

## Integrating Athlete- and Performance-Centered Approaches

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## **Integrating Athlete and Performance-Centered Approaches**

Chapter 3 in *Sport Psychology Essentials* (2022), edited by Dave Collins & Andrew Cruickshank

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When we think about elite athletes, we typically imagine someone young and fit, at the pinnacle of the sports career, achieving great results, and celebrating victories. We might also imagine someone overwhelmed by emotion after a defeat or a disappointing performance. Elite sport is about winning but success is never guaranteed, and athletes are more than just machines producing results. The typical elite sport narrative (i.e., the only way to athletic success is through a single-minded dedication to sport; Carless & Douglas, 2013) is promoted by many stakeholders, generating an expectation for athletes to focus and commit 100% to sport in order to be successful. Using this perspective, commitments in other life domains (e.g., education/work, relationship, hobbies and other interests) are seen as distractions from what is important (i.e. athletic success and results) which, consequently, should be reduced to a minimum. Such an approach is described by Kidman (2005) as coaches controlling athletes' behavior, not only through training and competition but also beyond the sport setting, hence disempowering the athlete. Kidman further highlights that many coaches applying this approach believe they are expected to win and that successful coaches should be hard-nosed and discipline orientated. Nor is this approach only promoted by coaches. In biographies, articles, and through social media, retired elites stress that this sole focus was central to their success (e.g. Kobe Bryant and the Mamba Mentality; Harrison, Lawrence, Bukstein, Carr, & Osika, 2016).

In contrast, the athlete or person-centered approach is consistent with social constructivist theories of learning where coaches and athletes are both centrally involved in the learning process. Athlete-centered coaching aims to empower athletes to become self-aware and independent,

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responsible for their development and decision making, both within and outside the sports domain. A fundamental belief of this holistic perspective is that each person is a compilation of multiple selves. Athletes have their own roles, responsibilities, needs, wants, and stressors but these all interact and affect each other.

In this chapter, I emphasize the importance of supporting athletes holistically from a whole person perspective, thereby making them more resourceful in sport and life. The reasoning is grounded in my experience as a former elite athlete, research stemming from studies about athletes' (dual) careers as well as mental health, and my applied experience as a sport psychology practitioner and career advisor in high-performance sport. The chapter starts with a relevance section, followed by an overview of what we know about athlete-centered approaches. Next, different tools for assessment are presented and finally, some recommendations for optimization are given for athletes, coaches, and environments.

### **Relevance**

This chapter is relevant for athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists. Athletes can get inspired by finding an optimal balance between sporting performance and other life domains which can lead to career excellence in sport and life beyond. Furthermore, that ongoing preparing for a second career while competing is doable and meaningful. Coaches can further develop their coaching skills by integrating a caring approach (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, & Lindgren, 2020) and use their influential role to support athletes aiming for career excellence. Sport psychologists can broaden their toolbox beyond the principles of psychological skills training related to performance enhancement and use a holistic-ecological approach when working with clients and/or organizations.

The current pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 disease has brought unexpected challenges to athletes and other sports stakeholders. Closed facilities, canceled competitions, and

limited group sizes for training have brought uncertainty to all involved. Clearly, not only are athletes' sporting schedules, sporting goals, and motivation affected; the pandemic situation also has a considerable impact on their psychosocial development (isolation, relationships, living situation), financial situation (reduced income from sponsors, no prize money), and their psychological level (reduced well-being, challenged athletic identity). In general, crisis situations disturb the equilibrium of the status quo but, may also provide an opportunity for change and development. Resourceful athletes, able to apply relevant coping strategies plus high adaptability and life skills, have better chances of emerging stronger out of this situation when things (hopefully!) go back to normal.

