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"It's not about sport, it's about you": An interpretative phenomenological analysis of mentoring elite athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The need to support the well-being of elite athletes in a holistic manner is becoming increasingly evident with the rise of reported mental health issues in this context. Surprisingly, mentoring as a support mechanism for athlete well-being has yet to be explored. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a contextualized perspective of the experience of mentoring within sport, and investigate whether athletes perceived benefits to their well-being as a consequence of engaging in mentoring.

Design and methodology: An interpretative phenomenological analysis was adopted (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight mentors and three athlete-mentees, who had been mentored for at least 6 months.

Results: Data analysis of participant narratives were conceptualized into five high-order themes: (1) role; (2) attributes; (3) experience and training; (4) relationship structure; and (5) agenda. Higher-order themes were embedded into three superordinate themes: critical elements of mentoring, effective relationships, and perceived benefits to psychological well-being.

Conclusion: Identified themes paralleled the dimensions in Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being (PWB). Collectively, these findings advance the limited literature on the experience of athlete mentoring and highlight it as a potential mechanism for the development of holistic athlete well-being.

1. Introduction

Mentoring is a social support mechanism that is grounded in assisting individual development (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Defined as one person helping another to make significant transitions in that individual's knowledge, work, or thinking (Clutterbuck, 2001), mentoring represents a collaborative social relationship between a mentor and mentee (Karcher & Hansen, 2013; Linney, 1999), in which the mentor acts as a wise and trusted advisor, a confidant (Baker & Maguire, 2005), and a role model (Kram, 1985). The mentoring relationship is facilitated by the mentor's encouragement, emotional support, and guidance (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2008; Hon & Shorr, 1998), and is influenced by the level of respect, trust, and genuine connection shared in the dyad (Howe, 1995). A strong mentoring relationship that is tailored to meet the unique needs and goals of the mentee is essential for positive mentee outcomes (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004).

Presently, there are two approaches to mentoring: the sponsorship model (i.e., protégé model) and the developmental model. Predominantly adopted by researchers in the United States, the sponsorship model involves directive and one-way learning (i.e., the protégé learns from the more senior mentor, and is promoted in relevant contexts), and emphasizes the effective use of the mentor's influence and power (Clutterbuck, 2001). Organizations who endorse the sponsorship model typically assign the mentor-mentee pairs, which usually have a short duration (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). In contrast, the developmental mentoring model is popular among European, Australian, and Canadian researchers, who posit the promotion of a mutual relationship between mentor and mentee. Here, a developmental mentor holds power that is irrelevant to the relationship, and less focus is placed on the status gap (Clutterbuck, 2001). Rather, greater focus is place on the experience gap such that the mentor acts as role model (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). Individuals in developmental mentoring relationships reportedly experienced mutual respect, and perceived that the relationship was strengthened by the similarities shared between members (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). Critically, developmental mentoring enables the mentor and mentee to identify key learning opportunities for the mentee, and devise strategies for the mentee to advance her/his knowledge (Clutterbuck, 2001).

A review of the developmental mentoring literature suggests that mentors possess a broad array of qualities and attributes. These

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individuals commonly demonstrate empathy and authenticity (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004; Darwin, 2000), care for the mentee and offer support (Hagenow & McCrea, 1994), invest their time, provide knowledge, and teach skills (Barnett, 1995), and perceive themselves as helpers (Clutterbuck, 2001). A critical characteristic for mentors is adaptability so that they can handle the uniqueness of each mentee and their needs (Eby, et al., 2008). Moreover, mentors can create safe spaces for mentees to identify knowledge gaps (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004), and encourage open dialogue to facilitate growth in the mentoring relationship. The result of this openness is positive personal development and enhanced well-being, such that mentees experience an alignment between positive mentoring outcomes and heightened psychological well-being (PWB; Cannister, 1999). Additional mentoring benefits for mentees include experiencing greater self-esteem (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), more social relationships (Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004), greater emotional well-being and a positive identity (Rhodes, 2005), increased autonomy (Kipp & Weiss, 2013), positive career progressions (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012), greater networking opportunities (Bower, 2011), improved coping strategies (Devenport & Lane, 2009a,b), and reductions in stress and increased career satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lents, & Lima, 2007). Importantly, mentors also derived benefits from mentoring, including gaining satisfaction from helping others (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2007), and experiencing increased work productivity and work commitment (Chun, Sosik, & Yun, 2012).

Whilst much of the extent mentoring research was conducted in non-sporting contexts (e.g., business, education, health sectors), there is some evidence pertaining to mentoring in sport. For instance, coaches who received mentoring reportedly progressed their sport science knowledge (Reade, Rodgers, & Spriggs, 2008) and adopted similar life philosophies, values, and imitated behaviors that positively influenced the mentees lives (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). Early-career coaches also experienced overall professional development as a consequence of receiving mentoring (Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). In the UK, the implementation of coach development officers, who provided mentoring to sporting coaches, was deemed a valuable service that directly contributed to coach development (North, 2008). In spite of these positive findings associated with mentoring and sport coaching, less is known on the benefits of developmental mentoring for athletes.

In their qualitative study of athlete coping skills, Devonport and Lane (2009b) utilized mentoring to underpin a coping skills intervention for junior netballers. Based on developmental mentoring frameworks, Devonport and Lane (2009b) reported that the athletes experienced a variety of benefits following the mentoring sessions including goal identification, increased confidence, and improved coping competencies. In reflecting upon the contribution of the mentors to athlete's development, Devonport and Lane (2009a) acknowledged that the mentors "were pivotal in motivating, supporting and challenging participants [i.e., athlete mentees] to complete and reflect upon activities provided in the coping intervention" (p. 171). Here, the findings point towards the valuable contribution of mentors when attempting to improve athlete coping strategies.

