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**Career Assistance to a Team in Crisis-Transition:
An Intervention Case Study in Swedish Elite Handball**

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Abstract

In this paper we share how a career assistance program (CAP) was developed, implemented, and evaluated with a Swedish elite handball team. Within this case study the initial version of the CAP's content was created based on the career-long psychological support services in Swedish handball framework and the first author's applied experiences. During implementation the head coach terminated unexpectedly and the team appeared in a crisis. This transitional situation led to modification of the CAP to help the players cope with changes. Eighteen players took part in eight workshops dealing with various aspects of their sport and non-sport life (e.g., performance, training, lifestyle, recovery, future planning) with crisis-related issues (e.g., coping with uncertainty) incorporated. Mixed-methods evaluation revealed the players' perceived increase in personal resources (awareness, skills) and decrease in stress and fatigue. Reflections on working in applied sport psychology from a holistic perspective in a dynamic real-life setting are provided.

Keywords: Case study, Career assistance program, handball, intervention, transition

Context

Study Background

This study is related to a larger project focusing on exploring career experiences and optimizing career assistance in Swedish handball (Ekengren et al., 2018; 2020; 2020b). In our previous papers, we have presented findings from a qualitative study of 18 professional (male and female) handball players. The major findings thereof included: (a) *the empirical career model of Swedish professional handball players* (ECM-H) with accompanying contextualized career stages (e.g., in relation to ages, handball and educational environments and stakeholders, professional opportunities, moving for a contract abroad, coming back and re-adjusting in Sweden, athletic retirement timing) and themes targeting the players' sport and non-sport experiences at each stage (Ekengren et al., 2018), (b) composite vignettes of male and female players' career pathways (Ekengren et al., 2020), and (c) *the career long psychological support services in Swedish handball* (CPS-H) framework (Ekengren et al., 2020b). The CPS-H framework, grounded in the research part of the project, promotes a combination of the proactive, educational, whole career, whole environment, and whole person approaches in career assistance. The interrelated parts of the framework address the questions: *where* (changes in the contexts), *when* (ages, career stages), *what* (athletes' needs and potential working issues), *who* (support providers), *why* (philosophy shared by the stakeholders), and *how* (service forms) concerning psychological support. The validation process was conducted in focus groups with potential end-users (players, coaches, SPP), and resulted in mostly positive feedback (e.g., "it is a new map for Swedish handball"), including a call to test the CPS-H with athletes. As such, the present instrumental case study (Hodge and Sharp, 2016) is the first to test the CPS-H by means of providing insights into development and implementation of a career assistance program (CAP) to meet athletes' needs at a certain stage of their careers. Career assistance is aimed at helping athletes to deal

with various sport and non-sport career issues (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Our intervention is aimed to optimize career assistance to Swedish elite professional players at the mastery stage of their careers during which they experience a demanding and stressful life (e.g., high training workload, performance demands, playing for the club and national team, extensive traveling) and as a consequence are vulnerable to injuries and mental health problems such as burnout, depressed mood, or anxiety (Ekengren et al., 2018; 2020; see also Henriksen et al., 2019).

Career Assistance Programs and Related Intervention Studies

Career assistance programs are typically organized as a combination of workshops, groups, and individual counselling sessions, while the CAPs address training, performance, lifestyle, education/work, recovery, social network and relationship issues and are aimed at helping athletes to better understand themselves and the sport/life contexts involved, make optimal choices, develop resources (e.g., performance and life skills), reduce unnecessary stress, and develop a proactive mindset to bridge their past, present, and future in and outside of sport (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2020; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014; Wylleman et al., 2004). Sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) that apply CAPs typically adopt a whole person educational approach to comprehensively prepare athletes to cope with concurrent and future demands, as well as to prevent crisis-type transitions and related mental health problems; some CAPs also have clinical services or referral opportunities available (see more in Schinke et al., 2018; Stambulova, 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014; Torregrossa et al., 2020). Our CAP supports athletes in their striving for *career excellence*, defined as “an athlete’s ability to sustain a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport and life” (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 14).

Recently, Torregrossa and colleagues (2020) suggested a taxonomy of CAPs consisting of three categories: *holistic CAPs for elite athletes*, *sport specific CAPs for professional*

athletes, and *dual CAPs for student-athletes*. The present CAP entitled *Life as a professional handball player* is situated on the border between the first two categories, being both holistic and sport specific. Further, it addresses players' career development emphasizing work on their values and needs at the mastery career stage (i.e., coping with performance and everyday demands in sport and non-sport life). This approach is common for sport specific CAPs for professional athletes (Torregrossa et al., 2020).