### **What We Know**

#### **A Whole Career and Whole Person Perspective with a Focus on Dual Career**

Contemporary views on athletes' careers (see Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020) embrace the notion of *athletes as whole persons* (a person who does sport together with other life matters such as studies, work, family); *athletes' development as holistic* (athletic development complemented by other layers influencing each other in multiple ways); *career transitions as crucial turning phases* in career development (coping with transition demands leading to successful or less successful outcomes); and *athletic career as part of the life career*. Recently, the concept of *athlete career excellence*, defined as the ability to sustain a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport *and* life, was introduced to complement the established concepts of performance and personal excellence (Stambulova et al., 2020).

The Holistic Athletic Career model (HAC; Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011) is a framework that provides an overview of the development stages and normative transitions athletes go through on their sporting pathway through interrelated layers (i.e., athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, financial, and legal). While early phases in the sports career are

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characterized by playful activities and sampling of different sports, specialization and increasing training load with a focus on results and winning are typical for later stages. Career transition frameworks (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003) can help to explain how various factors (e.g., demands, resources, barriers, situation, support, coping strategies) interplay to create different transitional outcomes. *Career assistance* covers various intervention types provided by sport psychology practitioners or Career Assistance Programs (for an overview in 19 countries, see Stambulova & Ryba, 2013).

Globally, many elite and semi-elite athletes are engaged in a *dual career* (DC); defined as one with major foci on sport *and* studies or work (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). While the US collegiate system has been the predominant pathway for US athletes towards elite or professional sports (90% of the 2012 US Olympic team was comprised of student-athletes), DC pathways in other countries are more diverse and depend heavily on local sports systems and DC possibilities (Kuettel, Christensen, Zysko, & Hansen, 2020). A variety of benefits are associated with a DC, such as developing a multidimensional identity and a sense of well-being (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Pink, Saunders, & Stynes, 2015). Findings from a recent review suggest that student-athletes develop academic identities, albeit these are likely to be less important to their self-definition compared to their athletic identities, particularly in earlier university years (Steele, van Rens, & Ashley, 2020). Successful athletic retirement (Kuettel, Boyle, & Schmid, 2017), and increased life satisfaction after sport (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) are further potential benefits. Indeed, focusing on an alternative career has also been described as a relief from the pressures of sport and provides a broader perspective (Aquilina, 2013; Pink et al., 2015). DC athletes have mentioned higher levels of motivation to maintain both sporting and educational endeavors to obtain these benefits (Aquilina, 2013; Cosh & Tully, 2014).

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In terms of athletic performance, student-athletes seem to have better medal prospects than those who have not attended university. For example, in London 2012, 40% of the Australian team were student-athletes, but these won 63% of the medals. Similarly, 56% of the French medals were won by the 39% student-athletes (Knapp, 2012), and 80% of the Danish medals in Rio 2016 came from the 36% Danish student-athletes (Bundgaard, 2016). These numbers indicate that engaging in an alternative career does not harm performance at major sporting events.

Obviously, the demands DC athletes meet are many and require time and effort. DC athletes have to prioritize (e.g., school during the exam period or sport when approaching competitions) and make shifts depending on life situations to find an *optimal DC balance* (Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). Conscious shifting of domain-specific identities across time may also be an important strategy in reducing role conflict, supporting well-being, and achieving goals in both sporting and academic domains. For instance, during athletic competition, the athletic identity is likely to be dominant to the individual's sense of self; whereas during university exams, academic identity becomes more central. Student-athletes who can rapidly shift the salience of their academic and athletic identities as they complete different types of tasks are better in achieving this DC balance (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). However, athletes' ability to manage a DC is described as heavily dependent on support from significant others (Knight, Harwood, & Sellars, 2018), a well-functioning DC environment (Henriksen, Storm, Kuettel, Linnér, & Stambulova, 2020), and the possession of DC competencies (De Brandt, Wylleman, Torregrossa, Defruyt, & Van Rossem, 2017).

