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Entry into Elite Sport: A Preliminary Investigation into the Transition Experiences of Rookie Athletes

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Athletes experience a number of transitions throughout their athletic career (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). One pivotal transition that has received less attention in the literature is the transition into elite sport. The purpose of the present study was to examine the transitioning experience of young athletes entering elite sport. Using a phenomenological approach, rookie ice hockey players ($N = 8$, representing two different Major Junior 'A' teams) were asked about their experiences of entering into elite sport. Two primary themes emerged from the young athletes' responses: on-ice issues associated with performance and off-ice issues relating to relationships and personal development. These findings offer preliminary evidence that young athletes encounter transitional challenges during the entry into elite sport. Further research is necessary to explore how the entry experience impacts young athletes' athletic and psychosocial development and well-being.

Participating in elite sport can challenge a young athlete both physically and psychologically (Hollander, Myers, & LeUnes, 1995). In addition to coping with the normal rigors associated with adolescence and early adulthood, young athletes often encounter events and issues (e.g., injury, burnout) that may increase the demands of the developmental process (Pearson & Petipas, 1990; Remer & Watson, 1978; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Within the elite sport experience, transitioning between key points in a career has been identified as a particularly critical period (Pearson & Petipas, 1990). For over four decades, researchers have been interested in how athletic career transitions impact the athlete (e.g., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Hallden, 1965; Mihovilovic, 1968). Through such investigations, coaches, researchers, practitioners, and athletes have come to understand the physical and psychological challenges facing elite athletes during their athletic careers.

Schlossberg (1981) proposed one of the more accepted definitions of transition as, "an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships" (p. 5). While Schlossberg's definition was developed to investigate transitions in life, a number of researchers

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have applied her definition to the sport setting (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Danish, Owens, Green, & Brunelle, 1997; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). For the most part, research in sport has focused on an individual's transition *out of* competition (Danish et al., 1997; Miller & Kerr, 2002). A number of researchers have documented the transition out of sport to be challenging for the athlete, often resulting in emotional difficulties (Allison & Meyer, 1988), decreased self-confidence (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and/or mental health problems (Menkehorst & Van Den Berg, 1997). In addition, several comprehensive conceptual models of the adaptation of athletes' transition out of elite sport have been proposed (Kerr & Dacynshyn, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). One pivotal transition, which has received less attention, occurs when entering elite sport.

At a conceptual level, Bloom (1985) was among the first to describe the entry into elite sport as a critical developmental phase in which athletes become more dedicated to their sport and where the amount of training and level of specialization increases. Bloom conducted in-depth interviews with 120 American world class performers. During the often long developmental stage, Bloom suggested that the athlete may struggle with the adoption of a whole new set of behaviors and beliefs. This struggle often revolved around the personal and familial sacrifices (e.g., relationships, free time) associated with the increased intensity, hard work, and commitment necessary in the developmental stage. Similarly, Côté (1999), in an investigation of four elite junior rowers and tennis players (mean age = 18 years) and their families, suggested that the transition of athletes into elite sport would be identified as a developmental period in which the athlete makes an investment into the sport.

Stambulova (1994, 2000) also developed a stage model based on career transitions of over 200 elite Russian athletes representing a wide range of sport specializations. Stambulova believed that an athlete's career consisted of six predictable stages and transitions. Of particular interest in the present study was Stambulova's second stage, which was the transition to intensive training in the chosen sport. This stage embodies the transition into elite sport, a point in time in which training and competition become the major foci of the athlete's life (Coakley, 1983).

A substantial contribution toward the entry transition literature of young athletes has arisen from the research of Wylleman and Lavallee (e.g., Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Wylleman and colleagues (1999) viewed the concept of transition in a holistic life-span perspective, which spans the athletic and post-athletic career. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) are credited with creating a developmental model on the normative transitions athletes may face through their athletic career. Normative transitions are characterized as generally predictable and anticipated transitions during which the athlete leaves one stage and enters another stage (e.g., transition from amateur to professional status, from regional to national level competitions) (Schlossberg, 1984; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Alternatively, non-normative transitions are described as generally unpredictable, unanticipated, and involuntary (Schlossberg, 1984). These transitions may result from the loss of a personal coach, season-ending injury, or being "cut" from the team (Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004).