When designing our CAP and preparing for its implementation, we used experiences of other authors who previously conducted relevant intervention studies (e.g., Hong & Coffee, 2018). Kendellen and colleagues (2017) recommended a combination of proactive and concurrent perspectives in selecting the CAP workshop topics and recommended the three-phase structure of a workshop (i.e., introduction of the topic, discussions and exercises, and debriefing). Pummel and Lavallee (2019) developed an intervention program to prepare youth players in a UK tennis academy for the junior-to-senior transition. The intervention lasted over 11 weeks, with one 90-minute session each week. Within this UK study, each session began with filmed interviews in which established senior tennis players shared their experiences in relation to particular aspects of senior and professional tennis (e.g., tournaments, traveling and camps, lifestyle of a professional player). Those videos stimulated discussions in the intervention group and were complemented by the program leader's informative presentation(s) and exercises, all of which helped the youth players to understand tennis-specific transition demands and develop resources to cope. Larsen et al. (2014) conducted an intervention with a Danish professional football club, aiming to facilitate the players' transition from talented youth to professional. The intervention was carried out in four months, the content included topics like: introduction to sport psychology, the junior-to-senior transition, goal setting, and coping with adversity. Larsen and colleagues highlighted the importance of the CAP leader's ability to encourage the participants to reflect on their

situation, self, strategies, and support, and to integrate new knowledge with their previous experiences. These authors also emphasized that the players' environment should be observed, for example, with a focus on people, relationships, values, and assumptions in the environment as the CAP's content is expected to be sensitive to changes in the environment.

The key lessons we have learned from career assistance intervention studies to be used in our CAP included: (a) the CAP should address career issues which are concurrent and/or forthcoming for the participants, (b) a series of workshops delivered over 2-4 months is an appropriate CAP's design, (c) it is beneficial to begin each session with a motivating "kick off" (e.g., video, metaphor, inspirational or provocative quote) to help participants to enter the session topic, (d) the workshop leader's competence in the focal sport and having access to the athletes' environment are beneficial, (e) participants appreciate small groups/pair discussions and exercises complemented by contextualized information or presentations from the leader, (f) the content of the workshops should be flexible to allow participants to respond to possible changes in the athletes' environment, and (g) it is difficult to achieve statistically significant pre-post (short-term) intervention changes because of time limits and potential CAP's long-term effects; therefore, a qualitative evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness might be more informative than a quantitative one.

Swedish Handball Context and Selection of the Case

The Olympic sport of handball is popular in Sweden, much of which is due to the victorious tradition of the men's national team, which is one of the country's most decorated (with a total of 20 Olympic, World, and European Championship medals). The status of the Swedish league is not as illustrious. Because the men's league largely consists of semi-professional players, with professional players in the top teams, while the women's league is at the semi-professional or amateur level. Skilled and determined players strive for professional contracts abroad to fulfil their careers in leagues and teams with higher

professionalization, media attention, and superior financial incentives. Players who have moved home after a career abroad reflected on differences from the Swedish handball culture, which commonly emphasize hard work, discipline, cooperation, friendship, and team results before individual success. The cultures of foreign clubs commonly provide different leadership and are more result-and-individual-success-centered (Ekengren et al., 2018; 2020). After a career abroad, Swedish players often move back home and play their final contract in Sweden before terminating their athletic careers and proceeding with education or vocational employment, thus keeping a link to handball through formal or informal coaching.

The Swedish Handball Federation (SHF) supported this intervention study as part of the CPS-H implementation and suggested that the first author select a team to work with. This was done based on the convenience criterion to facilitate the first testing of the CPS-H. The first author, in parallel with his work as a SPP for the SHF, had a multiyear connection as a resource in sport psychology to one elite handball team, working mainly individually with the players. These players were at the mastery stage of their careers and played in the highest league in Sweden. After consulting with the team's head coach, club manager, and players, informing them about the project and ethical issues (e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, right to dropout) the team's stakeholders provided informed consent, and the team was selected for the CAP intervention.

The Case

The aim of this intervention case study was to develop, implement, and evaluate a CAP delivered to an elite handball team in Sweden. This was built as an instrumental case study (Hodge & Sharp, 2016) to test part of the CPS-H and to illuminate the content of psychological support in the mastery stage for professional athletes. Ethical approval for the intervention was received from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

In this section, we describe the team's situation before the intervention and how the

initial version of the CAP was developed. We then report the unexpected changes that happened in the team and what modifications were made to the CAP to facilitate the players' coping. The overview of the CAP's modified version is presented in Table 1. Subsequently, we share how the CAP was implemented and evaluated, and finish with feedback on the CAP provided by the participants.

Target Team and Development of the CAP

The team is comprised of 18 male professional players, aged between 18 and 35, training double sessions a day and playing approximately 60 competitive club matches per season and approximately 20 additional matches for players selected to represent their national team. Over time, this team has become established as one of the best in Sweden (e.g., winning the league, playing in European Cups), regularly advancing players to international standard. Their success has resulted in a vast exchange of players each season because players move their careers to leagues with higher professionalization and financial incentives. When beginning the season in which the intervention took place, the team had recruited seven new players. Further, the team is a part of the club situated in a small-sized Swedish town and receives passionate attention from the public and local media. At times, this publicity and “talks of the town” are sources of additional stress for the players when the team cannot meet public expectations (mainly in terms of winning) or fans are not satisfied with changes in the team. This connection between the players' performance, reactions to public feedback, and their well-being was recognized and kept in mind when the CAP was developed.