1.1. Athlete support services

It is well-established that during their sporting careers, athletes can typically access an array of support services including career assistance programs (Ryan, 2015), sport psychologists (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999), and most recently athlete welfare and development consultants (Stansen & Chambers, 2017). The provision of these athlete support services enables athletes to successfully navigate the various psychological, psychosocial, and athletic transitions they encounter during their sporting career, as outlined by the holistic athlete career model (Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). Supporting evidence illustrates the multitude of benefits to athletes who engage with the services. For example, athletes who received career counselling advice were better prepared for sporting retirement (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013), and those who received flexible, person-centric psychology consultancy reportedly experienced a range of personal and professional improvements (Sharp & Hodge, 2014).

Despite these documented benefits, other investigations of these supporting roles (i.e., family, coaches, career and education programs, sport consultants) revealed contrary findings; some programs did not offer adequate support (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999), had hidden agendas (Ryan, 2015), came with preconceived perceptions related to athlete support (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999), and lacked emotional closeness between athletes and service providers (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). When athlete issues are related to mental health and or well-being, other evidence suggests that certain athletes may avoid seeking support due to associated stigma. For instance, athletes who are unfamiliar with psychological support services (Martin, Lavelle, Kellmann, & Page, 2004), and athletes who are younger and male may also possess a stigma towards seeking sport psychology consulting (Martin, 2005). The recent ISSP position stand highlights the culture of sport as a key contributor; athletes may be less inclined to seek assistance because they do not want to show weakness (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017). A telling recommendation in this position stand is the need to devise strategies and interventions that counter these challenges.

Although the existing evidence base for mentoring in sport is limited, the broader mentoring results are encouraging; being mentored appears to foster the development of mentee skills, knowledge, and well-being. Given that mentoring can operate outside the traditional sporting boundaries (i.e., mentors may not be directly involved in sport), it presents as an alternative mechanism to support athletes. For elite athletes, the prospect that they may perceive improvements in the PWB as a consequence of mentoring is worth exploring. Thus, developmental mentoring may be an important social support mechanism for elite athletes to foster enhanced PWB.

1.2. Psychological well-being and career transitions

PWB (Ryff, 1989) is a theory laden (i.e., developmental, existential, humanistic, and clinical psychology) model of well-being, which focuses on optimal psychological, behavioral, and cognitive functioning for enduring flourishing throughout the lifespan. Within the eudaimonic well-being research, PWB is defined as "a multifaceted domain encompassing positive self-regard, mastery of the surrounding environment, quality relations with others, continued growth and development, purposeful living, and the capacity for self-determination" (Ryff & Keyes, 1995, p. 724). Building on Ryff's (1989) seminal work, Lundqvist (2011) devised an integrated model of well-being that accounted for psychological well-being at both the global (e.g., self-acceptance) and contextual levels (i.e., self-acceptance as an athlete). In addition to PWB, social well-being also features in the integrated model, thereby highlighting the importance of an individual's social functioning (e.g., social integration and the feeling of support). In the context of examining mentoring in sport, casting the spotlight on social functioning is crucial.

PWB, as illustrated by these six dimensions (Ryff's, 1989), captures the holistic approach advocated within sport psychology and the various aforementioned athlete support services. In this context, PWB may protect against the negative effects resulting from athletic identity foreclosure (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, Wilson, & Crocker, 2012; Huta & Ryan, 2010); and assist athletes to balance competing demands. Within the extent athlete careers transition literature, there are also references to various PWB elements. For example, maintaining close social relationships assisted athlete with post-sport lives (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013), engaging in educational and vocational developments resulted in improved perceived self-identity, life balance, self-confidence, and readiness for retirement (Park et al., 2013). In

professional sport, athletes affiliated with a sporting club that promoted a holistic culture were more likely to pursue dual-careers, maintain greater life balance, and perform better (Pink, Saunders, & Stynes, 2015). Importantly, many of these PWB outcomes fall across the global and contextual level. As a broad framework for sport and exercise psychology researchers to investigate factors associated with well-being, Lundqvist's (2011) integrated model of PWB provides a context-specific framework to underpin the exploration of the perceived benefits of mentoring.

1.3. The present research

Despite the promising findings associated with mentoring, the current literature documenting the experience of mentors and mentees in sport is thin, and the association with PWB almost non-existent. Based on the preceding reviewed literature, mentoring may serve as an essential social support mechanism to facilitate athlete PWB (Cannister, 1999). The current study employed a phenomenological methodology to explore the experiences of those engaged in mentoring in sport. Specifically, the study was guided by the following two research questions: What are the experiences of mentors and mentees in sport? What are the perceived benefits of mentoring on PWB?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

When devising the current investigation, the researchers employed a critical relativist perspective. Critical relativists hold the view that scientific endeavors occur in a socio-historical context, such that research may be affected as much by empirical and sociological factors. Related to this, critical relativists believe that there are numerous methods that can be utilized to attain multiple scientific objectives (Anderson, 1986). Indeed, critical relativists do not claim that their research will yield the absolute truth. Rather they argue that they employ available resources that are endorsed by contemporary research practices. In other words, researchers who hold this ontological position attempt to appraise phenomena that are relative to a specific research community and a particular period. Ultimately, a critical relativist is driven to understand the "cognitive and practical aims of a theory so that its range of applicability can be assessed" (Anderson, 1986, p.156).