The developmental model put forward by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) consists of four interacting layers: i) athletic, ii) psychological, iii) psychosocial, and iv) academic vocational (see Figure 1). The top layer illustrates the four stages and transitions athletes face in their athletic development. Specifically, the athletic development layer includes three stages previously identified by Bloom (1985): i) initiation, ii) development and iii) mastery. A fourth stage, discontinuation, has been proposed by several researchers (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001; Wylleman et al., 2000). The second layer of Wylleman and Lavallee's model examines the stages and transitions occurring at a psychological level including childhood (birth to

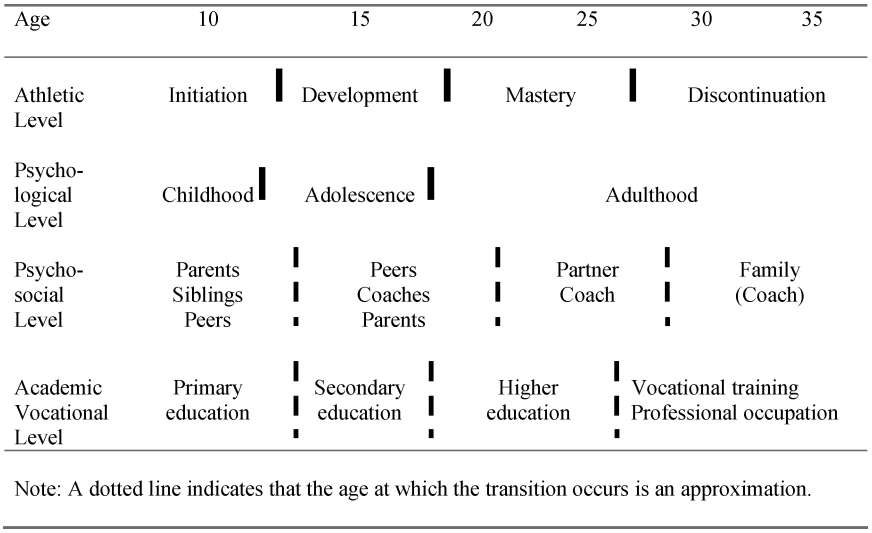

Figure 1. Wylleman & Lavallee's (2004) developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational levels.

12 years of age), adolescence (13 to 18 years) and adulthood (from 19 years onward). The third layer reflects the changes in the athlete's social development relative to her or his athletic involvement. More specifically, this layer outlines the athlete's evolving interpersonal relationships with peers, coaches, and parents. The fourth and final layer examines the transitions at academic and vocational levels from primary education to secondary education to higher education and ultimately professional occupation. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) suggested that the model should stimulate sport psychology consultants to reflect upon the "developmental, interactive, and interdependent nature of transitions and stages faced by individual athletes" (p. 517). During the critical time period of entry into elite sport, Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) framework suggests that the young athlete may be in the second stage of athletic development (layer 1), the psychological level of adolescence (layer 2), engaging in salient interpersonal relationships with peers, coaches, and parents (layer 3), and attending secondary school (layer 4).

While existing research (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) has identified the transition into elite sport to be a potentially important period, relatively little is known about the experience of the young athlete during this critical time. Understanding the factors important to the young athlete during the entry into elite sport may have a number of direct and future implications for athletes, coaches, and practitioners. Utilizing a qualitative methodology may be beneficial in the initial exploration of this topic. Qualitative research has been successful in the past in extending our understanding of various psychological concepts such as athlete burnout and coping with stress and injury (e.g., Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). In particular, phenomenology, a research tradition grounded in understanding the essence of the phenomenon or experience (Morse & Richards, 2002) was chosen as the best method for the current study.

Several researchers including Creswell (1998) and Dale (1996) have noted that phenomenology lends itself to the deep understanding or meaning of lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon. In a sport setting, phenomenology has been effective in extending

our knowledge of elite athlete quality of life (Brady & Shambrook, 2003), coping in sport (Holt, 2003; Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005), fear in high-risk sport (Miesel & Potgieter, 2003), persistent fatigue in elite female triathletes (Yarde & Dunstan, 2000), and playing hurt (Turner, Barlow, & IIbery, 2002). Taken together, this growing body of research suggests that the implementation of phenomenology may be a promising qualitative method to gain insight into young athletes' entry experiences into elite sport. The purpose of the present study was to provide an in-depth exploration of rookie ice hockey players' transitions into elite Major Junior 'A' hockey using a phenomenological tradition of inquiry.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included eight rookie male ice hockey players (mean age = 17.12 years) from two Major Junior 'A' Ontario Hockey League (OHL) teams. The OHL represents the highest level of elite, amateur hockey in Canada. The inclusion criteria for this study entailed that participants had to be a member of a Major Junior OHL team as well as a rookie player, defined as any first year OHL player. All participants were randomly selected from a list of rookie players from each of the participating teams. See Table 1 for a more detailed description of the participants.

