role or whether his coach appointed him captain, the same athlete said "it was decided by the head coach" (A14; Curling).

Discussion

In this study, we sought to identify who was responsible for fostering athletes' life skill development within the context of university sport. Athletes identified themselves, other athletes, the head coach, the athletic support staff, and family members as the agents responsible for their development of life skills.

Novel to this study was athletes' central role in their own development. Specifically, athletes described learning emotional regulation, time management, and social skills through 'trial by fire' scenarios where they were forced to try out various approaches in response to challenges,

while fending for themselves. The current results contrast most positive development research on younger sport cohorts, where the direct teaching of life skills by adults is believed to be integral to athlete development (Petitpas et al., 2005). In fact, adult supervision is so ingrained within positive development through sport that it has been included as a central component within the most recent operational definition:

“PYD (Positive Youth Development) through sport is intended to facilitate youth development via experiences and processes that enable participants in *adult supervised programs* to gain transferable personal and social life skills, along with physical competencies...” (Holt, Deal, & Smyth, 2016, p. 231).

Our results suggest that at the university level, adults (i.e., coaches) continue to provide some structure to help athletes develop, but it is the athletes themselves who drive their own day to day development. We offer two potential explanations for this discrepancy. First, it is possible that university athletes as a cohort have a stronger capacity for autonomous action towards their own development, thus, requiring less adult driven intervention. This interpretation is consistent with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2006). Spanning from 18 to 25 years of age, emerging adulthood is the final transition period from youth to adulthood and characterized by an increase in independence from others and a need for emerging adults to self-experiment and discover the consequences of their own actions (Arnett, 2000). This interpretation can also explain the reduced role athletes’ parents in the context of university sport.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the nature of our probing allowed us to better uncover the important influences of self and peer agents in athletes’ lives. Prior to the study, and in line with Holt et al. (2016)’s definition above, we believed that coaches would have a great influence on athletes’ acquisition and development of life skills. Thus, in creating the semi-structured interview guide, we made a point to guard against this personal bias by intentionally sequencing our probes to give athletes the option to take responsibility for, or attribute their development to anyone, adult or not, before we finally explicitly probed them about their coach. Unfortunately, the nature and sequence of qualitative interview probes are rarely discussed in positive development in sport publications, thus, it is difficult to know whether athletes in previous research were given the same opportunity to discuss other valuable influences before being probed about adults (i.e., the coach). In using an open-ended probing sequence, unlike findings in positive youth/adolescent development, our findings showed ‘self-as-agent’ of development to be the driving force behind university athletes’ acquisition of life skills.

Of all the agents within the university sport context, other athletes appeared to have the most direct role in fostering university student-athletes’ acquisition of life skills. The importance of mentorships received from teammates was notable in this study. Athletes discussed how mentorships helped buffer their transition into university sport by facilitating their developing of time management and emotional regulation assets required to manage their increased academic and athletic demands. Consistent with our results, Hoffmann and Loughhead (2015) found that university athletes who were mentored by their peers were significantly more satisfied with themselves, their teammates, and their coaches, than athletes who had not received an athlete mentorship. Taken together, these results suggest that peer mentors might improve athletes’ satisfaction by providing them with superior life skills, which allow them to more readily navigate the demands of varsity sport and the dual (and sometimes competing) roles of a student-athlete. Furthermore, these findings provide additional evidence of the reduced role of adults within the context of university sport, as peers become more central to university athletes’ development.

The current results also add to the literature by providing a nuanced depiction of the role of the head coach in university athletes' acquisition of life skills. In the past, university coaches have cited the importance of athletes' personal development and have claimed that fostering such development is one of their main roles as a university coach (Flett et al., 2010; Rathwell et al., 2014; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). However, the process through which they influenced athletes' was not discussed. In this study, athletes noted their head coach's direct role in fostering their development related to identity and adult networking. In addition, some athletes had head coaches who worked with them directly on time management, goal setting, and emotional regulation skills. However, this was not true for all athletes, and many described that head coaches were not involved directly in the teaching of specific skills.

Athletes also acknowledged the ways in which their head coaches influenced their development without having to interact with them directly. One indirect strategy that head coaches used was identifying competent support staff members and delegating the teaching of life skills to them. The use of other agents to teach athletes life skills is consistent with past research that had examined head coaches' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of head assistant football coaches (Rathwell et al., 2014). Specifically, Rathwell and colleagues found head coaches were less involved in athletes' day to day development and provided different knowledge and leadership than their assistant coaches. In our study, where athletes were free to discuss all members of the coaching staff, we found the support staff, especially sport psychology consultants, assisted athletes with their development related to networking, social skills, mental skills, and goal setting. These results highlight the importance of sport psychology consultants for fostering various life skills within the context of university sport. These findings have practical implications for coach education programs and suggest that modules or training related to the development of life skills might have more impact if they target key members of the support staff.

Another indirect way through which head coaches influenced athletes' development was by placing them in scenarios where they had opportunities to acquire life skills. This included awarding athletes with a leadership position on their team, and mandating and monitoring their attendance in programs offered by the athletic department. These programs included study hall and various community outreach programs. Through their exposure to these different social contexts, athletes gained experiences where they could experiment and develop life skills such as emotional regulation, time management, and social skills through trial and error. Notably, after coaches placed athletes within these social contexts, athletes' development was very much self-driven. Recently, Deal and Camiré (2016) described Canadian university athletes' motives for contributing to off campus community, arguing that repeated exposure to contribution opportunities leads to the internalization of intrinsic motives for contributing, even if the initial exposure was obligatory (e.g., coach assigning the team to a volunteer activity). The current results suggest that the same may hold true for the acquisition of life skills. For instance, by affording athletes a leadership position on their team, athletes may be forced to act as leaders initially, but through continued experiences acting as a leader, athletes might internalize certain leadership qualities. Taken together, our findings provide additional evidence for the central role that athletes play in their own development, as they acquire life skills through trial and error. However, they suggest that head coaches can help athletes develop by placing them in, or indirectly affording, contexts where the opportunity to develop life skills exists. The role of the coach in athletes' development of life skills, because it is often indirect, appears less explicit in

the university context compared to the acknowledgement of coaches' roles in positive youth development.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study offer an initial profile of the agents responsible for athletes' acquisition of life skills in university sport. These findings can help athletic directors and head coaches construct the necessary support system and program structure for fostering their student athletes' life skill development and for understanding how university student-athletes pursue their own development within this system. Overall, it appears that the head coach provides athletes with initial experiences that can help them transition into their roles as varsity student-athletes. In addition, when time permits, some head coaches directly assist athletes with their acquisition of life skills. However, because of the managerial nature of their roles, head coaches often delegate much of the responsibility of teaching athletes life skills to their support staff and other athletes on their team. Finally, at the university level, athletes are primarily responsible for their own development as they seek different opportunities to regulate their own acquisition and development of life skills.

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