Two contrasting cases of transition
- From junior to senior level in swimming.
Vujic, A. (2004). *Two contrast cases of transition – From junior to senior level in swimming*. (C-essay in sport psychology 41-60p.) School of Health and Social Sciences. Halmstad University.

Abstract

The aims of this study was to examine the perceived transition demands, resources, barriers, coping strategies, and consequences for two cases of transition, one successful and one unsuccessful transition – from junior to senior level in swimming. A qualitative study was executed on two swimmers from southern of Sweden. The instrument was a semi structured interview guide with the Sport Transition Career model as framework. The results showed that the athlete copes better with a balance between resources and demands exist and has a successful transition from junior to senior level. An unsuccessful transition were more likely to occur when the athlete had poor resources (internal and external), and the intervention with a therapist became ineffective. A further study is needed to find out if there are differences between the resources and the demands and the coping skills between female and male athletes.

Keywords: athlete crises, coping, demands, transitions, resources.

Sammanfattning


Nyckelord: Coping, idrottsskriser, krav, resurser, övergångar.
Introduction

Overview

An athletic career usually starts at age of 7 to 10 years, sometimes even earlier depending on the sport event (e.g., in swimming, artistic gymnastics, figure skating, and ice-hockey). In the early years children think of their sport simply as playing a game and then later in their career days they perceive the games as their attitudes change and sport becomes as an education opportunity. Much later for those who reach the top it becomes a job or professional activity. It takes usually about 10 years of planned practice to reach an expert performance level in sports (Hanin & Stambulova, 2004).

Sport provides many role models for children and adolescents. As role models, athletes are expected to act good on as well off the field, court, ice, track, or other setting as they do during the performance. This is an added pressure for some athletes as their identity becomes more and more defined by sports participation. Although the status of sport provides heroes and models for the “common” people, the disregard pushes many athletes into well-defined, narrowly based roles.

The process of identifying oneself as an athlete may begin early, with good intentions. For the young participant, at all levels of sports, the physical activity, teamwork, and competition have important implications for social, physical and personal development (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1990, ref. in Baillie & Danish, 1992). Sport participation contributes to the development of physical abilities that in turn, result in more effective peer and family interaction (Nelson, 1983, ref. in Baillie & Danish, 1992).

Gould and Horn (1984, ref. in Baillie & Danish, 1992) have suggested six motives that promote sports involvement in children ages 8-19 years. They have suggested that children enjoy sports because of the potential for improving skills, having fun, playing with friends, experiencing certain thrills and pleasures, achieving and maintaining a level of fitness, and achieving success in a socially desirable area. Gould (1987, ref. in Baillie & Danish, 1992) further suggested that children continue their involvement in sports until such time as their motives are no longer being met. As children move into adolescence and the pressure for sports achievement become greater, there may be a shift from internal motives to external motives. Internal motivation is more likely to be durable and positive (Csikszentimihalyi, 1975; Nicholls, 1980, ref. in Baillie & Danish, 1992). After high school, fewer athletes are able to continue their sports careers into college. This reduction means the forced loss of elite sports participation for many high school athletes; successful college athletes still are able to compete.

Every athletic career of every individual athlete is unique, it is becoming ever clearer that interaction of several groups of factors can either help or hinder an athlete’s development and achievement of athletic performance. The groups of factors are subjects such as an athlete’s talent, environmental factors (for example; competent coaches, family support, practice opportunities etc.), athlete’s ability to develop, engage and how the athlete uses its resources in coping with the demands that occur during an athletic career (Hanin & Stambulova, 2004).

Identification with the role of athlete can have a variety of effects. For many individuals, sport participation has a positive influence; however, some athletes become overly invested in their status and uniqueness as members of an elite, privileged class. For these persons, a significant
proportion of their identity becomes closely linked to this role, and the end of a career in sports may swift a range of negative outcomes (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Hanin and Stambulova (2004) mention that the transition from amateur to professional sport is marked by adaptation to specific requirements and pressure of professional sports, competitions with very strong opponents, more independent training, and striving not only for the victory but also for fan’s sympathies.

Definition of a transition

A transition occurs when an event or non-event results in a change in our thinking and behaviour. Some events that can lead to transitions include going away to college, marriage, divorce, death of a friend or family member, graduation, and entry into the work force. Non-events would be not getting accepted for a job you wanted (Schlossberg, 1981 ref. in Meker, Stankovich & Kays, 2000). Non-events for an athlete might include being passed over for the starting position on a team or not getting drafted by a professional team after college.

Schlossberg (1984, ref. in Stråhlman, 1997) stated that transition includes several headlines. These headings are about what type of transition it is, in what context it interacts and what influence it has. The first heading is called “predictable transition” and it defines as a normative occurrence, for example a wedding or a job. The second heading is defined as “unpredictable transition”, for example sudden death. The third heading mentions “disadaptation”, which is shown in individual’s difficulties to socialize with others (trigger for example divorces and criminality). The fourth and last heading is what Schlossberg calls a “non-event transition” and characterizes by something like not to be able to have children (Stråhlman, 1997).

From a developmental perspective the sport career is seen as a” shortened lifespan model” or a” miniature course of a lifespan” over the individual’s life development (Stambulova, 2001). The analytic model sees the sport career as a process with its different steps and transitions that take several years. In the model by Stambulova (1994) seven transitions for an elite athletes’ sport career have been identified. 1) The beginning of sports specialization; 2) The transition to special intensive training in the chosen sport; 3) The transition from mass popular sports to high-achievement sports; 4) The transition from junior to adult sports; 5) The transition from amateur sports to professional sports; 6) The transition from the culmination to the end of the sports career; and finally 7) The ending of the sports career.