The content of the CAP initially emerged from preliminary talks with the team/players about their needs and the recommendations derived from the CPS-H framework (Authors, in press) in terms of career assistance during the mastery stage. The CAP's title *Life as a professional handball player* was approved by the team. The club manager supported the delivery of the program during the competitive season. One reason for this decision was

having several new players in the squad and thus to further facilitating their adaptation, and another was starting the intervention after the winter break (due to national team championships) and before the playoffs. The head coach was initially in favor of focusing on a performance-centered intervention, but after communicating with the club manager and the first author he agreed that a more holistic perspective on the players' lives might be beneficial because performance is influenced by both sport and non-sport factors.

Life as a professional handball player is aimed at supporting professional players' development at the mastery career stage with focus on increasing their self- and career awareness and developing resources to cope with challenges related to their athletic and non-athletic life. Major themes selected to be addressed in the CAP's content included: career awareness, performance, personal values, training, lifestyle, well-being, and planning for the future. One workshop was created for each theme, including the aim, content or activities, and organizational tips. Lessons learned from other intervention studies outlined in this paper's context section were taken on board, for example, a kick-off quote for each session, and a combination of a short informative and contextualized presentation from the leader with discussions in pairs and exercises.

Unexpected Change in the Team and the CAP's Modification

The initial version of the CAP guided the beginning of its implementation. However, half-way into the intervention the head coach was terminated due to contradictions considering the team's future organization. The termination was to some extent a shock for the players; indeed, the long-lasting and successful coach they were used to, changed in the middle of the season and they were not informed of *why* by the club management, before moving to an interim regime with the manager and two temporal coaches leading the team until the next head coach could take over (expected within a month). Some players were frustrated that they learned about such a big change in the team from the local newspaper;

players were disoriented in how to cope with the change, and the club had limited readiness to assist the players at the time. This crisis-type situation in the team required a reaction from the CAP's leader, and based on the talks with the players and the manager, the content of the CAP was altered to include *crisis-coping issues* to complement the initially planned themes and content. As a result, workshops 5-8 included a *crisis-coping* segment consisting of updates on the situation in the team, discussions of coping strategies, and plans for the coming week. To deal with the players' emotional reactions to the situation, the CAP's leader incorporated a brief introduction of Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) approaches in order to promote players' psychological flexibility from the six core processes in ACT; contact with the present moment, values, committed action, self-as-context, defusion, and acceptance (Hayes, 2020; Hayes et al., 2012). An overview of the modified CAP with eight workshops described in terms of their theme, aims, content, and organizational tips is presented in Table 1. Further in Table 2 extracts from content of two workshops (including participants' discussions) are provided as examples of how the workshops were delivered.

[Please insert Table 1 around here]

Implementation of the CAP

The eight workshops were delivered in the middle of the season, once or every other week (overall 12 weeks), commonly after a morning training session in one of the club's facilities. Workshops lasted 45-60 minutes. The CAP's leader (i.e., the first author) worked from the very beginning to establish an open, supportive, and non-judgmental group climate (e.g., be present, do what matters, and open up) to facilitate reflections, sharing, and discussions.

Each workshop started with a *kick-off*, including reflections on the period from the previous meeting and an introduction of the current theme, mainly by using kick-off quotes from former professional handball players who participated in our previous studies (Ekengren

et al., 2018; 2020). Then *discussions in small groups or pairs* were stimulated, in which the players reflected on the current theme and quotes, and how both related to them and their current living. Questions to reflect on included: how does the quote relate to your own experiences?; what did/do you do to effectively cope with the theme issues?; was/is something difficult in the coping process?; given where you are today, would you have done something differently in the past? In workshops on crisis coping, *exercises connected to the theme*, for example, holding an ice-cube as an acceptance-based ACT-technique (Hayes et al., 2012) were included instead of or in addition to the pair discussions. *Discussion in the whole group* followed and was devoted to collective reflections and a summary of the lessons learned by using *peer-to-peer debriefs*: what have you learnt related to the current topic of today's workshop? The debriefing facilitated the identification of take-home messages considered to be of personal significance. The players were also offered individual meetings with the CAP's leader in between the workshops.

The first workshop was devoted to career awareness, including introducing the idea of the *Life as a professional handball player* CAP and relevant parts of the CPS-H framework (i.e., players' needs at the mastery career stage). The participants were asked to provide their feedback on the content of the program and the described needs. The workshop leader collected additional individual and team information (e.g., about their training, matches, and life outside sports) to better meet the players' needs in the following workshops (see more information about this workshop in Table 2).

[Please insert Table 2 around here]

Workshops 2-4 focused on performance, self-awareness, values, and training issues (see Table 1). It is common for CAPs to initially focus on athletes' values and from that departure point discuss career planning and development (Lavallee et al., 2001; Torregrossa et al., 2020). Values are defined as "freely chosen concepts linked with patterns of action that

provide a sense of meaning and that can coordinate our behavior over long time frames” (Dahl et al., 2009, p. 9). Values offer a clear sense of self-directed meaning, and are used to set goals, create action plans, guide what you do as you move forward, and move forward in the face of challenges (Hayes, 2020). Embedded in our CAP are examples of related questions the players discussed: Who or what is important for you in life?; Which actions move you towards your values?; What might stand in your way and restrict you from living up to your values?; What unwanted thoughts or feelings might appear, moving you away from your values (Henriksen, 2019)?