Procedure

A phenomenological approach was utilized to examine the experiences of young athletes as they made the pivotal transition into elite sport. Employing a phenomenological approach offered opportunities for the young athletes to be the experts and for the researchers to move beyond brief description toward an in-depth understanding of the athletes' transition experiences (Dale, 1996). Focus groups were used as they have the potential to provide insight into the thoughts young people have on issues, programs, and opportunities (Krueger & Casey,

Table 1
Summary of Rookie Participants' Demographics

Participant	Team	Age	Position	Previous Season's Level of Hockey	Present Living Conditions
Nathan	1	17	Left wing	Junior 'B'	Living away from home with a billet (host) family for the second time.
Jason	1	17	Right wing	Tier II Junior 'A'	Living away from home with a billet family for the second time.
Michael	1	17	Defense	Midget	Living away from home for the first time with a billet family.
Peter	1	16	Center	Bantam	Living away from home for the first time with a billet family.
Darren	2	17	Left wing	Midget	Living away from home for the first time with a billet family.
Josh	2	18	Defense	Midget	Living at home.
John	2	17	Center	Tier II Junior 'A'	Living away from home for the first time with a billet family.
Jared	2	18	Defense	Junior 'B'	Living away from home for the first time with a billet family.

2000). Each focus group session consisted of four rookie participants from the same OHL team. Although, typical focus groups are 6 to 10 people (Patton, 2002), the small size of the focus groups is in keeping with Krueger and Casey's (2000) suggestion that the researcher may gain an enhanced level of understanding with smaller groups of four to six participants. Further, smaller groups are recommended when the participants have a great deal to share about the topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The focus groups met after the fifth month of the regular season following a scheduled practice in a private room away from coaches and teammates. The focus group sessions were moderated by the primary investigator, who was a former junior hockey player. Prior to the focus group sessions, the moderator received focus group training from the second author who had extensive experience with qualitative interviewing techniques. The interview training involved pilot testing the interview questions and procedure as well as running through several interview scenarios. Consent for the study was received from the overseeing athletic governing body, Hockey Canada, and the participating OHL teams, coaches, and rookie participants.

The two focus group interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and were audio taped. Due to the exploratory nature of the investigation, the interview guide was derived from a variety of sources. Conceptually, the interview guide focused on two layers from Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model on transitions faced by athletes: the athletic level of development (layer 1) and the athlete's social development relative to his athletic involvement (layer 3). From an applied and practical standpoint, the interview guide also was based upon four pilot interviews conducted with two former Major Junior A players, one present Major Junior A coach, and one rookie Major Junior A player.

The guide consisted of three primary styles of questions: i) grand tour or descriptive (e.g., "Describe any challenges or conflicts you have experienced since beginning your OHL career?"); ii) structural (e.g., "What are the strategies you used to cope with the challenges of the season?"), and iii) contrast (e.g., "What are the major differences you have noticed between last season's level of hockey and the OHL?"). The three distinct styles of questions enable the researcher to collect a rich sample of the participants' language (Guba, 1981; Spradley, 1979).

The format of the interview guide consisted of five main question areas to reflect the recommendations of Morgan and Krueger (1998). These five areas included: (a) opening questions; (b) introductory questions; (c) transition questions; (d) key questions; and (e) ending questions. General questions were asked initially, followed by more specific questions tapping into the primary purpose of the focus group interview. Probes were used to expand on the responses and understanding of several key questions.

Opening Questions

The opening questions were about their age, position, and previous playing experience. The two questions pertaining to previous playing experience were: "What was the highest level of minor hockey that you had played?" and "What level of hockey did you play last season before playing in the OHL?"

Introductory Questions

Following the opening questions, a series of introductory questions were posed to provide the participants with an opportunity to begin to reflect on the transition from minor hockey to junior hockey and their first experiences with junior hockey. The two introductory questions included: "At what age did you begin playing junior hockey?" and "Do you feel you 'fast tracked' through minor hockey to get to junior hockey?" Given the wide range of potential playing backgrounds of the participants, the latter introductory question served to generate an

awareness of each participant's playing experiences leading into the focus group's discussion on entry into elite sport.