Theoretical framework

All athletes go through transitions. Moving from high school to college athletics or from junior- to senior-levels of competition are examples of normative sport transitions. But athletes must sometimes deal with unexpected transitions, for example an injury that ends a sport career (Petipas, Champagne, Chatrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997).

The Sport Career Transition model (Stambulova, 1997, ref. in Stambulova 2003) includes a crisis-transition as a part. The model treats the career transition as a process and not as a single event (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999, ref. in Stambulova, 2003). The sense of this process is coping with a set of specific demands (challenges), which is necessary for continuing athletic career successfully.

The Sport Career Transition model includes levels which each has subject that plays a
difference during transitions in athletic careers. The first level “transition demands” includes all the demands the athlete experience with the transition. The second level “dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers” is about how the balance is between the resources (for example support from family, peers and coaches, and what internal and external factors the athlete has with him or her) and barriers (for example loss of support from family, peers, coaches, economical difficulties, injuries etc.). The third level includes all coping strategies the athlete uses in the transition. This level makes a difference in the outcome of the transition, successful or unsuccessful transition (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Modified Sports Career Transition model.
Coping is a very important, which divides the next level it into two parts. The upper part of the level considers the demands to cope with and the factors influencing coping and the lower part summarize two possible outcomes and consequences of a career transition. These two outcomes include positive transition and crisis-transition. Positive transition is associated with effective coping when the athlete is able to organize its resources and transition barriers. The other outcome is a crisis-transition, which is associated with the athlete’s inability to cope effectively.

As the career transition model shows there are three kinds of interventions that can be useful in a sports career transition: a) crisis-prevention intervention; b) psychological crisis-coping interventions; c) psychotherapeutic (clinical) interventions.

Every transition has the potential to be positive or negative, depending on the individual’s perception of the experience (Meker, Stankovich, & Kays, 2000).

Definition of athletes’ crises

When analyzing an athlete’s transitions and crises, sport psychologists usually discuss factors which influence the transitional process and effectiveness of coping. However, there must be a reason (an origin) for the crisis (Stambulova, 2000). It shows that an origin of a crisis always lies in some sort of contradiction or inner conflict between “what the person is” and “what she/he ought to be or wants to be”. The inability to solve this inner conflict generates negative stress or other forms of emotional discomfort, which are typical for the crisis process.

Stambulova (2000) states that there are three possible types of athlete’s crises identified: age-related crises (crisis-transitions between adjacent age-related stages); sports career-related crises (crisis –transitions between adjacent stages of the sorts career), and situation-related crises (crisis-transitions that are caused by particular circumstances in the individual’s sports career, or the ordinary life).

Coping strategies

Coping plays an important key role in the transitions outcome. Successful transition is linked with effective coping when the athletes are able to take on, use, or rapidly develop necessary resources and avoid (or overcome) potential transition barriers. One of the main objects in effective coping depends on the athletes’ strengths, which can compensate for potential and existing weaknesses or barriers (Hanin & Stambulova, 2004).

There are several types of coping that athlete uses during a crisis. Cognitive stress management (e.g. mental training), self-talk (e.g. pep-talking or strategy-planning for oneself) or social support (e.g. peer, parents, friends, team mates, cheerleaders, fans) are some of the coping strategies (Meker, Stankovich & Kays, 2000).

Working with a sport psychologist

Two different models describe different types of work between a sport psychologist and athlete. These models have a foundation in what kind of life experience that athlete has. The models have both physical and psychological abilities that can be adapted in a life outside sports. Abilities as how to cope with stress, communication, goal setting and decision making,
are taught and learned parallel with the engagement the athlete makes in her/his sport. The athlete gets new abilities that can be used on and off the athletic field.

The first model is a counselling model that treats athletes in crises situations and the other model can be seen as a framework for a longer co-working (Fallby, 2004).

**The Mobilization model of counselling athletes in crises**

Athletes in crisis need psychological assistance to shift them from a “dead end” situation to a “cross-road” situation and to see several new coping alternatives. Moreover, psychological intervention influences the consequences of the transition (Hanin & Stambulova, 2004). Effective intervention leads to successful but delayed transition. Alternatively, ineffective or no intervention situations are followed by negative consequences or so-called costs for failure to cope with the transition (ibid.).

The aim of the counselling with an athlete in crises is to give psychological support and to analyze the problem. Also alternatives for coping, making decisions, an action plan and to contribute a stronger self-efficacy and self-confidence to cope with the crisis.

The model gives the counselor guiding lines for the dialogue with the athlete, but it also allows the freedom that is necessary for each of the steps in the counseling session. It can be adapted to different transitions both in sport and life. There are some limits; the model works best with mature athletes and not with younger or immature athletes (Stambulova, 2000 ref. in Fallby, 2004).

**Psychological Support of Sport Career model (PSSC)**

This model has several blocks; goals but primary psychological support with advantages for its effectivity and expected out goal. It can be used to create individual model in work and as a framework for a co-work between a sport psychologist and an athlete.

The guideline of the psychological support describes a life-span support of which the athlete receives. Not only in training and competitions, but also in career and in life in general. Examples on this could be switching club or a trainer, troubles in school, divorce or other family problems, love problem and other that could influence the development. The sport psychologist has to have a good listening ear to realize what kind of need the athlete is in, even in these kinds of questions.

The PSSC model has to take into regard some important factors that are used in an effective co-working between the sport psychologist and the athlete. The sport level and the situation for the athlete, above the specific sport culture, are the most important to know about. Age, gender and other individual characteristics are also of use to know about to make good decisions in the sport psychology counseling (Stambulova, 1999; 2001 ref. in Fallby, 2004).