Some negative aspects of pursuing two career goals simultaneously have also been reported. DC pursuits can be very challenging because of the great time effort (80 plus hours per week) and the intense pressures on physical and mental energy (Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2017). Thus, DC athletes have reported feeling compelled to compromise one of their pursuits (Cartigny, Fletcher,

Coupland, & Taylor, 2019) and find it difficult to maintain a DC balance. Role conflict may also occur when the demands of one role interfere with meeting demands of another (van Rens, Borkoles, Farrow, & Polman, 2018). Besides, DC athletes generally feel “underequipped”, since they rate their DC competencies as lower than what they perceive as needed to deal with the various demands (De Brandt et al., 2017).

### **Challenges in Sport and Other Life Domains as a Possibility to Enhance Life Skills and Personal Characteristics Developing Excellence**

For elite athletes involved in chronic high-pressure and goal-oriented environments, the ability to manage reactions to all types of stressors can have major impacts on performance and well-being (Bryan, O’Shea, & MacIntyre, 2019; Kuettel & Larsen, 2019). When developing resilience-associated resources (i.e., support, self-efficacy, optimism, coping skills, motivation, and perspective) in both sport and work, it needs to be considered what effect it will have both on the long-term development and upcoming adverse circumstances. How competencies and skills learned in the sports domain can be used in non-sport settings and vice versa is another relevant question (Lebrun, MacNamara, Rodgers, & Collins, 2018). Life skills can be behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, or intrapersonal and are defined as “internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings” (Gould & Carson, 2008) p. 60). There is a prevailing myth held by many coaches and parents that sports participation automatically teaches athletes life skills. However, these skills must be intentionally taught and fostered throughout the sport experience with coach characteristics, teaching strategies, and athletes’ assets mediating this process (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016).

Contrary to the linear development of athletes’ careers described in the HAC model, empirical research on athletes’ careers (and my own experience!) has shown that development is not stage-

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like and is characterized by performance slumps and non-linear progression. Considerable research highlights the importance of psychological characteristics and competencies as central to the development process for athletes on their “rocky road” to the top (Collins, MacNamara, & McCarthy, 2015). One skillset which can both facilitate the process and optimize the outcome of the talent pathway are termed Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs: MacNamara, 2011). These describe skills and characteristics that enable young athletes to cope with the many ups and downs of development and transitions, maximize growth opportunities, and learn from setbacks in both sport and life (Collins, MacNamara, & McCarthy, 2016).

In a retrospective study comparing “super champions” (winning several medals at international events) with “almost” (players who had achieved well at youth level but then reached much lower levels as their highest senior achievement), Collins et al. (2015) found that super champions were characterized by a strong positive reaction to challenge, both proactively and in reaction to injuries or sport-related setbacks. They also had higher levels of self-reflection that supported their development. The authors concluded that the facilitative rather than directive styles of parenting and coaching experienced by super champs was a factor contributing to the proactively driven approach towards challenges.

### **The Role of Coaches and the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

Coaches play a central role in how athletes experience sport and can be considered as “architects” of sport environments, carrying responsibility to nurture athletes’ learning and development (Rynne, Crudgington, Dickinson, & Mallet, 2017). However, athletes have reported coaches’ behaviors as sometimes unhelpful for their athletic and personal development or mental health (Kuettel & Larsen, 2019). Effective coaches integrate professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal coaching knowledge and foster athlete development in terms of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Depending on the development stage, coaches serve



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different roles and functions in athlete development. While coaches working with emerging athletes have a significant role in offering care and support, demonstrating excellent people skills, and help athletes developing PCDEs (Collins et al., 2016), they also have a large influence over the most common factors related to athletic drop-out (e.g., too much emphasis on winning, showing favoritism, lack of fun). High-performance coaches play a key role in supporting athletes to navigate the many tensions and challenges characteristic of elite sport. However, since financial support for elite athletes and coaches is primarily based on results, coaches in high-performance sport often experience dilemmas concerning the crucial balance between the athletes' focus on the pressure to perform with health and well-being issues, as well as the DC pressures alluded to earlier (Dohsten et al., 2020).