Transition Questions

Transition questions offered participants a logical link to the upcoming key questions (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). The transition questions were: "What are the major differences you have noticed between last season's level of hockey and the OHL?", and "What are some reasons that you believe the level of hockey you played last season was or was not a good 'stepping stone' for playing in the OHL?"

Key Questions

Five key questions were developed to serve as the focal point of the interview and provide some understanding of a young athlete's entry into elite sport. These five key questions included:

1. Who has been helpful in your transition or adjustment into junior hockey?
   Probe: What has he or she done to ease or impede the transition?
2. Describe your experiences living away from home?
   Probe: How many years have you lived away from home?
   Probe: What age did you leave home to pursue junior hockey?
   Probe: Do you feel you were ready to leave home and your friends?
3. What emotions have you experienced since making the team?
4. Describe any challenges or conflicts you have experienced since beginning your OHL career?
5. What are the strategies you used to cope with the challenges of the season?

Ending Questions

The ending questions provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their responses to the key questions. The two ending questions were: *"*Reflecting on your experience this season, are you satisfied with how you are developing as a player both physically and mentally?" and "Overall, are you satisfied with your decision to play in the OHL?"

Trustworthiness

It is necessary for qualitative researchers to establish the trustworthiness of the data collection, analysis, and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was operationalized based upon credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility for this research was achieved through participant observation during the focus group sessions by the moderator and through triangulation. Field notes describing the observations were written immediately following the focus group interview sessions by the focus group moderator. The field notes and analysis during the first interview session served to strengthen the inclusion of further issues in the focus group session with the second team. Triangulation involved the use of multiple sources and methods to cross-check data and interpretations (Denzin, 1978). The triangulation took place between the informants' comments, field notes, and transcripts. Both sessions were audio taped to serve as valuable referential materials to support the interpretation of the results.

Transferability was achieved through purposeful sampling and obtaining thick descriptive data. Each participant was permitted a chance to speak freely on each question without time constraints. This opportunity lent itself to preventing dominant participants from monopolizing the discussion as well as resulted in thick descriptive data, which facilitated the transferability and comparison of the findings between the two focus groups (Guba, 1981).

In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the instrument through which the data must pass for analysis. Therefore, field notes and analysis notes were kept to ensure a continuous audit trail for the dependability of the findings (Guba, 1981). The field and analysis notes were also utilized in the confirmability audit conducted by the second author following the two interviews to demonstrate the neutrality of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analyses

The data analyses resembled the spiral model proposed by Creswell (1998). The first process or loop commenced with the data collection and data management. Next, the margin notes and initial codes were formed while reading through the text. A third loop involved describing the social setting, and then analyzing the data for themes and patterned regularities. The final loop of the spiral involved the interpretation and presentation of the findings visually supported by tables, figures, and sketches (Creswell, 1998). After each focus group interview was transcribed verbatim, an interpretational analysis as described by Tesch (1990) was conducted by the lead researcher. This approach involved segmenting the text into meaningful pieces of information called meaning units. The emerging meaning units, which can be a word, sentence, or phrase containing one idea from the data, were then indexed or coded into distinct categories (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the second author conducted a reliability check on 20% of the responses. This process yielded an inter-rater reliability of more than 85% between researchers. Any discrepancies between the researchers were resolved during a meeting between the two researchers.

RESULTS

Two broad categories of issues emerged within the focus group discussions. These included on-ice issues and off-ice issues. On-ice issues reflected the athletes' transition experiences on the ice and at the arena while off-ice issues reflected the transition experiences away from the ice rink (e.g., at home, at school). Table 2 depicts the frequency of the responses in each category.

Table 2
Frequency of Responses in Relation to Transition Into Elite Sport

Category	Total Responses	Percentage
On-Ice		
Readiness for elite competition	39	22.7
Demonstrating competence	12	7.0
Earning playing time	22	12.8
Evaluation of performance	15	8.7
Comments from coaches	19	11.0
Off-Ice		
The role of teammates	17	9.9
Billets	18	10.4
Player trades	12	7.0
Personal development	18	10.5
N	172	100

On-Ice

Five common themes relating to on-ice activities were identified by the rookie athletes: (a) readiness for elite competition, (b) demonstrating competence, (c) earning playing time, (d) evaluation of performance, and (e) comments from coaches.