**Research data**

A study by Ekengren (2002) showed that showed that the most typical transitional resources were that the athletes perceived their own mental strengths, support from the club, coaches, family and peers. The barriers that were perceived were too high self-expectations, a lack of
devotion and a lack of communication with the coach. Their coping strategies were about hard and qualitative training and signing a professional contract.

Objectives of the Study

Based on the literature reviewed above and an interest from the author of this study a research in swimming transitions was conducted. The objectives were; a) To study perceived transition demands, resources, barriers, coping strategies, and consequences of one successful transition from junior to senior level in swimming, and b) To study perceived transition demands, resources, barriers, coping strategies, and consequences of one crisis-transition from junior to senior level in swimming.

Method

Participants

Two interviews were conducted with swimmers from southern Sweden. The gender distribution were; one female and one male. The ages of the subjects were; 24 years old (male) and 20 years old (female). Only one of the swimmers was still training and competing on a national and international level; this was the subject with successful transition, the other subject, who has already terminated, was considered as the one with unsuccessful transition. The different styles represented were (50, 100 & 200m.) backstroke, breaststroke, and crawl, also sprint-relay was represented by both of the interviewees. The participants were recruited by the author of this study, who knew them personally already.

Instrument

An interview guide for semi-structured interview was designed to cover the objectives of the study; for a successful and an unsuccessful transition, and the subjective experiences – thoughts and feelings. The interview guide was translated into Swedish from English. The final interview guide consisted of two distinguished parts; background information and experiences related to the transition from junior to senior sport. The final product was one interview guide which was easy to work with (see Appendixes 1 and 2).

Procedures

Time and place with the first participant was scheduled by phone. The first participant was regarded as the swimmer with the successful transition. The interview was conducted at the participants’ school-library. The second participant was scheduled by internet-service (e-mail). This participant was regarded as the swimmer with the unsuccessful transition. The interview was conducted at the participants’ clubhouse. The reason for the different places was that the participants should feel calm and at home. Before the interviews were conducted, the participants were informed of his or her right as an interviewee and told that the participation in the study was voluntary and all data would be treated with confidentiality. No participant refused to answer any question in the interview. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and then transcripted and analyzed by the author of this study. The first interview lasted for 2 hours and the second interview took about 1, 5 hour. The first participant was contacted by the author for his successful transition (he was still training and competing on a national and international level) and the second participant was contacted for her unsuccessful transition (she quitted after a few years on the senior level).
The method was to interview the participants and to get all information they could provide the author with. The rooms the interviews were conducted in were a bit cold and it also echoed a bit which made the situation a bit uncomfortable for both; the athlete and the author, though the selection of place was made by the participants. But the interviews were made and the participants seemed to be pleased with the outcome of the interview.

A post check with the participants was made after the interview was done with questions of how they have experienced the interview and if they had any questions for the author. This was very appreciated by them.

Data Analysis

First the interviews were transcripted by the author. Then a qualitative analysis was performed on the transcripts. Deductive and inductive analyses were adopted. The technique involved five steps of analyzing.

Step 1. Categories were structured based on the objectives of the study (deductive analyse), the unsuccessful and the successful transition were separated (see appendix 3).

Step 2. Reading through the text several times to get an overview of the content.

Step 3. The third step involved colour marking the meaning units in the text.

Step 4. Sorting and organizing all data under nine categories, which were; start of the transition, career transition demands, career transition resources, career transition barriers, career transition feelings and thoughts, need in assistance, coping strategies, duration of career transition and consequences.

Step 5. Sorting and categorise the data in to different cases, case 1 (successful transition) and case 2 (unsuccessful transition). The result of the data analyzes is shown in the result part.

Result

Case 1; the successful transition

The participant started with swimming at the age of 14, in a small town in the south of Sweden. After a few years the participant finished high school. The transition started, at the age of 18, and lasted two years to the age of 20 the time when he participated in his first Swedish cup at senior level. He still swims and feels happy about his life (see Appendix 3, start of transition).

At the reach of 20 years old he felt he got to a “dead end” where nothing (training or competition) went well. He injured his shoulders and had to take cortisol-injections to linger his pain, all of this added to the difficulties to succeed. At this time he moved to another city where he went to the university, and there he got to a “turning point”.

The participant told that the new coach in the new swimming club gave him a new chance with his career and that it was a relief and it motivated him to continue with his swimming career. At the new club a different kind of training was applied and this had a positive effect for the participant. He made the qualifications to the Swedish cup and other international competitions.

The transition had its barriers; the school took a lot of time and also the coping and the rehabilitation from the injury and the adjustments to a new environment and a new club with its new approach to training, team mates and coaches (see Appendix 3, career transition barriers).
The demands that occurred during the transition were that the training got tougher, the participant had more to say about his training, and the coach was more there for support than as a coach. The participant felt that he was more in charge in how to train and what goals should be achieved and that was much to take on at that time. The demands made the participant to think more about what he did and what could influence on his swimming, both physically and psychologically (see Appendix 3, career transition demands).

The resources that the participant used was to always take one goal at the time, never to plan ahead and to keep the goals a bit diffuse. He also mentioned that with stubbornness and an “iron will” and good support from mom and dad (economically and socially) he got through the difficult times he had. He felt that he had strong self-confidence and that he knew that he was much stronger than his opponents so he never worried during competitions. Other resources that helped him during the transition were the support from his family, coach and school friends – they all backed him up so that he could achieve in school and in swimming (see Appendix 3, career transition resources).