On *all* athletic levels, however, the coach-athlete relationship is at the heart of coaching, and coaches and athletes are inseparable entities, whether in participation or performance (Jowett, 2017). Jowett and Poczwadowski (2007) proposed a conceptual model to understand the quality of the coach-athlete relationship with *closeness* (mutual respect, trust, appreciation), *commitment* (maintaining a close relationship over time despite ups and downs), *complementary* (athletes' and coaches' corresponding behavior of affiliation), and *co-orientation* (degree of empathic understanding and the established common ground in their relationship) as the 4C-components. It clearly takes time to foster these 4C's and to build up a close coach-athlete relationship. Additionally, group size and type of sport are important parameters to consider (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013). For me as a former individual sport athlete, training and traveling with a small team, it was especially the time and the conversations during travels and off-pitch activities that increased the quality of my relationship with my coach and vice versa.

Different aspects of coaching climate (task/ego-involvement, autonomy-supportive, and controlling) can impact athletes' development and motivation. DC athletes whose coaches

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emphasized that everyone has an important role on the team, value each athlete as a person, and listen to athletes' thoughts and feelings, experienced lower symptoms of burnout in both sport and school (Into, Perttula, Aunola, Sorkkila, & Ryba, 2020). In contrast, controlling coaching and punishing athletes for making mistakes were associated with higher levels of burnout. Learning conditions and motivational processes have been examined among Norwegian elite performers (Haraldsen, Nordin-Bates, Abrahamsen, & Halvari, 2020). A performance-oriented climate and a controlling coaching style unfolded as two-sided: They could provide a boost of competence development and a strong nurturing source of motivation for ambitious performers underpinned by high demands, hard work, and professionalization. When facing failure and adversity, however, these performance-oriented practices and culture revealed a downside. Stagnation and failure were challenges that put the performers' quality of motivation to the test.

#### **Athlete and Performance-Centered Issues Concerning the Olympic Games**

The Olympic Games are usually the culmination of an athlete's career. It can be an opportunity to justify years of hard work for this moment of glory in the international spotlight. However, while much is at stake, being your best at the Games is no easy task. The four-year cycle offers few opportunities to gain experience and acclimatize to the unique mental challenges of the Olympic environment (e.g., distractions in the Olympic village, feeling of living in a bubble, security procedures, and constant media attention). Some sport psychologists argue that "at the Olympics, everything is a performance issue" (McCann, 2008, p. 267). However, the range of issues that potentially arise at the Games often lay outside the sports domain and concern interpersonal conflicts (with coaches, agents, spouse, or teammates), crisis management in the personal domain (e.g., death of a family member, marriage crisis, uncertain future after the Games), and clinical issues (e.g., obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behavior, eating disorder, depression). Supporting athletes in such critical situations (a crisis at the Games cannot be put off until later)

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demands that sports psychologists and coaching staff have skills for dealing with the immediate problem together with an understanding of the athlete's overall situation and underlying cause(s).

The post-Games phase is also challenging, whether an athlete has been successful or not. Athletes must decide whether to continue for another quadrennial or to retire from elite sport, prioritize work or study, or perhaps start or expand the family. While some athletes will receive increased attention and the opportunity to capitalize on their results, others will have to deal with intense emotions and mood fluctuations resulting from under-performing. From my experience attending three Olympic Games, each post-Games phase was different, depending on the career stage and the results and expectations of the past events. After Salt Lake City in 2002 where my teammate (unexpectedly) won both gold medals and I finished with a very satisfying 6<sup>th</sup> place, our team was overwhelmed by the sudden public interest and the hype around our sport when arriving home. I was among the medal favorites four years later in Torino 2006, but finishing 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> was a huge disappointment. It took me more than six months to appreciate my performance and to find the motivation to set new career goals. Returning from the Vancouver 2010 Games, I had to accept my mediocre results knowing that these had been my last Olympics. My thoughts were circling around the "what's next?" questions concerning both my sport and life/work career. Additionally, I had to deal with the challenges and expectations of being a young father that had been too much away from home during the Games and preparation phase.