The modified content of workshops 5-8 (see more information about workshop 5 in Table 2) started with discussions around the teams’ *crisis coping* and then proceeded with the planned theme of the CAP. In between these workshops, the players met the new head coach, and he described his coaching philosophy and requirements for the team. The coach referred to the team’s recent matches and pointed out the player’s lack of different skills, and among other things he stated: “You need to show attitude”. His messages were confusing for the players, who perceived themselves to be experienced, having a winning background, and being used to the culture of elite handball. What the players said they needed the most in their situation was to meet, receive information about the current situation, discuss it and decide how to cope in a constructive way. To cope effectively, the discussion and exercises centered around psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2020) especially on being present, open up, and doing what matters. These opportunities were provided at the beginning of each of the last four workshops (i.e., 5-8).

Evaluation of the CAP

The evaluation of the program included: (a) monitoring the players’ well-being based on self-assessment, (b) players’ written feedback based on the survey created for the purpose of this study, and (c) one focus group centered around the players’ feedback with emphasis on

how the CAP could be better conducted. In addition, the first author followed the situation in the team during the intervention period and made reflective notes.

Weekly Well-being Ratings

During the first workshop, the participants were introduced to the concept of self-monitoring their well-being based on the questions: “How much fatigue have you experienced last week?” and “How stressed have you been over the last week?” (Haddad et. al., 2013; Hooper & MacKinnon, 1995). Players’ ratings (between 1-7) of fatigue and stress were collected weekly (on Saturday mornings) from responses through the mobile application (XPS Client).

To investigate potential changes within stress and fatigue during the intervention period, a Bayesian two-level longitudinal model was specified using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo simulation procedures with a Gibbs sampler in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2020). More specifically, the specification of the model stress and fatigue were, on the within-person level (level 1), regressed over time to indicate the potential change in these variables over time. These change parameters were, in turn, nested within participants (level 2). One main advantage with the Bayesian approach is that it, in comparison to the traditional frequentist approach, has an increased likelihood of producing reliable estimates with small sample sizes (Song & Lee, 2012; Stenling et al., 2015; Yuan & MacKinnon, 2009). We assessed model fit using the posterior predictive p (PP p) value and its accompanying 95% confidence interval. We estimated credibility interval (CI) for all parameters estimated within the models. The recommendations from Zyphur and Oswald (2015) were followed, meaning that we rejected the null hypothesis if the 95% CI did not include zero.

The measured variables in the weekly ratings of fatigue and stress revealed a significant change for the healthier. The model showed good fit to data (PP p = .28, 95% Confidence Interval [-10.77, 16.87]). The participants experienced, on average, moderate levels of stress

($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.28$) and fatigue ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.26$). The results showed that both stress ($B = -0.02$, 95% CI = $[-0.05, -0.01]$) and fatigue ($B = -0.05$, 95% CI = $[-0.07, -0.02]$) had credible negative relationships with time, indicating decreased levels of stress and fatigue over the intervention period. There was also a credible positive within-person relationship between stress and fatigue ($r = 0.26$, 95% CI = $[0.12, 0.39]$).

Written Feedback from Participants

The survey was created by the research group to address the process and the learning outcome of the CAP and administered at the final workshop. It included three semi-closed type questions with 10-point scales and spaces for additional comments attached, and three open-ended questions; for example, “Please reflect on the program”, “Please specify what knowledge and/or skills you have developed?”

When answering semi-closed questions, the players rated the support they received in their personal development to be on average 7.3 ($SD=3.2$) with positive written comments (e.g., “the program was useful and good”). The players were asked to what extent they had developed skills that would be useful for them in their careers. This was rated on average 6.9 ($SD=2$) with comments such as: “I have taken great strides in my own development”, “I have matured, and I now understand much better what it takes to develop as a professional handball player”. The players were asked to what extent the team had benefited from the discussions around the crisis-situation, and the average rating response was 5.8 ($SD=1.5$) with the following comments: “It is always good for the team to sit down and talk”, “It was very hard psychologically when we trained without our old head coach. Many felt bad during that period and... sharing our thoughts and feelings was useful”.

One of the key open questions concerned what they had developed or learnt during the CAP. Among the comments were: “to focus on my own stuff in this very turbulent season”, “to dare to believe in myself and continuing to perform even though it was hard sometimes”,

“to take a greater deal of responsibility, and help the team under ‘windy’ conditions.” The comments highlighted that the CAP’s content helped the players to confirm what they already knew but also to open new lines of thinking and planning (e.g., combining handball and parenthood or combining club handball with playing in a national team). One of the CAP’s participants provided the following reflection on the season:

This season was unusual and challenging. I had my first real injury, and for the first time did my coach terminate in the middle of the season! I think these things addressed [in the program] help me to develop as a person and a player in the long-run, even though it was hard when all these happened! ... I learned a lot from it!