The participant mentions that the biggest barrier was to combine the swimming to the other part of life that a swimmer has, like school and/or a part time job. The swimming doesn’t help much or any with the economical part, there isn’t any economical help; for example scholarships. His biggest barrier was to manage a swimming career, school and having a part time job. He also felt that to become as an elite swimmer it is important to eat right, and learning about nutrition is necessary for a swimmer to manage at the elite level.

Summary

Right before his transition he got injured and this made his thoughts negative and black, and he revealed that it blocked his path to succeed in swimming. He mentioned that negative and destructive thoughts about himself took part in his head, he thought about what he did wrong and what he could do better. Then he moved to the new city and club and the new coach started to work with him. At last he qualified for the Swedish cup and this was his highlight of his life. He realized that to achieve to this type of career some parts of life had to be sacrificed. He also felt gratitude towards swimming and other swimmers, and he also felt satisfied with what he had accomplished so far. He felt pleased with his current situation (see Appendix 3, consequences).

During his difficult time with the injury the participant felt that a sport psychologist was in need, but he also felt that it was “taboo” to make contact with one. The swimming club did have a sport psychologist but he never went to see him, instead he and his coach worked together to find a plan to follow. This worked out well; they worked with emotion-, problem-, appraisal-, and avoidance-focused coping (see Appendix 3, need in assistance and coping strategies).

The participant shared that he felt very tense and a pressure to perform well during his transition. During this time he tried to withdraw from everybody, but he kept in touch with his former coach from his “home” club. With him he could discuss what have happened and how everything went along, and with just few positive words from the former coach everything felt good again. The former coach functioned as a person that he could load off all of his problems and questions about everything that went through his mind. The participant mentioned that if
he had some kind of role model to follow things would have been easier (see Appendix 3, career transition resources).

The consequences that had an impact on the participant was that he realized that it was more psychological than physiological that inhibited the achievements on a senior level. He also mentioned that it is easier to achieve at the junior level than on a senior level, because as a junior swimmer you do as you are told on training and nothing else is needed – as a senior swimmer it is much more on your own responsibility to train well and make decisions on what is the best for yourself and your swimming career.

He also reviled that he felt happy about his transition although his little crises (the injury), which although went well in the end, and he feels gratitude towards his coach and team mates, and now he is happy with his life (see appendix 3, consequences).

Case 2; the unsuccessful transition

The participant started to swim at the age of six, in a town, in the south of Sweden. Her transition started at the age of 14 by qualifying to the junior and senior Swedish cup without her knowing (she qualified at a minor competition) and went further to the Youth Olympic Games. She swam with senior swimmers, both in competitions and in training, though she herself was only a junior swimmer (according to the Swedish Swim Federation’s rules). She quitted after two years with a desire to live an ‘ordinary’ life (see Appendix 3, start of the career transition).

During the transition it got very tough (with the swimming demands and to combine it with the ‘ordinary life’) and the participant felt that she needed a break from the swimming. She mentioned that the swimming got all different and that the training wasn’t just for fun any longer. All the goals of training were to get her to the big competitions. At this time she felt that her relationships with the coaches got different and that they got tougher; they demanded more of her, to perform better than anyone else of her team mates (see Appendix 3, career transition demands).

The participant told that she didn’t have many friends outside the swimming arena, that she never has had friends that didn’t train. Her recourses were the support from those friends who stood by her during the transition. The participant also mentioned that her coaches helped her in different ways, but mostly with training. Her boyfriend at that time and her closest family understood her and what she needed to do to succeed with her career. She also told that, with her stubbornness and her goal orientation, it helped her to accomplish her goals (see Appendix 3, career transition resources).

The participants’ barriers were that she had two coaches, one female and one male coach. She felt that the male coach didn’t understand her; she never got a good relationship with him. During her transition to the senior level many friends abounded her, mostly because she had to plan every hour of the day and it wasn’t sure that her friends were available at that time when she was available (see Appendix 3, career transition barriers).

She also mentioned that she wasn’t a modest person per say and that made it hard to make new friends from, for example other clubs. She felt that the modesty and openness between swimmers was hard to accept because she felt that she wasn’t an open person and that she was very reserved towards others, especially towards swimmers because they were her
competitors. Her relatives never understood her swimming career and what it took to stay at the top, and that made a gap between her and them which hurt a lot (ibid.).

The participant also mentions that the coaches from her home club never had the knowledge to train a swimmer at the elite level, she noticed this when she went for elite training camps and saw how the other elite coaches trained their swimmers (ibid.).

**Summary**

The participant mentioned that she got into the puberty during the transition, which made that she had big mood swings and got really mean sometimes towards people. She also had very negative thoughts about her body and she couldn’t sleep well because she was feeling so low at that time (see Appendix 3, feelings and thoughts).

The short course season (25 m) was the best time during her senior level but the long course season (50 m) was the worst season of her life. She reveals that she was very down and had very negative thoughts and feelings during this season. She thought negative about her (male) coach and her team mates although she felt that her team mates were like a family to her. When a competition went bad she withdrew herself from everybody and she thought that created the bad atmosphere in the swim team (see Appendix 3, consequences).

The participant felt after a short time during the transition that she needed a break from swimming, and after “having tasted the other life” she didn’t want to go back to swimming. She said that it felt right to quit and that swimming didn’t have anything to do with her decision. Although she mentions that the swim team had a strange atmosphere and that the swimmers in the team didn’t understand what it took to swim at the senior level. This made it very lonely during the training sessions (see Appendix 3, feelings and thoughts).