One methodology that is complementary and contemporary to critical relativism is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers who adopt IPA maintain interpretivist philosophical assumptions, and posit ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism. Through an inductive approach, the participant and the researcher enter a hermeneutic circle to explicate idiographic descriptions of the meanings participants ascribe to significant experiences of particular phenomena (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In recent years, sport psychology researchers have employed IPA to investigate social support and athletes' transition out of sport (Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2018), the role of player development mangers (Stansen & Chambers, 2017), parental stress and coping in youth gymnastics (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016), and talent identification processes in youth sport (Miller, Cronin, & Baker, 2015). Given the lack of qualitative investigations on mentoring in sport, coupled with the prominence of IPA research within contemporary sport and exercise psychology research, the researchers perceived that IPA was the most appropriate methodology to explore individual mentoring experiences.

2.2. Participants

Adopting an IPA approach enables researchers to retain an idiographic focus for the emergence of findings that are clearly situated, circumscribed, and transparent within a particular context (Larkin, Watt, & Clifton, 2008). Whilst small homogenous samples sizes are recommended (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith et al., 2009), IPA researchers note that such investigations may include larger and more diverse samples (Smith et al., 2009). For example, recent IPA studies in sport and exercise have included larger (e.g., 12 participants; Cassidy, Naylor, & Reynolds, 2018) and diverse (e.g., inclusion of males and females; Green, 2014) samples. Hence, eleven individuals (eight mentors, three athlete-mentees; M_{age} = 34 years, SD = 7) participated in this study. Participants had at least six months mentoring experience in sport, a time period considered sufficient to establish a mentoring relationship and for associated outcomes to be apparent (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004).

Participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). As a former practitioner and current researcher in Australia's high-performance sporting environment, the second author possessed a network of athlete support contacts from numerous elite and professional sports. The second author emailed the industry contacts and asked them to disseminate the research information pack (i.e., the plain language statement, interview questions, contact details for various counselling services, in case any participant required additional support following the interview, and a consent form) to potential participants and encourage them to participate. Those mentors who agreed to volunteer in the research were invited to identify and approach one of their mentees to take part in the research; the researchers did not directly recruit athlete mentees. This practice is consistent with previous research on mentoring in sport (Bloom et al., 1998). All eight mentors who consented to partake in the study were known to the second author to varying degrees. Participants' descriptive details are provided in Table 1.

2.3. Interview protocol

Over a six-week period, the first author conducted 11 semi-structured interviews, at a mutually agreed upon time and location, with a total interview time of 480 min (M = 43.6, SD = 10.3). Two interviews were conducted in person, and due to geographical distance the remaining nine via telephone. All interviews were one-to-one and in-depth, working on an idiographic level and committed to an inductive approach, allowing the participant to think, speak, and be heard (Smith et al., 2009). Acknowledging that telephone communication may affect the richness of data collection, telephone interviews commenced with rapport building conversation (Hanna, 2012). The use of an interview schedule precluded potential difficulties in phrasing of questions and addressing sensitive issues, and was adapted according to the participant's response (Smith et al., 2009). Interview questions were open ended to promote a rich and detailed contextual account (Smith et al., 2009). Questions were tailored to gather descriptive information on *what* the participant experienced (e.g., Can you tell me about what issues you discuss during mentoring?), and *how* they experienced

Table 1
Participants' descriptive details.

Participant[a]	Gender	Age	Sport[b]
M1	Male	35	Basketball
M2	Male	46	VFL
M3	Female	30	Rowing
M4	Female	29	Boxing
M5	Male	42	AFL
M6	Male	40	Triathlon
M7	Male	33	Cricket
M8	Female	38	Non-athlete
A1	Male	27	Golf
A2	Male	24	VFL
A3	Female	25	Triathlon

[a] Note: Mentor (M), Athlete (A)
[b] Victorian Football League (VFL).

mentoring and their well-being (e.g., How do you think your well-being has changed because of mentoring?). The use of probes encouraged expansion on responses to elicit a deeper understanding where necessary (i.e., Can you tell me more about that?; Patton, 2002). All interviews were digitally recorded. An initial pilot interview was performed that resulted in the reordering (i.e., mentoring questions first, followed by well-being questions) and refining of questions (i.e., the inclusion of specific prompts for the 6 PWB dimensions; Gratton & Jones, 2003). No data were collected during the pilot interview.

2.4. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' institution. The second author emailed a research expression of interest to potential participants. Those individuals who replied and provided consent to participate were provided with the research information pack. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time. A mutually convenient time and location for the interview was arranged. Participants received the interview schedule prior to interviewing, to provide familiarity with the interview, and ensure they had sufficient time to make sense of their experiences and deliver a more comprehensive account in the interview (Smith et al., 2009).

2.5. Transcription

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), interview recordings were manually transcribed verbatim by the first researcher to increase familiarity and acquire an intuitive appreciation for each account. It should be noted that grammatical and semantic adjustments were made to enhance readability, and did not corrupt the accuracy of the verbatim data. To protect participants' anonymity and safeguard confidentiality, names were replaced with a non-identifiable code during transcription.