With the multiplicity of issues and high vulnerability of athletes to experience the commonly referred "post-Olympic blues", this phase must be targeted as a unique and extremely important time for mental health support (Henriksen, Schinke, et al., 2020). However, support for athletes after the Games is typically reduced whilst coaches and sports officials also experience the "post-Olympic blues" and need time off after the intense Games phase. Hence, the post-Games phase should be considered as the final (and equally important) part of the Olympic cycle, where athletes

should be monitored in terms of mental health challenges and changes. Dedicated support experts should assist both athletes and coaches (whose contracts might be terminated) in dealing with specific issues and provide opportunities for continued light training and team gatherings to maintain some familiarity with existing daily sport processes.

#### **Assessment**

In terms of assessment, validated scales together with easily obtained questionnaires or online tools can support working with an athlete-centered approach. For example, athletes' identity can be assessed by the Academic and Athletic Identity Scale (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Even though it is more challenging to assist athletes with strong athletic identities on non-sporting commitments, it might not be the case if athletes are constantly preparing and taking their time to plan their next careers (Harrison et al., 2016). A valuable tool to encourage reflection about prioritization of different life domains in the present and the near future is the five-step career planning strategy (Stambulova, 2010), building on the HAC model and socio-cultural learning theory. Using this instrument can help athletes *and* coaches in career planning and goal setting, in preparing for a career transition, and in improving social support systems.

Athletes on their way to becoming elite can optimally benefit from developmental challenges by assessing characteristics associated with effective development. The PCDEQ2 (Hill, MacNamara, & Collins, 2019) is a psychometric tool that measures seven factors (adverse response to failure, imagery and active preparation, self-directed control and management, perfectionistic tendencies, seeking and using social support, active coping, and clinical indicators) that can help to identify areas that require support for individual athletes or monitor intervention impact and effectiveness. Most sports require social skills in order to compete successfully, and adolescent athletes and coaches have described communication skills as the most important transferable skills (Jones & Lavalley, 2009). However, athletes may not be aware of the skills they have developed

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and, therefore, may not transfer across life domains. Tacit knowledge of verbal communication-, relationship-, team commitment-, responsibility and non-verbal communication skills developed through sport can then be made accessible through guided self-reflection and structured feedback (verbal and written) from both peers and coaches.

Another interesting tool to self-assess competencies especially related to managing DC challenges (De Brandt et al., 2017) can be found at [www.dualcareertools.com](http://www.dualcareertools.com). On this website, student-athletes, DC support providers, and athletes planning their transition from elite sport to the job market can get an evaluation and a personalized feedback report. Environments that aim to facilitate athletes' holistic development can make use of the Dual Career Development Environment model (Henriksen, Storm, et al., 2020) as a lens to become more aware of how different key stakeholders from sports, study, and the private domain interact and communicate around the athletes. Using these models in workshops with coaches, teachers, parents, and athletes can spur discussion about relationships, responsibilities, and communication pathways.

Acknowledging that the coach-athlete relationship is a dynamic process and can fluctuate over time (Jowett, 2003; Sandström, Linnér, & Stambulova, 2016), coaches need to find the right balance between being friendly and demanding (being able to impose, direct, and persuade). The quality and satisfaction of the coach-athlete dyad can be assessed by the 11-item CART-Q (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), available in a coach and athlete version. Coaching climate can be measured with the Empowering and Disempowering Motivational Climate Questionnaire (Appleton, Ntoumanis, Quested, Viladrich, & Duda, 2016) and concerns what the coach does, says and how he/she structures the environment in training and competitions. Regarding athletes' mental health, a sport-specific screening tool as recently been developed by the IOC mental health working group (Gouttebauge et al., 2020). Such instruments can (together with observations by coaches and sport

psychologists) help to detect changes in athletes' mental health so that tailormade interventions can be started in good time if needed.