According to the participant all the coaches (from other clubs) that she had during the transition, were very different comparing to her own coaches, they all were tough during training sessions but off the swimming arena they were modest, she never experienced this with her own coach (the male one) (see Appendix 3, consequences). She said that her time with swimming was a fun time and that she miss everyone but she couldn’t sacrifice more of herself and her other part of life for it (ibid.).

The participant felt that sport psychologists were in need, and she did go to a non-sport psychologist. She said that it helped a lot and her mom, who was an educated therapist, also tried to help her out. Although the outcome of the non-sport psychologist help and her moms help got a negative outcome of the participant transition (see Appendix 3, need in assistance).

The participant never revealed in how she and the non-sport psychologist worked with her thoughts and feelings of the transition. From the data of the interview, that have been sorted out, some conclusions could be made and that was that the participant tried to deal with all the demands, barriers and resources with emotion- and problem-focused coping, by making training as a time-out time (‘cleansing her mind from bad thoughts and negative feeling) and preparation for dealing with competitors, friends, team mates, coaches and her own feelings and thoughts of herself (see Appendix 3, coping strategies).

The participant mentioned that she learned a lot from the transition. She thought that the whole situation would have helped her if the coaches had informed her more about the
Swedish cup and prepared her of what swimming at a senior level was all about. She said that she thought it was nearly too much responsibility of the training to have for her at that time. She also learned that her coaches didn’t have the knowledge that was needed to coach a swimmer at the senior level. The participant also said that she still hasn’t gotten the relationship with her other relatives back on track, and this seems to bother her quite a lot (see Appendix 3, consequences).

She did feel she could have accomplished much more, but that it doesn’t bother her. She doesn’t regret her decision of quitting with swimming (ibid.).

Her highest wish now is to accomplish something that people will remember her by. She isn’t that happy about her lifestyle that she lives now (ibid.).

The similarities between the two cases

The few similarities between the two participants were that they both were sprinters, and had gone through the junior to senior transition. They both perceived a tougher climate and harder demands at the senior level and with that came along taking a lot of responsibilities of their own of the training and the career planning and what could make a difference to succeed in the career. They both had support from their family and coaches although some differences in what kind of support they received from them. They also had a strong belief in themselves during competitions and trainings. They both felt that they were in need of help from a sport psychologist, but none of them took contact with one.

The differences between the two cases

The difference in their transitions was that the participant with the successful transition achieved the goal by managing to deal with the demands and barriers and balance it with his resources. The participant with the unsuccessful transition had both an unsuccessful and a successful transition. With her poor resources (mostly internal) she didn’t manage to cope with the demands and barriers to achieve with the transition, although with “no regrets for quitting with swimming” she did have a more successful transition but with her ‘ordinary’ life.

The participant with the successful transition started his transition at the age of 18, and this could be one of the reasons why he did have a successful transition than the participant with the unsuccessful transition, he was more mature and ready to take on the demands and barriers. He did have a smaller crisis when he got injured and started his transition, which he tried to cope on his own, but it had an ineffective outcome, until he moved to another city and got a new coach who worked with him. With the new coach’s input the intervention got effective, and the swimmer had a successful transition both with the recovery of the injury and the transition.

The participant also had bigger and stronger support from his family, his coaches (both former and new), his team mates and his school friends. His modesty and his strong belief on himself also helped him to cope with and adapt to the transition. Another difference that could have mattered for the transition may be that the participant that had a successful transition was a male and this could have had an effect on the coping-skills and what kind of support he really felt that he was in need of.
The participant with the unsuccessful transition was only 14 years old when she started the transition, which could be a barrier to manage the demands and to adapt properly to the senior level. She also was in the puberty which could have had an effect on the coping skills and made a difference in the outcome of the intervention. Even the fact that she was a female could have made a difference in her balance between the demands, barriers and resources. The participant didn’t have that much support from her surroundings, besides her family that supported her hard and strong. Her coaches supported her in training but she lacked the social and emotional support from them, likewise about her support from team mates was a bit low. All of this could have made the coping and intervention to the ineffective transition.

She did go to a non-sport psychologist when the coping with the transition went ineffective. But this didn’t have an effective outcome either; the participant quitted because she felt it costed her too much and took to much part of her ‘ordinary’ life.

Discussion

The connection between the transitions junior to senior level to crises is based on the fact that the athletes entering sports of high achievement automatically begin to participate in adult competition, regardless of chronological age. For elite athletes, it is the beginning of sports career culmination (Stambulova, 1994). It is easier though, to attain the higher level of sport than to continue at this level. The athletes concentrate all efforts on adapting to new demands of adult high-achievement sports with new levels of competitiveness. According to the Swedish Swim Federation a senior swimmer is the one who has left the junior level (SSF, 2003).

The career of actual athletes can include a varying number of crises. When athletes don’t cope with new difficulties and problems, they retire from sports prematurely. Consequently, it is precisely in these periods that the athlete especially needs skilled psychological assistance that takes into account both the specific nature of each crisis and the peculiarities and reactions of the individual athlete (Stambulova, 1994).

Counselling practice shows that athletes often see a crisis as being at the “dead end” or a “blind alley”. In fact, they need a psychologist (or a more experienced and qualified person) who can show them that to be in crisis means to be at a “cross-road” (Stambulova, 2000).

During crisis it is important to analyze the situation from different points of view and to make a proper decision about how to resolve the contradiction(s) and how to turn ineffective coping into effective coping. The analysis of the situation prepares for the most important outcome of psychological counselling: the athlete’s choice of a coping strategy, one of the three suggested by the psychologist: rejection, acceptance or fighting.