2.6. Data analysis

The authors adopted the IPA data analytic stages as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), with the first author completing stages one to six. First, all interviews were transcribed as previously described. Second, all interviews were read numerous times for familiarization (Smith et al., 2009). Third, initial notes for one narrative were made in thorough detail to capture the essence or "soul" (Gallo, 2014, p. 41) found within narratives. Fourth, a higher level of abstraction followed to develop emergent themes from the initial notes. Fifth, similarities within the one narrative were explored and formed the superordinate themes, with findings tabularized. Sixth, stages 3 to five were completed for the remaining interviews. At the completion of this stage, the authors agreed that the data from mentors and mentees should be collated to best address the research questions. This decision was largely based on the fact that the emergent data was highly consistent between mentors and mentees.[1] Seventh, both authors explored for themes across all interviews, and produced a thematic map representative of the findings (see Figure 1). At each phase credibility checks of themes and codes were conducted, ensuring within and across text connection, grounding in the particularity of narratives, and connected to the research question (Smith, 2004).

2.7. Trustworthiness

Through a relativist, rather than criteriologist position (Smith & McGannon, 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), the researchers endeavored to adopt good qualitative practices and maintain data trustworthiness. Research quality was improved by acknowledging that IPA is engaged in double hermeneutics, that in the context of this study, implied that the mentors and mentees were attempting to make sense of their embodied experiences, and that the authors were trying to make sense of their experiences. Accordingly, the researchers employed several strategies to ensure data trustworthiness.

Reflexivity. The first author used bracketing to adopt a reflexive stance and provide an open and non-judgmental dialogue that was not influenced by her personal frame of reference and preconceptions. During interviewing and data analysis, the first author also maintained a reflexive journal to raise awareness of personal views and assumptions of the data, as to enter the realm of pure essence for the phenomena explored in this study (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The decision to maintain the reflexive journal was primary due to the first author's limited experience with mentoring and elite sport. The authors decided that a reflexive journal would enable the first author to set aside any assumptions of this context that may interfere with maintaining research objectivity.

Reliability. The second author, who refrained from directly collecting data, acted as a critical friend to ensure a qualitative form of reliability. A critical friend can provide dispassionate oversight and interpretative dialogue of the findings (Smith & McGannon, 2017), to encourage reflexivity and prevent erroneous research decisions (Cowan & Taylor, 2016). In practice, the second author refrained from partaking in the first five analytical stages to ensure a greater degree of impartiality when exploring themes across cases and creating the thematic map. This strategy contributed to the neutrality and credibility of research findings (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Member Reflections. In light of recent debate regarding member checking within interpretivist research (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), member reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2013) were adopted for a meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched understanding of the current research findings (Smith & McGannon, 2017). To prevent participant memory distortions, interview transcripts were returned to participants approximately one month after interviewing (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), with participants invited to comment on the transcript (e.g., elaborate on any statement). Doing so, ensured transcript accuracy and verified participant representations of their own subjective experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Member reflections were also employed for ethical purposes; greater dignity, mutual respect, and connectedness between the researcher and participant were attained with this strategy. All participants confirmed accuracy of the data, with no additional insights offered by participants. Hence, findings from this research can be deemed trustworthy (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

3. Results

In total, five higher-order themes were identified: role; attributes; experience and training; relationship structure; and agenda. These higher order themes were absorbed into three superordinate themes: critical elements, effective relationships, and perceived benefits to psychological well-being. Consistent with contemporary IPA practice, a thematic map was created and is presented in Figure 1. The thematic map depicts how the critical elements of mentoring (i.e., the role, mentor attributes, and the mentor's experience and training) facilitate the development of an effective mentoring relationship. Here, the relationship structure and agenda remain the focus for the mentor and mentee, such that they constantly review them for the duration of the

[1] During the data analysis process the authors endeavored to ensure that mentor and mentee voices remained distinct in the findings. However, as the mentees were recruited by their mentors, it became apparent that the mentees were at times mirroring the mentors' experiences of the mentoring process. The authors attributed this to the likelihood that mentors invited one of their more compatible athletes to participate in the research. A deliberate attempt recruit mentees with differing experiences to their mentor may have yielded alternate findings.

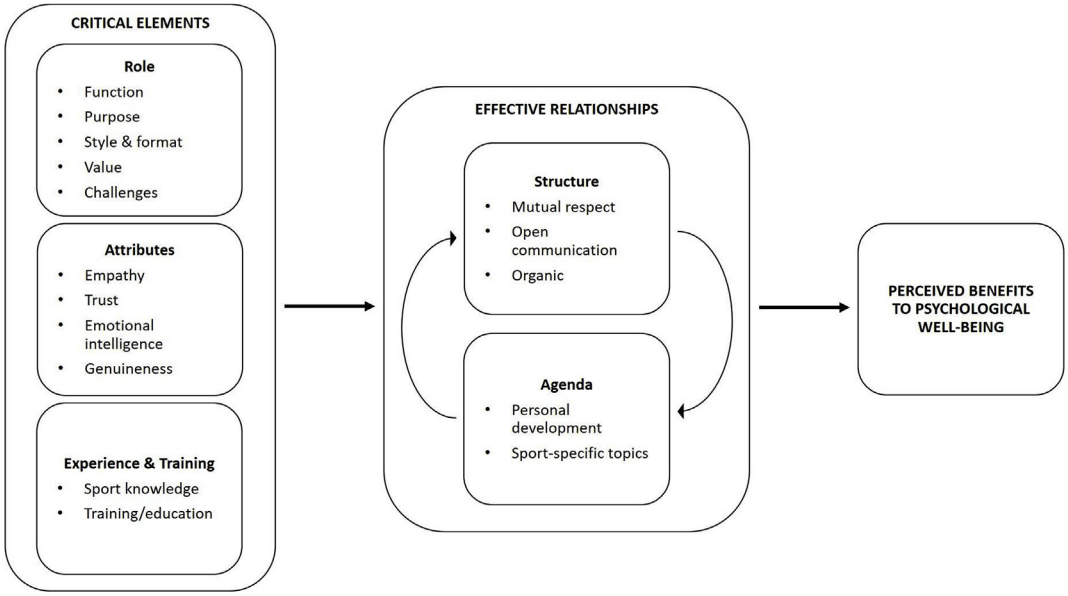

Fig. 1. Thematic map of mentoring experiences in elite sport.

relationship. The continual refinement of the relationship structure and purpose in turn enabled the pursuit and attainment of individual well-being, as perceived by both mentors and mentees. The following section includes a detailed discussion of these themes.