Focus Group

To complement the written evaluation, a focus group with four players from the team was conducted after the program, and the discussion lasted for 45 minutes. The focus were on their perception of the program and the learning outcomes. The focus group participants reflected on the program as a positive service development compared to earlier years of their work with the first author:

Player 1: Earlier, you came when we have had performance flaws...

Player 2: Yeah, you always came with the fire extinguisher.

Player 1: You had that role... But during this program it was useful to sit down and talk about what is good and how we develop.

Player 3: It has been very rewarding to better understand how to continue even in a crisis period and turn it around, instead of making it worse.

We are aware of the possible limitation that the first author was a leader of the CAP and a moderator of the focus group. Therefore, we subsequently focus mainly on the participants’ reflection on how the program could be improved. Two major issues were highlighted: (a) it was difficult to be open in the whole group discussion partly because some players competed

with each other for the playing time and partly because they did not want to show any potential weakness, and (b) even more attention could be paid to emotions, dealing with stress, and well-being. Reflecting on the former, the participants suggested providing more time for individual reflections and one-to-one or small group discussions. As Player 3 mentioned, “I have learned more during our individual work. ... I find it easier with personal communication and sharing not to all the team”. In terms of the stress, emotions, and well-being, the participants agreed that it is impossible to overestimate the significance of these issues, as seen in a fragment from the focus group discussion:

Moderator: Is it important for the club to address the well-being of elite athletes?

Player 2: I don't think you can work enough on this issue ... Often the feeling of being seen as a product to be improved and then sold is totally bizarre. Players might hear from their club's management something like: 'We own you, and you have free time when we permit you.' It is a bit scary. ... Dealing with players' feelings might be difficult because feelings radiate and produce [metaphorically speaking] many circles on the water affecting results, reputation, and the payers' turnover.

Moderator: Did you discuss these issues with each other in and between workshops?

All participants at once: No, not much.

Player 1: It is too sensitive. For example, I can share with some but not with all, and I get the most out of such talks.

Player 3: Yes, it is the same for me.

Player 2: I think it is about feeling safe. ...and probably related to the culture in team sports. I can't say it is a macho-culture in our team, but it is somehow rooted in the mind that you should not show your weakness and tell the team, for example: 'I have a problem with anxiety or I have emotional problems when someone yells at me, and I don't really know how to handle it.' I think such discussions are very difficult in teams.

We (the research group) value that during the focus group discussion the players shared their reflections in such an open and sincere manner and provided additional and complementary information to the survey. This last quote illuminates a complexity of the professional sport context and may serve as a reminder for SPP that the optimization of environmental influences should not be forgotten about to reduce athletes' unnecessary stress and improve their well-being (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2019).

Reflections

In this intervention case study, we developed the CAP entitled *Life as a professional handball player* to test a part of the CPS-H framework (Ekengren et al., 2020b). The team involved was selected based on convenience for the first author who already had a connection to the team. We think this approach was justified, especially keeping in mind unexpected changes in the team during the intervention that led to the crisis-situation, and it was crucial that both players and staff knew the first author and trusted him. The initial version of the CAP was developed based on the research part of the Swedish handball career project, the CPS-H framework (Ekengren et al., 2018; 2020; 2020b), lessons learned from the CAP's interventions reported in the literature (e.g., Hong & Coffee, 2018; Larsen et al., 2014; Pummel & Lavalley, 2019), and continuous discussions between the authors. The initial version of the CAP was created to be holistic and sport-specific addressing the current and forthcoming needs of professional players. The first author, after preliminary discussions regarding the CAP's content with the club management and the team, started the intervention in the middle of the season, and workshops went mainly as planned until the essential changes happened in the club due to termination of the head coach. Here is the first author's narrative about his perception and experience of the situation (based on the reflective notes):

The former head coach left, the interim coaching staff was unsure how to manage this, the new coach was expected in a month, and the players were (mainly negatively)

surprised and challenged in many ways – that was a crisis-transition-type, intense, and stressful period for all. In times, I was like a donkey between two haystacks, trying to maintain good relationships with, and encourage cooperation spirit among, different people (e.g., former head coach, interim coaches, the manager, and the new coach). The new coach was highly confident in his coaching skills and communicated his approach in a demanding way during his sporadic guest appearances in the club. Surely, the crisis period was a test for everyone in and around the team. I regularly consulted with my co-authors but also understood that I had to make the decision myself considering: was it wise to continue the intervention or not? Possibly, I could pay full attention just to the crisis coping. At the same time, life continued, training and matches went on. So, I had decided that we needed to work in parallel on the (planned) career themes and the crisis coping. Now I think it was right, and the players' reflected positively about the program. Moreover, their stress level lowered along the way, and this happened during the most turbulent season in the club's modern history.