According to Stambulova (2000) the younger and more immature (as sportsmen and personalities) athletes are, the more appropriate and effective the ‘substitution’ technique is (seeing him-/herself as stronger and most talented athlete), and that counselling on the basis of the “mobilization” technique pushes forward the athlete’s thinking and helps to consider a crisis situation from different perspectives.
The successful transition

To have a successful transition depends on many variables. The most important in his transition was that he had good support from family, peers, team mates, coaches and school friends. Other important variables were to have good internal resources (believing in oneself, motivation, skills etc.), the study of Ekengren confirms this. His balance between his resources and his barriers (which were his injury, moving to another city, new environment and routines, and to manage to combine school, swimming and part time job) were more positive on the resources side and that made the intervention effective. His coach had the knowledge to counsel the participant and persuade that his ‘crisis’ was not an actual crisis but a “turning point”. The consequences of the participant successful transition were that he got modest towards the athletes/swimmers and to others that struggle with their lives and goals.

Although with help from a sport psychologist the intervention might have taken less time, and the participant might have adapted and coped with his transition and injury without taking a harder road. One of the approaches could be to combine The Mobilization model of counselling athletes in crises and The Psychological Support of Sport career model (see page 5). This would have helped the participant to cope with his injury and to adapt to the senior level and its transition, with all factors that are included in his life (school, part time job and swimming).

The unsuccessful transition

The participant with the unsuccessful transition had a lot of variables that disturbed her to have positive outcome of the intervention. The variables that interfered were the lack of emotional support from coaches, team mates and friends. Her balance between her resources and barriers was not enough to keep an even balance. Her motivation changed from having fun with swimming to not having fun, and her social support came mostly just from her family. She had more barriers that made her taking help from a non-sport psychologist, but the outcome was ineffective and as a result she left her swimming career. Her barriers were that she had inter-personal conflict (not feeling modest, not be able to make new friends, and lacking of necessary knowledge and skills, etc.), and that she wasn’t mature enough to take on the demands that came along with the transfer to the senior level.

A sport psychologist might have worked with her internal resources to make her stronger mentally and also educate the coaches in what could make their relationship better with the participant, by informing them about social support is necessary, and improve their communication between each other.

If the communication, during the transition, between the coaches and the participant were better the coaches would had a chance to realize that the transition occurred too early and maybe by taking a step back could have made the participant stay longer and grow into the demands that were demanded at the senior level.

Also by working with different types of mental practices she might have been more capable to cope with the barriers. Some methods such as hypnosis, progressive relaxation, visualization, biofeedback, autogenic training, meditation, negative thought stopping, and confidence enhancement (Martens et al., 1990; Taylor, 1996, ref. in Hanin, 2000) might have helped the intervention outcome more effectively – but this is only something that can been discussed and not proven in this particular case.
The participant with the unsuccessful transition was a very young girl that transferred from junior to a senior level in swimming. Second she didn’t have the strong support to back her up when it got tough, mostly she blamed herself that she didn’t let anybody near her personally, they (the team mates) were competitors. She used a therapist to help her cope with all the resources and demands but the balance wasn’t good to succeed to balance it even. The transition didn’t go well and she dropped out, an unsuccessful transition occurred - the intervention was ineffective for the transition from junior to senior, although “with no regrets” she had a successful transition for her ‘ordinary’ life. This is although a whole new paper.

*Reflective Thoughts from the Author*

With a strong support (friends, team mates, coach, family) you as an athlete can manage with almost everything. There must be a balance between demands, barriers and resources if an athlete should manage to cope and deal with a transition, particularly at a level from junior to senior level. Why? Because when a transition from junior to senior level occurs this could be overwhelming, especially if an athlete isn’t mature enough. Shouldn’t the transition go well, an intervention with a sport psychologist should be offered or taken into consideration.

*Summary*

Sport almost always begins as a free-choice activity. Most people have experienced sport in some form, and many view it as a highly positive aspect of life. Sport gives participants of all ages’ opportunities for self-expression, personal achievement, competitive strivings, and fun. One could argue that sport exists to make us feel good and therefore that the more we know about this process, the better – both for participants and for sport as an institution (Hanin, 2000).

A transition from junior to senior level shouldn’t occur too soon but also not too late, at least not in swimming where a career ends about at the age of 30, sooner for the women. The transition shouldn’t occur if the swimmer doesn’t have the support and the resources to manage with all the demands and barriers that might make it harder to adapt to the new level.

*Putting theory into practice*

In every sport - transitions are made. Not many do make it to the senior level and if they make it to the level not many manage to sustain at the level and perform well. A sport psychologist shouldn’t be a taboo to come in touch with. With proper coach educations and with proper information to the athletes at an early age the taboo will disappear and more athletes will come in touch for help in managing to cope with demands or evolve them to become stronger as athletes. With this in mind more athletes might manage to sustain at the new level after a transition, particularly after the transition from junior to senior level. It is important to have in mind that sport psychologist isn’t just for professionals; they are for all athletes at every level.

As a coach it is important to think not once but twice even three times before moving up a swimmer a level, especially at an early age or if the swimmer isn’t mature enough to manage taking most of the thinking of the training on her/his own. As a coach it is important to have this in mind. If the coach decides to move the swimmer up and a negative balance between recourses and demands occurs and the coping of this doesn’t work – it is important to turn for
help of a sport psychologist than a therapist. A sport psychologist has the proper tools to use; to make right decision on how to help and how to work with the athlete.

*Concerns of the Study*

To have in mind for the next time interview are held is to check if the room has a comfortable temperature and if there are any more people that can come and disturb the interview. This is important to have in mind because it may interfere in a delicate part of interview where the participant is telling a difficult part of her/his life and may snap out of the memory, and in that way important information could be lost.