3.1. Critical elements

For effective mentoring to take place between the athlete and the mentor, three critical elements were required. In assuming the mentor role, it was beholden upon the mentor to possess a collection of attributes (e.g., empathy) to facilitate the development of the relationship. Equally important was that the mentor had training and experience in mentoring elite athletes.

3.1.1. Mentor role

When interpreting individual experiences, it became clear that fundamental to the mentor role was its function, purpose, style and format of mentoring, the perceived value, and recognition of the associated challenges (see Fig. 1). Mentors frequently functioned as helpers and role models, and adopted a selfless athlete focus. As one mentor articulated, "You've got to be selfless. It's not about you, it's about giving to the person that you're wanting to see excel" (M5). The most desirable mentors were typically non-active members of the sport arena (e.g., coaches, selectors), as these individuals acted as objective outsiders who provided unbiased help via the sole agenda to meet the athlete's needs.

The purpose of mentoring was best described as enabling athletes to create a future vision, which was underpinned by providing holistic and balanced lifestyle support to athletes. In supporting athletes, several mentors employed a person-centered approach and self-reflective techniques, as one mentor stated "It's not about basketball; it's about you as a person" (M1). Mentors were cognizant of the negative effects associated with an exclusive athletic identity, and made deliberate efforts to broaden the athlete's focus. As one mentor described

> [Mentoring is about] making them a better well-rounded person, because we know moving through the actual life span that you can't just play sport all your life…making sure that you have other things going for you so you can transition from your sporting career into work life. You know if you don't it can cause a lot of personal issues later on (M1).

Mentors described the delicate balance of empowering mentees to be self-sufficient whilst also providing emotional support through normalizing experiences so "they [athletes] understand that the problems aren't quite as big as what they originally thought" (M7). Empowering athletes to take life ownership, took the form of ensuring the mentoring process was athlete driven. As one mentor stated, "It's much better if it's driven by the athlete or the person, I think that's where the real success is" (M5). The same mentor elaborated on the importance of a mentee-driven environment, stating that, "the person provides direction and personal growth, mentoring gives them the tools, potentially a framework, potentially a map, they provide the actual direction and they decide on the growth" (M5). At times, athletes would report feeling overwhelmed by the elite sporting environment, whereby mentors would provide emotional support to athletes in times of need:

> Sometimes you need someone to give you a hand back up to be able to know how to move on again and I think mentoring quite often gives that hand back up and creates that balance and allows that person to move on again (M7).

As a result of creating a supportive mentoring environment, the athletes engaged in self-exploration practices that revealed alternative talents and passions outside of sport, in addition to learning new life skills.

In reviewing mentor experiences, there was a great array of mentoring styles and formats adopted by the mentors. Mentoring appeared to differ according to the degree of formality required (i.e., casual vs. structured), and the number of individuals involved (i.e., one-on-one vs. group mentoring). Most athletes described group mentoring as useful to improve sport knowledge, enhance athlete-athlete relationships, and normalize sport related stresses. Yet there was a clear preference for individual mentoring. In keeping with the diversity of mentoring formats, locations for mentoring sessions varied considerably (e.g., gym, during a bike ride, café). The justification for these locations was that they offered mentors and mentees a non-intimidating and familiar setting so athletes could comfortably express themselves. Further, these environments allowed the mentor and mentee to bond as friends, strengthening the mentoring relationship:

> …we'd go to the gym and we'd do our workout and we'd have a chat…and then we'd sit in the cafe next door and talk about cars, girls, movies, whatever it happens to be going on in both our lives (M5).

As a testament to the value of the role of a mentor in the elite

sporting environment, it was evident that mentoring continued after the athlete had retired from sport. For example, one mentor explained that she continues to mentor a former athlete who "Still calls me on regular basis to check in and ask for advice and it can be advice regarding almost anything" (M4). The majority of participants perceived that mentors were the key to athletic success, whereby the mentor played a fundamental role in the athlete's development. One mentor reflected on his experience as the recipient of mentoring for several years when he was an athlete, and he articulated the moment that he realized the value of having a mentor:

> I remember it happened against Collingwood [AFL team]. There would have been 80,000 people there…it was on the wing of the MCG members wing…I picked up the ball, I felt like there was no one else around me and it was just like a car accident where basically everything just slows down and it was just such clear thinking and I remember just almost wanting to hand ball it back to my mentor cause I imagined he was in front of me, but he wasn't. So you know in that moment it was like wow all those seconds, minutes, hours, days invested in getting to this point have shown to be truthful (M5).

Despite the benefits of mentoring, mentors cited several challenges faced when providing this valuable service to athletes. In particular, mentors acknowledged that a lack of funding and resources associated with mentoring stifled their ability to provide ongoing, long-term support to athletes. Mentors also noted that some athletes were resistant to change, and that a perceived stigma around mentoring services was still evident in the elite sporting environment. Overwhelmingly, mentors reported that the lack of recognition associated with mentoring was the greatest challenge. In spite of these challenges, mentors chose to persist as "mentoring [is] a real foundation for clubs, it's just as important as physios, doctors, coaches, skills development, you know structured mentors" (M1).