It proved to be beneficial to conduct the intervention mid-season, because the group had become more stable considering the changing of players into the season, there was a window of opportunity after the winter-break and prior to the playoffs when the team travelled less and could focus on development. Finally, otherwise it would not have been possible to address the issues that emerged during the season (i.e., the termination of the coach).

The players' evaluation of the CAP indicated that several players thought the intervention confirmed what they already knew but were not always sure about. To the question "Have you learnt something new?", common answers were: "yes, now I better understand my current career, and what can be expected next, better self-knowledge, and understanding values". The support for personal development (7.3) and developing useful skills (6.9) were rated higher than the crisis-coping issues (5.8), in which many things were

still unclear during the intervention. We were especially interested in how the players perceived the various sport and non-sport demands expected of a professional player and how these demands were reflective of the players' needs at the mastery career stage outlined in the CPS-H framework (Ekengren et al., 2020b). Comparing the two sets of demands/needs, we found several overlaps but no complete similarity, which is natural because of the uniqueness of real-life settings. For example, in our study all the players were in the Swedish club, some were part of a national team, but the CPS-H also addressed the playing abroad pathway relevant to the mastery career stage. This comparison supports the idea that when implementing the CPS-H framework, a SPP should adjust the framework to the organizational context in question. Arnold and colleagues (2017) stated that sport organizations should take responsibility for helping to eliminate, or at least reduce, the dimensions of organizational and other stressors that elite sport performers encounter. Therefore, CAPs' developers should combine information from the CPS-H with analyzing the players' particular environments and contexts. This recommendation is also grounded in the basic tenets of the *cultural praxis of athletes' careers* and *context-driven practice* (e.g., Schinke & Stambulova, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2020).

Observing the group dynamics during the CAP, it turned out to be challenging for the participants to learn from each other in an elite team. The current team was a mixed bag of different ages and experiences; some players were in their first professional club and others were completing their final contract. The stigma in elite sports of not publicly displaying any weaknesses (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2018) was at times noticed by the first author during the workshops. The participants found it more convenient and easier to share their experiences in small groups or pairs than in the whole group discussions. Pair discussions were likely the most effective organizational approach for self-reflections, self-awareness, and listening to and learning from others. It was beneficial for the first author to be

a familiar face for the team and be able to link previous training and game experiences in the team with the current status of both.

Life as a professional handball player adopts a more holistic and lifelong perspective than typical psychological interventions in Swedish handball focusing on performance enhancement. To address performance issues was not in the CAP's main focus, but it was an inevitable content because the players' lives revolved around matches. In agreement with Keegan (2014), we find it vital to focus on personal development issues instead of solely on performance enhancement skills. Because performance and personal issues overlap in rich and complex ways, we agree with Keegan that "psychological well-being is at least as, if not more, important than performance in a caring profession...; psychological well-being may frequently come into conflict with performance demands; ...career transitions, injuries, and life skills development are all inherent parts [of sport psychology interventions] clearly interacting with performance and well-being" (p. 62). Effective practitioners in various applied psychology disciplines (including sport psychology) should understand both the clients and the contexts in which they develop (e.g., Larsen et al., 2014; Schinke & Stambulova, 2017; Tod et al., 2011).

This instrumental case study confirmed that the functioning of a real-life setting is dynamic and often unpredictable. During the intervention, we learned that a SPP should be ready to find an optimal combination between the planned structure and content of a CAP and the improvisation required when the situation changes, and adjustments are needed both on paper and during CAP sessions. We invite practitioners to learn from us and continue testing the CPS-H being inspired by the idea of a career-long psychological support system, creating CAPs addressing the athletes' needs, and conducting interventions meeting those needs, for example, with youth (e.g., at the national elite sport schools) or retired players. We see

possibilities for the analytical generalizability of the CPS-H and our CAP after being adapted to different research aims, contexts, and populations (Smith, 2018).

At the beginning of the intervention, the players expected more of a focus on performance, because they were used to meeting only for the evaluation of less than satisfactory match performances. The career approach was appreciated to counterbalance this result focus. Although the intervention confirmed what most of the players already knew, they also learned important skills, for example, to reflect on their current living, challenges, and coping strategies, and to open up and discuss topics other than the common technical and tactical issues with other players. Finally, it is our strong belief that moving away from a solely performance enhancement focus to the whole person and whole career perspectives accepted by all stakeholders is a key milestone under way to implement the CPS-H as “a new map for Swedish handball”.

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Declaration of Interest

As described in the text, the first author was employed by the club as a sport psychologist for the team in which the intervention took place.