Interviews should, although, be considered as to be the most right instrument to use in managing to get all the delicate information the participants posses. It is important, as an interviewer, to have in mind to be careful and delicate in how the questions are asked during an important or difficult moment where the participant reveals her/his inner thoughts and feelings. More participants and with a quantitative investigation other results might have been revealed.

The result might have been different if two more cases were presented, one more in the successful transition, maybe a female, and one more for the unsuccessful transition, for example a male participant. Maybe then, more information could have been revealed. It might be some differences between males and females way of coping with transition from junior to senior level, or that they have different needs in social support.

*Future Research*

For future studies a quantitative instrument that could measure all these topics could be in handy, or a qualitative study with more participants and a comparison between females and males coping ability from junior to senior level could be interesting to study. Or a comparison in how it is to transit from junior to senior level in European countries differentiates from how Swedes transit from junior to senior level.
References


SSFs (Svenska SimFörbundet) (2003). *Stadgar och Tävlingsbestämmelser*, kap. 2.
Appendixes

Appendix 1. English interview guide for athletes.

Appendix 2. Swedish interview guide for athletes.

Appendix 3. Deductive analyses of the interviews (in Swedish).
Appendix 1.
English interview guide for swimmers.

**Part 1. Background information:**

1. Please, tell me what you find important about yourself (age, education, family).

2. Please, tell me about your athletic career.
   a. When did you start with sport, in general?
   b. When did you start swimming? For how long have you been swimming?
   c. Please, can you divide your athletic career into several stages and to tell me about briefly about each of them.

3. Sport experiences.
   a. What were the highest achievements in your swimming career?
   b. What was your best result last season?
   c. What are your goals for the current/next season?

**Part 2. Experiences related to the transition from junior to senior sport**

4. Please, now think back about the period when you started on the senior level in swimming. Did you perceive it as a turning point/transfer/transition in your career?

5. Please, describe what new challenges (demands) you experienced during that transitional period:
   a) In training
   b) In competitions
   c) In relationships (with coach, teammates, family, girl- or boyfriend)?
   d) In lifestyle/regime of life? (did swimming interfere with your life outside swimming?)

6. What helped you to meet the challenges you mentioned above:
   a) Your own strong points (knowledge, skills)?
   b) Other people (coach, teammates, family, others)?
   c) Organizational/financial support (school, club, Federation, etc.)?

7. What created difficulties to meet the challenges in the transition;
   a) Your own weak points (lack of competences, skills)?
   b) Other people (coach, teammates, parents, girl- or boyfriend, others)?
   c) Organizational /financial barriers (e.g., uncomfortable rules, living far from facilities, no scholarship, etc.)?

8. Please, describe how you felt at that time in general.

9. Did you have negative thoughts about yourself? How often?
10. How often did you have negative feelings (guilt, etc.) related to:
   a) Your training  
   b) Your participation in competitions?  
   c) Your coach?  
   d) Your teammates?  
   e) Your lifestyle (coordination of sport with other activities)?

11. Did you feel, at that time, that you focused very much on your mistakes and failures?

12. Did you feel that you needed assistance/support from a psychologist?

13. Did you get professional psychological help or any other help?

14. What did you do to cope with the difficulties/barriers on your way to adjust on the senior level in swimming?

15. What did you do more, in general, to meet the challenges of the transition?

16. How long did it take for you to adjust to the demands on the senior level?

17. What lessons did you learn from that transition?

18. Please, tell me what you are feeling right now about:
   a) Satisfaction with your athletic career?  
   b) Future plans/goals for the future?  
   c) Your life satisfaction in general?

Debriefing and questions from the interviewee.
Appendix 2.
Swedish interview guide for swimmers.

**Del 1. Bakgrunds information:**


2. Vill du vara snäll och berätta om din idrottskarriär.
   a) När började du med idrott, allmänt?
   b) När började du med simning? Hur länge har du simmat?
   c) Vill du vara snäll och dela upp din idrottsliga karriär i olika delmoment och berätta lite kort om dem?

3. Idrottsliga upplevelser.
   a) Vad är din högsta/största prestation i din simkarriär?
   b) Vilket är ditt bästa resultat från förra säsongen?
   c) Vad har du för mål för den nuvarande/nästa säsong?

**Del 2. Upplevelser relaterade till övergången från junior till senioridrott.**

4. Vill du vara snäll och tänka dig tillbaka till tiden när du började på seniornivån i simning. Uppfattade du det som en vändpunkt/övergång i din karriär?

5. Vill du vara snäll och beskriv vad för nya utmaningar (krav) du upplevde under denna övergång/vändpunkt:
   a) på träning?
   b) på tävlingar?
   c) i relationer mellan (tränare, träningsskamrater, familj, pojk- eller flickvän)?
   d) i din livsstil? (har din simning påverkat mycket på ditt liv utanför simningen?)

6. Vad har hjälpt dig att klara av dessa utmaningar som du har nämnt just:
   a) dina egna styrkor (kunskap, skicklighet)?
   b) andra personer (tränare, träningsskamrater, familj, andra)?
   c) organisationens/ekonomiskt stöd (skola, klubb, förbundet, etc.,)?

7. Vad gjorde det svårt att uppnå/möta dessa utmaningar i övergången/vändpunkten:
   a) dina egna svagheter (brist på kompetens, skicklighet)?
   b) andra personer (tränare, träningsskamrater, föräldrar, fick- eller pojkvänner)?
   c) organisationens/ekonomiska motgångar/barriärer (obekväma regler, bor långt ifrån anläggningen, brist på stipendier, etc.)?