In sum, the majority of participants spoke highly of the value of the mentor's role as a key component for athletic success, maturity, and personal development. The need for heightened awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of mentoring was made clear. Mentors were selfless in their role and were primarily focused on the athlete's development. Through providing person-centered and holistic support, athletes were exposed to opportunities to develop their maturity, improve thinking and behaviors, learn life skills, gain self-awareness, develop future visions, and take ownership of their lives.

3.1.2. Attributes

The second higher-order theme embedded within the critical elements of mentoring was mentor attributes. Specific attributes identified by participants included: empathy, trust, genuineness, and emotional intelligence (see Figure 1). Mentor genuineness was conceptualized as "those moments of true giving" (M5), which required mentors to be authentic for a true connection to be built with the athlete. Trustworthy mentors were respectful, available, and reliable. As one athlete described, "just having that consistent someone to be able to rely on when everything else turns to crap" (M4). The most frequently reported attribute was emotional intelligence that was characterized by interpersonal awareness and adaptable communication skills. In practice, emotional intelligence resulted in being "able to cater your skills or your advice as a mentor, to people in different situations" (M8). Ultimately, mentor attributes determined how effectively mentoring roles were performed, and the strength of bond shared in the mentoring relationship.

3.1.3. Experience and training

Experience and training emerged as the third higher order theme within the critical elements to mentoring. Having mentoring experience was by far the most important feature for all participants. Specifically, several mentors stated that being a mentee was extremely informative in their development. When reflecting on his subsequent involvement in mentoring, M5 recounted:

> I've been asked to consult to a number of different mentoring programs and the first question I ask is "Who of you have been mentored?" And if hands don't go up then straight away I'm skeptical about what we're going to be capable of achieving within the room. [Without having direct mentoring experience] I can't see how they're going turn this on if they've got no prior knowledge no understanding.

Related to the perceived need to having mentee experience, mentors with sport experience were reported to have a deeper understanding of the athletes' worldview, and were able to offer sport-specific knowledge. As one female athlete noted, "He helped me open my eyes to what the world is going to be like as an elite athlete" (A3). Sport experienced mentors also possessed well-integrated sport-specific networks and contacts that were useful for the professional growth and development of their athlete-mentees. However, mentors were equally mindful of the benefits associated with being removed from the athlete's immediate network.

> I think it's really important to be completely withdrawn from their sport sometimes because I've found that my athletes are looking for someone to talk to who isn't a coach, who isn't a manager, who isn't a parent, who isn't an athlete welfare education member from their club. Or just…someone outside of sport who they can talk to. It's not a performance psychologist, it's not a shrink, its just being a genuine person to listen intently and really understand where they're coming from and offer some support. I think that's a really key thing that I've done that really works for a lot of the athletes. And I try to make sure that I'm available for them from that perspective as well… "I'm a person and you're a person and let's chat there's no-one else involved" and I think that's really important (M7).

In short, being a genuine person who does not possess a vested interest in the athlete's sporting performance provides the mentee with an objective critical friend to nurture their development.

The majority of participants perceived mentors who obtained formal training and educational development in personal, professional, and educational domains, as more skilled. Mentoring training aided mentors to enhance their core competencies (e.g., active listening, challenging, and questioning) and complemented their sporting experience. Formal training also provided mentors with a greater appreciation and understanding of ethical practice, and behaving in an appropriate and professional manner when guiding mentees on their self-directed journey. M5 reflected that pursuing formalized mentoring training enabled him to develop various strategies to implement within his work:

> I might give an example or use a technique …to plant the seed and give direction. Or it's even as simple as the different questions that are asked to people to get them thinking differently. I will always suggest to athletes that at times I will be asking questions that may challenge you for a reason but they are done for a reason. The idea is for them to grow with the way they are thinking so in the future they can deal with it themselves.

According to some mentors, formal mentoring training resulted in acquiring new strategies and skills that improved their mentoring practice.

3.2. Effective mentoring relationships

Mentors and athletes agreed that effective mentoring relationships were primarily determined by the structure; those relationships that were able to develop organically and were built on mutual respect and open communication were deemed the most fulfilling (see Fig. 1). This structure then permitted mentors and athletes to set the agenda that

included personal development and sport-specific issues. As the relationship matured, the agenda was revisited and refined. It is worth noting that not all mentoring relationships were effective. Relationships that were forced (e.g., athlete pushed by a coach into a mentoring relationship), and or where communication was not open, were often terminated early. Accordingly, relationship structure was critical to mentoring effectiveness.

3.2.1. Structure

In establishing the relationship, building rapport was crucial, as organic mentoring relationships were more likely to progress into a deep and meaningful bond. Mentor and athlete compatibility was best characterized by finding a good match between mentor and mentee values and interests, as one mentor reported:

> If you have different values, you're on completely different pages and it's quite hard to sort of listen to what they're actually going through or offer advice if you're sort of too different sides of the spectrum … building rapport is about actually making sure that your personalities and values match up (M8).

A compatible and organically formed relationship facilitated open communication regarding mentoring roles, expectations, objectives, and desired goals. Open communication also contributed to relationship longevity and the continued development of mutual respect. Two distinct outcomes from such mentoring relationships were the formation of a loving friendship and unconditional positive regard: the total acceptance and value between the mentor and mentee. For example, one mentor explained that "if you truly love who you are working with, that mentoring shifts into a true friendship and I think that's what takes it above and beyond" (M5).