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Table 1. *An overview of the CAP “Life as a professional handball player”*

No.	Workshop themes	Aims	Content	Organizational tips
1.	Career awareness: Life as a professional handball player	To increase the players’ career awareness and introduce the CAP.	Kick-off quote: <i>“You as a professional athlete need to understand that you are like a snapshot. You are valued in the present moment. If you perform, your club takes advantage of you. But tomorrow it could be someone else... It is in your hands to prove that tomorrow and perhaps the day after are yours. Anyway, you have to remember: Today’s performance is the most important.”</i> Brief presentation of CPS-H emphasizing the mastery-stage. Explaining a whole person and developmental perspective on the life as a professional player, reflections on the quote. Asking the participants to add about their individual and team’s needs.	Important to: - encourage reflections about their career development, including current perceived demands/needs, - explain the logic of the CAP and ask: “Do you agree with the program?” and “What do you want to add?” - introduce app for monitoring well-being.
2.	Pro players’ performance issues	To address perceived demands and coping strategies tied to performance issues.	Kick-off quote: <i>“I am selling my performance, and the board required the team to win and me to perform. I saw myself as a tool, only important when the club benefits from me. Yesterday had no meaning if my current performance was poor.”</i> Metaphor: “Story about two wolves” (Andersen & Waterson, 2017). Reconnecting to perceived demands from W1 and CPS-H. Discussion of coping strategies used and what more can be done.	- for small group discussions pair less experienced and more experienced players together, - use film-clips from previous matches to evoke self-awareness and reflexivity about performance demands and coping.

3.	The reflecting player	To address the concept of values and committed action.	<p>Kick-off quote: <i>“The professional life may be hard in periods, but it is difficult to replace it, I don’t know what I could have done instead for the same money and quality. I am happy with my career. I played at the highest level and I was important for my teams. But I never allowed myself to be content or happy. I always thought I needed to prove more, always thinking about the next training and match.”</i></p> <p>Explaining concepts of values and committed action, introducing main ideas of the values compass model (Henriksen, 2019) and stimulating discussions on individual and team values and committed action.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emphasize a role of reflexivity in reaching and maintaining status on the elite level, - begin with discussing committed action and then move to values.
4.	Pro players’ training issues	To address perceived demands and coping strategies in training.	<p>Kick-off quote: <i>“When I look back in at my career, I realize that it was important to get appreciation for what I did. That has always been important. Getting a response /... / [in town] you get a lot of feedback and joy back. And it has always been a driving force. To feel that people appreciate you. I understand that now, but earlier I didn't think much about it.”</i></p> <p>Discussion of the team’s training regime emphasizing perceived demands and coping strategies.</p> <p>Exercise: “Do what matters”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discuss demands connected to training using the player’s input during W1, - connect values and committed action to the current training regime, - remind about monitoring their well-being.
<p><i>Changes in the team:</i> Head coach terminated his contract, the team moved to the interim regime. The content of the following workshops were adjusted.</p>				
5.	Crisis coping, pro players’ lifestyle issues	To address the coach change and discuss stressors in and outside the court.	<p>Kick-off quotes, for example:</p> <p><i>“You will have several different coaches over the years and everyone has their way of thinking about how to act. You have to trust your style and pick the pieces that are right for you. I have had coaches who have wanted to come and</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - try to reduce the participants’ uncertainty about the changes in the team, - prepare to meet a new coach with an open attitude,

			<p><i>change my style totally, saying that I need to do it in a certain way. But I don't think there is one correct way. ... everyone is different.</i></p> <p>Discussing the quotes in relation to the changes in the team, expectations about the new coach and how to act. Discussing “the bigger life” (i.e., lifestyle and non-sport activities and relevant demands) in connection to values and committed action, and important life skills.</p>	<p>-stimulate focus on non-sport life (e.g., family, work, education), and use the players’ input in W1, -introduce some basic life skills (e.g., time and stress management).</p>
6.	<i>Crisis coping, pro players’ well-being issues</i>	To help coping with everyday stressors and demands from the new coach	<p>Kick-off quote from the new coach: <i>“You need to show attitude! I'm demanding ... I'm a democratic dictator ... I will tell you three times: first in joint agreement, then as a reminder, and the third time you will not have any hair left.”</i></p> <p>Helping players to connect to the present moment through breathing exercise, discussing the concept “attitude”, and ACT strategies (Hayes, 2020) to align with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.</p>	<p>- meet the new coach before the workshop (was done by the CAP’s leader), - take care of the safe environment to discuss the new coach’s demands and philosophy, - stimulate players’ interest in taking ACT strategies on board, - remind about monitoring their well-being.</p>
7.	<i>Crisis coping, the next career step</i>	To encourage career planning, awareness of different pathways, and preparation for athletic retirement	<p>Kick-off quote: <i>“I moved from a very safe and secure environment, where I had grown up and had a prominent role with a lot of success. Then I came to [club abroad], where I was at the bottom of the hierarchy. ...and to find the confidence and security that I’d previously had, in a new city, a new team, with new people, was very difficult.”</i></p> <p>Reflecting on the ways to potential contract abroad and related demands. Introducing career planning (Stambulova, 2010), discussing handball career as a resource for the life career.</p>	<p>- help the players to connect their past, present and perceived future, - encourage them to imagine their life abroad and how they will deal with family, - encourage them to imagine their life after termination in handball, - help to connect all the above issues to the player’ values.</p>

8.	Reflections on the CAP and the next steps	To summarize the program and its outcomes	<p>Kick-off quote from professional player: “<i>I tried to look cool and in control of the situation. But I was completely lost.</i>”</p> <p>Exercises: “If ‘x’ happens, then I will do ‘y’”, “Where do we go from here?”</p> <p>Individual evaluation of the program using a survey (followed later by the focus group)</p>	<p>- help the players to formulate take-home messages from the CAP,</p> <p>- encourage them to continue with career development-type of thinking.</p>
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Note: The CAP workshops were complemented by: individual sessions with players upon their request, the CAP leader’s several meetings with the club manager and interim coaches, and a meeting with the new head coach. During the workshops the participants’ reflections on the content and organization were (informally) collected and used in the subsequent workshops. Individual well-being ratings were monitored weekly. Pro = Professional, W = Workshop.