9. Har du haft några negativa tankar om dig själv? Hur ofta?
10. Hur ofta har du haft negativa känslor (skuld) relaterat till:
   a) din träning?
   b) din medverkan under tävlingar?
   c) din träär?
   d) dina träningskamrater?
   e) din livsstil (idrott med integrering med andra aktiviteter)?

11. Kände du, under den tiden, att du fokuserade väldigt mycket på dina misstag och misslyckande?

12. Kände du att du behövde hjälp/stöd från en psykolog?

13. Fick du professionell hjälp eller någon annan sorts hjälp?

14. Vad gjorde du för att hantera/”cope” svårigheterna/barriärerna under tiden du anpassade dig till seniornivån i simningen?

15. Vad gjorde du mer allmänt för att möta utmaningarna på seniornivån?

16. Hur lång tid tog det för dig att anpassa dig till kraven på seniornivån?

17. Vilka lärdomar har du lärt dig från denna övergången/vändpunkten?

18. Vill du vara snäll och berätta för mig hur du känner för, just nu, angående:
   a) din tillfredsställelse på din idrottsliga karriär?
   b) framtida planer/mål?
   c) din tillfredsställelse på din livsstil, allmänt?

Debriefing och frågor från intervjuobjektet.
### Appendix 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
<th>Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start of the career transition (5)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Start of the career transition (16)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start 14 år (1)</td>
<td>två år sedan (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kval till JSM/SM -99 (1)</td>
<td>första året gick åt till att rehabilitera mig nästan (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simmade med seniorer (1)</td>
<td>tog tid att vänja sig vid alltting (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utan min vetskap, hade inte en aning (1)</td>
<td>första SM kval när jag var 20 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kom vidare till ungdoms-OS (1)</td>
<td>återvändsgränd (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sedan en vändpunkt (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hade tur (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tränaren gav mig en chans (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flyttade hit och började plugga (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>träningen (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skador (1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Career transition demands (12)                                              | Career transition demands (14)                                            |
|                                                                              |                                                                              |
| simningen blev helt annorlunda (4)                                          | träningsflitighet (2)                                                      |
| aldrig krav hemifrån (1)                                                     | psyke (1)                                                                  |
| krav från tränarna (2)                                                      | styr du din träning själv (5)                                              |
| annorlunda relation till tränarna (1)                                       | trännen står som ett hjälpmidlet (2)                                      |
| egna krav (3)                                                                | börjar fundera mer (4)                                                     |
| behövde en paus (1)                                                          |                                                                              |

| Career transition resources (12)                                            | Career transition resources (12)                                           |
|                                                                              |                                                                              |
| inga vänner utanför simningen (2)                                           | envis (3)                                                                  |
| min mor/familj som stöd (2)                                                  | inte ge upp (1)                                                            |
| tränarna har hjälpt mig, framför allt på träning (1)                        | bra stöd (3)                                                               |
| klubben förstod vad som krävdes (1)                                        | stöd från mamma och pappa (2)                                              |
| envishet (1)                                                                 | vet att jag är psykiskt starkare än dom (1)                                |
| målinriktad (2)                                                              | målsättning (2)                                                            |
| pojkvänerna förstod (simmare, elitidrottare) (1)                            |                                                                              |
| vänner som stannade kvar (2)                                                 |                                                                              |
### Career transitions barriers (17)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Manliga tränare oförstående (2)</th>
<th>ingen riktig förebild (1)</th>
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<tr>
<td>planera allt (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>öppenheten bland simmare (1)</td>
<td>klubben (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ödmjukheten hos simmarna (1)</td>
<td>tid (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>är inte speciellt ödmjuk (1)</td>
<td>hinder (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>är inte speciellt öppen (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>väldigt reserverad (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>simmare är ju konkurrenter (2)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>tränarna/klubben hade inte den kunskap som behövdes (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>skaffa/behålla vänner (3)</td>
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<td>familjen (2)</td>
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### Career transition feelings and thoughts (38)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>tränings/tränaren (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>smak på det andra livet (3)</td>
<td>positiva känslor (6)</td>
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<td>tränare (3)</td>
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<td>konstig stämning i gruppen (3)</td>
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<td>negativa tankar (13)</td>
<td>coping (4)</td>
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<td>ifrågasättande (2)</td>
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<td>prioriteringar (4)</td>
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### Need in assistance (7)

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<td>tog hjälp av mamma, samtalanalyst (2)</td>
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<td>känner lite tabubelagd att gå till en psykolog (2)</td>
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<td>hjälpte jättemycket (2)</td>
<td>tog aldrig kontakt med psykologen (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping strategies (7)</td>
<td>Coping strategies (11)</td>
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<td>emotion-focused coping (3)</td>
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<th>Duration of career transition (2)</th>
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<tr>
<td>gick snabbt (1)</td>
<td>först mina två år i XXX tills jag gjorde</td>
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<tr>
<td>var aldrig svårt att anpassa sig (1)</td>
<td>mitt JSM-kavl (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sedan mina två år här i XXX tills jag kvalade till SM för första gången (1)</td>
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<td>den lilla, lilla biten som behövs</td>
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<td>är mer psykiskt än fysiskt (2)</td>
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<td>kunde inte offra mer (2)</td>
<td>mer ödmjuk mot simningen och andra simmare (2)</td>
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<td>har en mer sund inställning (2)</td>
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<td>hade hjälpt att prata om det (tävlingarna SM/JSM) (1)</td>
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<td>jag vill göra något viktigt för andra (3)</td>
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<td>min livsstil är jag inte alls nöjd med (1)</td>
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<td>fortfarande har man inte kunnat bygga upp det ännu (med släktningarna) (1)</td>
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<td>vet att jag hade kunnat komma mycket längre (2)</td>
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