In sum, relationship structure highlighted the necessary foundation to foster the mentee's growth and development. A good mentoring match drove the organic joining of members. Rapport building through communicating openly and honestly, forming a loving friendship, and developing mutual respect for one another, created a powerful environment for the athlete to feel safe and supported on their journey alongside a trusting mentor, whose intention was to facilitate their unique stages of growth and development.

3.2.2. Agenda

The mentoring agenda was salient in participant narratives with lower-order themes including personal development and sport-specific topics (see Figure 1). When discussing the athlete's personal development, frequently reported topics included the pursuit of life balance, identity formation, life after sport, time management, self-improvement, studying and or working, relationships, and confidence. Life balance discussions were crucial, as one mentor expressed the tendency for young athletes to be solely sport focused:

> That's all they're caring about at that stage…stressing about contracts and where the next selection is coming from. But if you actually get them thinking more about "Ok what's going on outside cricket?"…get them to be a bit more well-rounded person it takes a lot more pressure off them on the sporting field. So they can actually go out and perform with a clear mind (M7).

Mentors also emphasised that although athletes typically held the view that an exclusive sport focus resulted in sporting success, the contrary was often the outcome. One mentor stated, "[Mentoring] was really based around the off-field life and making sure it was balanced, and it was promoting better 'on the field' performance" (M2). Another mentor described a common narrative by athletes, and how he approaches post sport topics:

> [Athlete states] "I'm 30 what am I going to do now? All I've done is play sport?" "Ok well let's sit down and talk about your LinkedIn profile, let's leverage some networks, doing some placement work. What do you like to do? Are your hands on? Do you like to work in an office, IT, marketing?" So you start to really extrapolate where their interests are (M1).

Compared to personal development topics, sport-specific issues related directly to the athletes' sport. The most frequent issues included performance and motivation, coach, sponsors, media, nutrition, and injuries. These distinct issues varied between athletes and mentors, and were identified as a function of the effective relationship. However, the agenda was overwhelmingly holistic for the majority of participants.

3.3. Perceived benefits to psychological well-being

The perceived benefits associated with mentoring formed the final superordinate theme (see Figure 1) as all interviewees identified several personally meaningful outcomes from the mentoring process. Specific benefits most frequently experienced included attaining holistic life balance, clear visions of the future, confidence, greater independence, resilience and coping skills, positive relationships, a well-rounded identity, and networking opportunities. Collectively, these perceived benefits also aligned with the aforementioned PWB dimensions.

By engaging in self-exploration and pursuing a holistic self and world-view allowed mentees to develop confidence, achieve self-acceptance, and adopt a positive self-image, all of which were independent of any sport performances. For example, one mentor recounted her experience as an athlete mentee, and the value of achieving self-acceptance:

> One thing that I've learnt from my mentor over the years which has helped me was to accept myself wholly. For me even in the boxing ring with 5,000 people watching on, you need to be able to stand in front of a mirror and just completely and wholly accept yourself and be completely ok and not say one negative thing about yourself. So a lot of positive self-talk … to be able to stand there and actually tell yourself while looking at yourself I think that is really powerful way of helping athletes overcome any self-confidence issues and really accepting who they are. It can be quite challenging for some of them and I think it's definitely something that you have to work up to its not something you just chuck in on a first session (M7).

Here, the mentoring process enabled the individual to acknowledge and accept the multiple aspects of herself. The example also emphasizes that the path to improved PWB starts with greater self-acceptance.

The formation of meaning and long-lasting relationships was another important outcome of mentoring that led to the perception of enhanced well-being for many participants. One participant recounted his own experience of being mentored as an athlete, and the meaning of the relationship formed with his mentor:

> Three or four years later I went to buy him something. I wanted to buy him a gift just to say thank you for what he had done for me. I mean this guy had given me everything … and I spent the entire day shopping. I was a twenty-three, twenty-four year old you know like so that's a big deal for someone of that age to … to look at the entire city to buy right gift for someone and then basically give up. I remember I told him the next day when I saw him after that gift hunting exercise I told him "I can't give you anything but I can just tell you that I love you". And that's what I told him and again like I said it's a pretty big deal for a twenty four year old young man telling you know a fifty year old man I love you. Then to have him tell me that he loved me was like wow that's not a bad outcome here (M5).

Whilst not an outcome in all mentoring experiences shared by participants, the paternal affection and intimacy evident in this relationship exemplifies the influence that developmental mentoring can have on those within the relationship. Nevertheless, the majority of participants reflected examples of maintaining contact with mentors and mentees

following the natural conclusion of the relationship. That participants were still willing to find time to connect with a former mentor and or mentee is again indicative of the value placed upon these personally meaningful relationships.

Participants also gave examples related to the perception that mentoring enhanced life-ownership and purpose in life. Mentors created an autonomy-supportive environment, and encouraged mentee-directed discussions and independent thinking on values, beliefs, priorities and life goals. Establishing an effective relationship resulted in the development of an autonomous holistic individual, and the discovery of authentic passions and attributes for the development of future visions and a sustainable life purpose. For athletes, the discovery of life purposes included being a helper, a motivational speaker, a good father or mother, a positive influence for younger people, and a loving family member. For example, one athlete reflected that mentoring:

> Gives you clear…understanding of your priorities in life and where you sit. I haven't wasted time in areas that I found aren't important to me. So I'll devote more time to my work, to family and friends, to sport, so I guess you do feel more fulfilled (A2).

For mentors, they also reported experiencing immense satisfaction when helping an athlete to achieve purpose in life. As one mentor explained:

> [Mentoring athletes is] so rewarding that's why I love my job so much. Most of the time I thank my lucky stars to be able to meet these amazing people and I also learn so much from them and having a great place to work and having a great group of people to work with definitely increases my own well-being for sure (M4).