Readiness for Elite Competition

Perceptions of readiness for elite competition among the participants appeared to be based on the level of previous competition. Most participants viewed their previous year's level of competition as beneficial in preparation for the entry into elite sport. The five rookie players with previous junior hockey experience collectively expressed the benefit of their route to elite sport (OHL). Jared[1] discussed the benefit of his previous junior hockey experience on his relatively smooth transition into elite sport: "I was playing Tier II [Jr.A] last year. It was a good step to play against older, stronger players and get used to the quicker game. It definitely helped me for Major Junior 'A' (elite sport)." Nathan supported the previous player's comments by adding, "The level was just faster. From bantam (hockey) to junior (hockey), it prepared you more. It was similar to the OHL with workouts and practices."

In contrast, several of the rookie athletes who had elected to stay within the minor hockey system and compete at the midget level with players their own age were mixed in their assessment of their readiness for elite sport. Josh believed the level of competition in midget may not have benefited his preparation and transition into elite sport: "There were not too many challenges for me last year (in midget). It was pretty easy. This year was a big step up." In contrast, Darren perceived the midget experience to be beneficial in preparation for the transition into elite sport:

> I think playing midget gave me more of a chance to develop my skills. Being one of the better players on the team, I was on the ice in key situations, which helped me develop as a player. Whereas if I played (Tier II) Junior A, I would have played fourth line or not even dressed every game . . . you would play against older guys, which is good too but not getting the amount of ice time . . . I would have got playing midget. I don't know if it was better but it was certainly good for me.

Demonstrating Competence

One of the key initial thoughts among all the young entrants to elite sport involved demonstrating the competence to compete at the elite level. Josh indicated, "I just wanted to make the team and earn a spot in the lineup." John added:

> I pretty much wanted to prove that I belonged here (elite level) and could play in this league (OHL) . . . many people last year told me playing Major junior was a mistake for me . . . . I was too small to play in this league (OHL) . . . so basically my main goal was to prove them all wrong.

Earning Playing Time

A common concern among players involved the issue of playing time. This was reflected in the past and present goals of several rookie athletes. Jason stated, "[My goals were] just to

[1]To protect the identity of the rookie athletes, the names of the participants in the manuscript have been changed.

make the team and try to move up in the playing line up." Michael supported Jason's view and offered similar goals during the interview, "I want to make the team and try to get as many shifts as possible." A comment by Nathan highlighted this shift in goals from demonstrating competence to earning more playing time: "I want to move up in the lineup . . . instead of playing fourth line try to move up to third line to get a little more ice time."

Although increased playing time was a prominent goal for rookie athletes, their actual playing time appeared to be a common concern and a large source of disappointment for the young athletes. Josh, a rookie athlete, expressed his disappointment:

> For me I didn't play a lot in the first half of the season. Sometimes you are sitting out five games in a row. And the first two you are thinking okay, I'll pay my dues and get right back in there. But by the fifth one you just want to go home and quit hockey. Totally!

Josh was not alone in his sentiment; a fellow rookie teammate, Darren, shared a similar disappointment, "It is very frustrating sitting out games. I was thinking, 'When are we ever going to get in?' But even when we did get in on the fourth line we were not getting out there too much. It has been very frustrating."

For the majority of athletes, the adjustment of receiving less playing time when entering elite sport impacted their confidence. Michael stated, "My confidence is pretty low. I try to stay positive with the [infrequent] amount of ice time and everything." While the confidence of the rookie athletes appeared to initially drop with the associated decreased playing time, several rookies were able to put the loss of confidence into perspective by associating it with the challenges of the new situation. For example, Josh said:

> This is my first year playing with guys 2 or 3 years older. It is pretty hard on my confidence. In minor hockey, I was always the captain of the team. Here, I'm the seventh defenseman. It is pretty tough to have the same kind of attitude like you are the best. And also with the older guys, this is my first experience playing with them, so I think I am gaining confidence everyday that I am playing. But it was really tough at the start.

Evaluation of Performance

A consistent finding emerging from the interviews was the evaluation of performance in terms of point production. Further, when the athletes evaluated their performance in terms of this outcome, it often resulted in lower confidence. Peter highlighted how the lack of point production had impacted his confidence: "My 'goose egg' in goals is really hurting my confidence!"

Despite the noted evaluation of performance based largely on outcome (point production), it is worth noting that the players unanimously believed that competing at the elite level was a positive experience and that it had increased their confidence. John echoed the sentiments shared by the rookie players regarding the entry into elite sport:

> For the most part, I have seen myself play well. I have seen myself get points. I have noticed myself playing better since Christmas. So looking towards next year I basically know what I can do. Now I just know what I have to do to make all the other stuff possible. I'd definitely say it was a positive experience.