### **Optimization**

Different areas of optimization can be outlined to enhance the athlete and person-centered approach for athletes, coaches, and clubs/teams/environments. However, it is important to recognize that the efforts should be supported by an appropriate organizational culture (Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015) that facilitates the interventions on all levels and support the interplay between the different actors.

#### **For athletes**

First of all, and as described above, it is important for athletes to constantly engage in self-reflections (see Chapter 10), both in terms of athletic goals and life in general (what is meaningful?), but also concerning their roles and identity (who am I, how do I want to be?). Value-driven approaches can help to answer such questions (Kuettel, 2020). To find the right DC balance, different DC competencies are essential, and working with one's weaknesses in terms of both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills is required. Social support networks in and outside the sports domain are an important resource, but since athletes often travel and have busy schedules, these contacts need to be carefully and actively maintained. Focusing on the here and now and determinedly striving for success are important qualities of successful athletes. This need not be in opposition to pro-active career-planning, since it has the potential to enhance athletic performance (Lavalley, 2019) and can facilitate overcoming transitional barriers in any career stage. Bearing in mind that life after the sports career can be as demanding as the career within elite sport, it is recommended that athletes embrace a whole career and life-long learning perspective in which they can use the life skills gathered in and through their sports engagement.

#### **For coaches/practitioners**

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Benefits from athlete-centered coaching and creating a climate where athletes can contribute to mutual learning have been highlighted in this chapter. By being authentic, the holistic and person-centered coach demonstrates humility that can act as a catalyst for establishing and maintaining a well-functioning coach-athlete relationship. Showing interest and understanding what is going on in other spheres of an athlete's life is key for a sustainable collaboration, while constantly working on the elements of closeness, complementary, commitment, and co-orientation. Coaches should not be afraid to gather ongoing feedback from their athletes as well as peer coaches about how they communicate, what climate and culture they foster, and how their behavior affects team members. Coaches can further provide opportunities for athletes to promote their life skills (e.g., expertise from their studies) by leading workshops, involving them in creating team visions, and in planning related to training and competition. Pushing athletes to their limits while simultaneously caring about them as persons often generates dilemmas. Coaches are advised to build their practice on a solid philosophy (see Chapter 4) and discuss such dilemmas with trusted others. Besides enhancing athletes' performance mindset (described in the Chapters 5-10) and assisting them in building up resources to cope with transitional demands and to navigate between different life domains, sport psychological practitioners have an important role in supporting coaches to apply an athlete-centered approach by challenging their practice and basic assumptions.

### **For clubs/team/environments**

Clubs can foster a hypermasculine culture (e.g., ignoring injury, denying vulnerability, sacrificing individuality) which has to be met to gain acceptance and approval from the club's player and coaching hierarchy (Coulter, Mallett, & Singer, 2016). On the other hand, research in successful talent development environments (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; Ivarsson et al., 2015) has shown that proximate role models, inclusion, knowledge sharing, and focus on long-term development increase the chance to "produce" elite athletes while fostering their mental

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health. Creating an athlete-centered club culture demands that the espoused values and the artifacts expressed by the organization are built on basic assumptions of *athlete career excellence* described above. Effective DC environments are characterized by a dedicated DC support team that focuses on individualized solutions, applies an empowerment approach, and has a deeply rooted and shared philosophy (Henriksen, Storm, et al., 2020). Outcomes of a DC should therefore not only be measured by athletic success, study completion or drop-out rates, but also by athletes' DC satisfaction and their mental well-being. Furthermore, organizations and clubs aiming to apply an athlete-centered approach should be cognizant of the periodic nature of the sporting and academic calendar where athletes need different kinds of support (related to their performance, their mental well-being, and their development in non-sporting domains). Providing staff with expertise and possibilities for ongoing education on how to optimally support athletes depending on their career stage and their unique profile can help to reach this overarching goal.



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