Table 2. *Extracts from the content of two workshops (provided as examples of the CAP's delivery)*

No.	Workshop themes	Content
1.	Career awareness: Life as a professional handball player Aims: To increase the players' career awareness and introduce the CAP.	<p>After a brief presentation of the CPS-H emphasizing the mastery-stage, the CAP leader explained a whole person and developmental perspectives on the life as a professional player and encouraged reflections on the kick-off quote (see Table 1). Then he organized discussion about players' individual and team's needs. The discussion began in pairs and then continued in the whole group. Here is an extract from the group discussion (from the CAP leader's written notes):</p> <p><i>CAP leader:</i> What are shared needs you experience in the team?</p> <p><i>Player 1:</i> We talked about to always be present, you know, you will miss shots and have bad days. Still, if you are present, you will give yourself the best chance to succeed. /.../</p> <p><i>CAP leader:</i> Is it possible to help each other and remind ourselves to be present?</p> <p><i>Player 2:</i> Yes, if we work to be in the specific moment, understand and accept our roles, then it is easier to do what is best for the team in each specific moment /.../</p> <p><i>CAP leader:</i> If we move on to the next pair, what needs did you discuss?</p> <p><i>Player 3:</i> We listed to always be professional as the most important issue.</p> <p><i>CAP leader:</i> Alright, and how did you define to be professional?</p> <p><i>Player 4:</i> We said, or I think it falls back to our own responsibility with diet, sleep, and recovery. And to be present and bring quality into the training.</p> <p><i>CAP leader:</i> Do the group agree on the term professional?</p> <p><i>Player 5:</i> I was thinking about how we can work with it ...Because it may not always be clear what it means to be professional in this club, maybe because it differs between clubs /.../ It should be perfectly clear what is required from everyone on the team. And we should be aware of what is okay and what is not okay.</p> <p>Further in the discussion the players approved the content of the CAP and were also able to specify their needs to help the CAP leader to better plan content of the following sessions.</p>
5.	<i>Crisis coping</i> , pro players' lifestyle issues	<p>This workshop took place four days after the head coach had left the club. Two kick-off quotes were discussed. The first is presented in Table 1, and here is the second one: <i>"He [the coach] made me start to fight and realize that it costs to be good. And that you play as you train. He grasped that: 'What you will do in training, you will do in match.' You must fight, it must be ... blood, sweat and tears. / ... / Until then I had just lazed about. Taped a finger, glued the ball, weaved four times with my arms and then trained. Now, I realized what was expected if I wanted to take the next step"</i></p>

Aims:
To address
the coach
change and
discuss
stressors in
and outside
the court.

CAP leader: You have read and discussed the quotes. As you know, they are collected from interviews with experienced guys. /.../ Based on your talks in pairs I want you to share if you have been through similar situations in your careers and how did you cope /.../; your knowledge might provide us all with useful information. Martin, I heard you said that “this is just a breeze, and if somebody thinks this is a storm then they haven’t been around”. Can you please expand on your statement?

Martin: Yeah, there are worse situations. I played in [club], and back then it was messy, and we had crisis meetings in almost every practice. We had no salaries and we were not allowed to leave the club. The club threatened to defame us in the media if we talked outside the team.

CAP leader: It sounds like it was windy. Coming back to us and our situation, we are hopefully in a better position, but we have requested more information and we hope that we will receive it. /.../ Martin, how did you and the team handle that situation?

Martin: We did not handle the situation well /.../, it resulted in the team losing matches with ever larger numbers, and in the end we were relegated from the League.

CAP leader: I understand it was an extreme situation. But is there anything reminiscent of our current situation?

Martin: Yes, the coach question... The uncertainty... Back then, we also got a temporary coach and we did not handle it. Remember, we as players do not choose our coaches.

CAP leader: If we look at the current information we have, it is as follows [describes facts; what is known] /.../ Do we have any more input on the topic?

Folke: I had a coach who was sacked after coaching the team for 13 years. /.../ From that situation I learned that you have to work with your priorities. And also get together in the team and re-establish the goals, so everyone pulls in the same direction.

CAP leader: So, what we can learn from the previous experiences? To stick together as a group and define our overarching goal. What more?

Folke: Yeah, we must be our own leaders...

The workshop continued with discussions about the situation, the team’s values and committed action in line with those values. The CAP leader made notes and concluded with a summary and working plan for the upcoming week.