Coaches' Comments

The coaches were recognized by rookie athletes as being important during the transition into elite sport. In fact, the athletes often sought and received support from the coaches during their

transition. However, the athletes did not always receive the support needed. Several athletes perceived the coaches' feedback as often being overly critical, subsequently decreasing their confidence. For example, Darren recalled the difficulty he experienced when attempting to distinguish between constructive and negative criticism from the coaches:

> [When] they [the coaches] are criticizing you then you feel like they hate me. I suck out there. But they say they are doing it to make you a better player. It [constructive criticism] is hard to see at that time.

Other rookies felt the coaches could have offered more positive comments to enhance their self-confidence. For example, Josh noted, "I'm pretty bitter towards the coaches . . . sometimes you want the coaches to show a little bit of confidence in you, if you don't have as much confidence in yourself."

Off- Ice

The off-ice issues identified by the rookie participants included: (a) the role of teammates; (b) billets; (c) player trades; and (d) personal development.

The Role of Teammates

The transition into elite sport represented a shift in social support for the majority of the young athletes from their family to new teammates. As most athletes had moved away from home to compete, this may not be surprising. John spoke of the crucial support offered by teammates during the transition into elite sport:

> I think whenever you are down, for the most part teammates are usually the ones that can help bring you back because you are with them everyday. You are with them more than anybody. For eight months it is pretty much your family. You don't see your billets as much as anybody else. You don't talk to your parents as often. So I think teammates and coaches are probably the ones that would help you get out of certain slumps and help you continue streaks while you are on them.

In terms of teammates, support from both veterans and rookies was deemed important. For example, Josh commented, "At the start of the year I was not playing that much and Jim, a veteran, was helpful when he was in that situation last year and did not play that much." Darren discussed the important bond developed early in the season during the transition: "Even during training camp, the rookies had a couple of afternoons together and that really helped each other."

Billets

An athlete's billet or host family emerged as an important off-ice theme. Being away from home and living with another family for the first time was a 'culture shock' for some athletes. These billets, however, became an integral part of the athletes' transition. Billets were described as playing both a positive and negative role during the transition period. John shared the positive role his billet family played in his transition into elite sport: "When I first got here my billets were great. They helped me forget about leaving home and made it a lot easier." Alternatively, Jared recalls the difficult experience of his first billet family:

> With my first billets, it was a difficult situation because the parents were split up, and the dad was still living in the basement. So there was so much tension in the house. So finally after a while, I just left. The new place I am staying is a very nice family environment.

The athletes also acknowledged how the freedom of living away from home with a billet family could be both positive and negative. John stated:

> . . . but with billets they don't care as much as your parents do, so they kind of let you do your own thing. I guess to some extent it is a good thing, and to some extent it is a bad thing. Like he [Darren] said when you get home, there is no one riding you to do your homework so you tend not to do it. Just do your own thing.

Player Trades

The trading of a teammate also was a theme that emerged. When trades occurred early, the impact was minimal. Nathan recalled the day his rookie teammates were traded:

> There were a couple of rookies at the beginning who were traded . . . they were not here for that long at the beginning, so we (the rookies) didn't really get to know them . . . .so it wasn't that big of a deal.

However, as the season progressed, the impact of trades became more significant. John described the difficulty when two of his rookie teammates were traded later in the season:

> This year two of the three players that were traded were probably the two closest guys to me on the team. So it was kind of difficult at first. They happened fairly closely. The first one was in October sometime. I knew it was coming but at the same time, I was thinking maybe it would not come. They were the guys I spent the most time with. So it was a little hard at first but I guess they are both in pretty good situations now, so it worked out for the best for everybody. I guess at the time it was hard to deal with but as time went on it was all fine.

Personal Development

Despite the challenges, all players believed they were developing and maturing as a result of the elite sport experience. A sense of maturity was reported by the young athletes and was highlighted in John's comments:

> For the most part we are all more mentally mature. Just because of the whole moving away from home thing. We are not on our own because we have billets and stuff, but in a way we are. They are not your parents. They are there to feed you. Except for Jared's first billets, they didn't do that for him. Like we have said earlier it is your choice to do your homework or not. It is basically your choice whether you go to school or not. Of course if you don't, you will pay for it with your paycheck. It is something you will have to deal with yourself. Your parents are not there to bail you out.

The young athletes perceived that the challenging nature of the transition period accounted for this level of maturity. This evaluation led Josh to remark, "You are certainly thrust into a situation that you didn't think of before hand. You grow up in a hurry."

DISCUSSION

This preliminary study examined the transition experiences of eight young male ice hockey athletes entering into elite sport. Using a conceptual framework put forward by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) and a phenomenological approach, a number of themes emerged as being important factors to the young athletes during this transition. The themes were clustered into on-ice and off-ice experiences. On-ice themes surrounded readiness for competition, demonstrating competence, earning playing time, evaluation of performance, and coaches' comments. Off-ice themes included the role of teammates, billets, player trades, and personal development. Applying the findings to Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) conceptual framework, the on-ice themes offered valuable insight into an athlete's developmental phase, the first layer of the model. The off-ice themes, with the exception of personal development, added clarity to an athlete's social development, which is Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) third layer during an athlete's transition into elite sport.

In terms of on-ice themes, the young athletes often discussed the challenges of being a first-year player and the impact of reduced playing time on their confidence. This reduction of self-confidence is of concern as athletes' level of self-confidence has been linked in the literature to be important for their performance, personal growth, and future adherence to sport (e.g., dropout) (Jones & Hardy, 1990; Skard & Vaglum, 1989; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2001). Another important on-ice theme involved the athletes' evaluation of their performances. Rookies frequently evaluated their performance in terms of outcome (total points). The emphasis on outcome may account for the loss of confidence reported by many of the young athletes when evaluating their performance in elite sport. In an effort to improve rookie athletes' perceptions of their performances, advocating the importance of setting and evaluating performance and process goals in addition to outcome goals may be important (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001; Filby, Maynard, & Graydon, 1999). Weinberg and Gould (2007) stated that performance goals focus on improving personal performance standards (e.g., giving 100% effort for the 20 minute period), while process goals often involve improving form, technique, and strategy (e.g., keeping the stick on the ice)(Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Coaches, sport psychology consultants, and support staff should make certain rookie athletes are educated on process and performance goal setting and evaluation strategies. Ensuring the implementation of process and performance goals should increase rookie athletes' perceived control and confidence, both important constructs in their overall sport development.

Off the ice, the transition into elite sport often involved a shift at the psychosocial level (the third layer of Wylleman and Lavallee's 2004 model) in terms of social support from the traditional family to their new family (i.e., fellow teammates and billets). Teammates have been found to be a critical source of support (Hironobu & Shiro, 1996; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). This support appears to be important during the entry transition into elite sport. Lack of playing time, lofty personal expectations, and critical comments from coaches are potential sources of stress reported by rookies. In such instances, teammates can provide much needed social support in the form of emotional and esteem support to cope with the identified potential issues (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Direct evidence of the strong relationships between teammates emerged during discussions of player trades. Several of the athletes discussed the difficulty when one of their fellow teammates was traded to another team. Coaches and team administration must be aware of the close relationships between teammates and ensure a discussion is held early in the season about the possibility of players being traded and other difficult realities associated with elite sport (i.e., players getting cut midseason, season-ending injury). An early season discussion with players could

also serve as an opportunity to teach effective goal setting and reassure the athletes of the support networks in place (i.e., teammates, coaches, billets, sport psychology consultants) during the transition into elite sport. While a pre-season meeting should help avert any potential problems and establish relationships between both players and coaches, it has been suggested that the expectations, goals, and responsibilities should also be revisited regularly throughout the season as the athlete matures developmentally and athletically (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

While the athletes identified several salient on and off-ice issues during the transition, the failure to identify school, contractual issues, and hazing during the transition was surprising. In this sample, although seven of the eight rookie athletes had transitioned from one school to another, difficulty with the academic transition was not discussed among the participants. Given the number of psychological (e.g., coping with new school environment) and social (e.g., adjusting to new peers) challenges potentially facing the athletes during the transfer to their new schools (Holland et al., 1974; Schaller, 1975), the failure to identify school issues deserves a comment and several probable explanations can be offered. First, the young athletes entering into elite sport may view education as secondary and of lesser importance vis-à-vis hockey. Second, it also is possible that teams at this level may not hold the young athletes as accountable in an academic setting as on the ice. Support for these suppositions may be drawn from participants' comments during the interviews which reflected that homework was not that important to the players, and no one associated with the team (e.g., billets) would check to see if homework was completed. Third, the need to adjust to new peers in a new school may have been ameliorated somewhat by the social bonds formed with teammates.

A second issue not mentioned concerned contracts. Upon signing with their respective teams, players enter into a contractual agreement, wherein players receive a monthly stipend from the team. Given that this remuneration could possibly serve as an extrinsic motivator, it is surprising that contracts were not mentioned as a possible transitional issue, as this would be the first time that the players would be being "paid" for their services. In terms of explanations for this absence, it is possible that the remuneration may have been perceived by the young athletes as more informational (e.g., viewing reward as providing positive information about their competence) rather than controlling (e.g., undermining intrinsic motivation to play the game) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, it may not have been seen as a transitional issue.

A third issue that was not mentioned was hazing. This is surprising given that several articles document the "barbaric initiations" that young rookie junior hockey players endure during the socialization into the elite level of the sport (O'Hara, 2000; Robinson, 1998). Given the detrimental aspects of hazing on the team and its members (Crow & Rosner, 2002; Hill, 2001; O'Hara, 2000, Robinson, 1998), further research is necessary to determine whether this sample was atypical.

A number of future implications for coaches and practitioners flow from this preliminary study. The implications place the athlete at the forefront as advocated by Miller and Kerr's (2002) athlete-centered sport model. First, coaches and team administration should be particularly sensitive to young athletes' self-confidence during the transition. Comments directed by head and assistant coaches towards young athletes should be positive and constructive. As implied in this study, research has found that a coach's feedback to athletes can affect their perceptions of ability and competence (Amorose & Smith, 2003). Young athletes are typically coping with a number of on-ice (e.g., decreased playing time, lower point production) and off-ice (e.g., moving away from home) issues resulting in a period of re-examination of identity, roles, and motives for participation in sport (Danish et al., 1997).

It is critical that teammates and coaches provide a supportive environment for the young athlete during this difficult period. Second, coaches and team administrators also should be cognizant of players' billet environments. Thorough billet screening and consistent monitoring procedures should be in place to protect young athletes as they move away from home and enter elite sport. This recommendation also would be consistent with Miller and Kerr's (2002) call for an athlete-centered model that promotes the development of both performance and personal excellence in young athletes.

While the results of this preliminary study provide insight into the transition of eight young athletes into elite sport, the limitations must be acknowledged. Although 15 Major Junior 'A' OHL teams were invited to participate in the study, only two teams extended an invitation to speak with their rookie athletes. The private, often close-knit nature of elite sport (Botterill, 2004) may have accounted for the low response rate. Replication and extension of the present findings are therefore necessary. Researchers are encouraged to sample a larger number of teams and athletes and explore different individual and team sports as their experiences may differ during entry into elite sport. The number of interviews and the time of the sporting season in which the focus group interviews were conducted also was a limitation. The focus group interviews were only conducted once (per team) during the midseason. Perhaps conducting an interview earlier (e.g., training camp) and a follow-up interview with the same athletes post-season may have yielded different comments and perceptions. Such an investigation would also be in line with research calling for longitudinal designs with repeated assessments during athletes' careers (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Along with the noted limitations, this study has a number of strengths. Phenomenology describes "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). The use of phenomenology offered the rookie athletes the opportunity to be the experts on the topic. Miller and Kerr (2002) suggested that in the elite sport environment athletes are rarely afforded formal mechanisms such as focus group interviews to share and evaluate their experiences. By doing so, the present study yielded several important findings (e.g., the construct of confidence and its association with playing time and point production), which may not have emerged through the use of a more traditional methodological approach. A second strength of this study was the smaller size of the focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggested that smaller focus groups (4–6 participants) may permit an enhanced level of understanding. In the present study, the smaller number of participants in each focus group provided a level of comfort for the rookie participants to openly discuss the challenges of the transition into elite sport. Finally, although the transition into elite sport has been previously identified in the literature (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), relatively little was known regarding the experiences of athletes during the transition period. This study is among the first to examine and document young athletes' entry transition experiences and the challenges faced during this critical time.

In sum, athletes experience a number of transitions throughout their athletic careers (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The developmental model proposed by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) offers a fruitful conceptual framework to examine the transition experiences of rookie ice hockey players into elite sport. Based on the current findings, additional research is required to explore how the experiences of rookie athletes may influence their current and future athletic and psychosocial development and well-being. Obtaining such information would be integral in the creation of a theoretical model specific to the transition into elite sport. The study's findings also suggest that practitioners, coaches, and sport psychology consultants be cognizant of an athlete's transition experiences, not only as an athlete retires from sport, but also upon entry into elite sport.

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