In clarifying the sense of directedness that evolved during mentoring, participants also recounted experiences of personal growth. For the majority, personal growth was largely underpinned by a newly found sense of confidence in non-sporting domains. For example, in his mentoring practice, one mentor recounted that encouraging athletes to promote their own personal brand led to new experiences and enhanced confidence:

> I've found that a lot of athletes haven't been exposed to and haven't ever seen the real need to create a brand for themselves and what impacts that can have. To do those things actually requires confidence. So if that means going and meeting new groups though networks or doing a talk in front of people or even doing a corporate talk and not being afraid of actually telling people what they do, that's where I have seen the growth in young people. That's one of my aims to help to grow young athletes in areas that they probably are not used to (M2).

From the athlete's perspective, the resultant increase in confidence is welcomed: "I'm more confident in myself and I know my beliefs and I know my path and I'm ready to tackle it" (A3). The consequence of striving for personal growth also lead another athlete to the realization that she needed to invest more in her personal growth:

> I realized I was spending a lot of my effort on people that didn't give any effort back, so I started putting all of my energy into things that would make me better rather than helping them be better and me getting nothing. So sort just putting energy into things that would benefit myself (A1).

To summarise, mentors played a complex and dynamic role in the mentoring process and central to their role and purpose was to be athlete focused, person-centered, and encourage a holistic and balanced lifestyle. An organic and natural connection between a mentor and an athlete was crucial for a strong relationship and flourishing friendship to evolve. Ultimately, mentoring appeared to enhance participants' PWB as a function of the interaction between the critical elements of mentoring and the pursuit of an effective mentoring relationship.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of mentors and mentees in sport, and the perceived benefits of mentoring on PWB. Results revealed five higher-order themes that were nested within three superordinate themes: critical elements of mentoring (i.e., the role, mentor attributes, training and experience), effective relationships (i.e., structure, agenda), and perceived benefits to psychological well-being (see Figure 1). For the individuals in the present study, their collective mentoring experiences were largely positive, such that both mentors and mentees perceived that engaging with mentoring positively influenced PWB. The collective findings from the present study suggest that mentoring is a beneficial support mechanism for athletes, such that those who engage in mentoring may perceive improvements in PWB.

The results presented here (i.e., the critical elements and effective mentoring relationship) complement existing work on the structure and function of developmental mentoring. For example, that mentors functioned as externally situated helpers, who provided objective and impartial advice to mentees, was consistent with Clutterbuck's (2001) conceptualization of a mentor. Similarly, mentors were intrinsically motivated, in a selfless manner, to help the unique needs of the athlete, which in turn is consistent with the types of assistance preferred by athletes (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). The innate mentor attributes mirrored those used within person-centered approaches (Rogers, 1961): genuineness, trustworthiness (e.g., Darwin, 2000) and empathy (e.g., Eby et al., 2008). Related research findings indicate that possessing these Rogerian qualities resulted in nurturing mentee development (Darwin, 2000), emotional relief (McLeod, 2007), and an opportunity to feel heard (Parsloe, 1992). These mentor attributes provided the foundations for building rapport and relationship development, the attainment of improved athlete well-being (Ragins & Kram, 2007), increased mentoring success (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), and reduced the potential for early mentoring termination (Eby et al., 2008). Furthermore, the attributes, in concert with a clear view of the mentor role, facilitated the transition of knowledge between mentor and mentee. The effectiveness of the mentoring relationship was largely impacted by the mentoring style and format (e.g., Bloom, et al., 1998). The overwhelming preference for individualized and informal mentoring was also consistent with previous research whereby a non-intimidating and familiar mentoring environment is effective in stimulating open dialogue (Clutterbuck, 2001).

The results reported in this research also extend previous work by positioning mentoring as a support mechanism that enables the pursuit of enhanced PWB. Traditional athlete support services are often underpinned by the holistic athlete development evidence-base (Wylleman et al., 2013); athletes experience several critical transitions during their sporting careers and rely on these services to successfully navigate these milestones. Previous research that explored similar internal supporting roles (i.e., family, coaches, career and education programs, sport consultants) revealed such systems did not offer adequate support (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999), had hidden agendas (Ryan, 2015), came with preconceived perceptions (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999), and were lacking in emotional closeness (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Moreover, athletes reported that there remains stigma associated with seeking assistance from sport psychologists (Martin, 2005), which is problematic given the prevalence of mental health issues for current and retired athletes is 45% (Schaal et al., 2011) and 39% (Gouttebarge, Frings-Dresen, & Sluiter, 2015), respectively. That participants in the current study reported experiencing benefits to PWB as a consequence of engaging in mentoring goes some way to suggest that mentoring presents as a complementary support mechanism to traditional athlete services (e.g., career assistance programs, sport psychology consultancy).

All participants in the current study were active contributors to the mentoring relationship, and all perceived distinct benefits of mentoring

that paralleled the six dimensions of PWB as captured at the global level in Lundqvist's (2011) model: self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, and personal growth (Ryff, 1995). At the crux of all mentoring experiences reported in the present study were effective mentoring relationships; proactively contributing to establishing a meaningful mentoring relationship likely influenced their perceived improvements in PWB in the following ways. First, the formation of an organic bond between mentor and mentee (e.g., Eby et al., 2008; Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016; Underhill, 2006) was paramount in facilitating the mentee's journey of self-exploration. By providing a safe space for personal exploration and discovery the mentor allowed the athlete to free her/himself of distorted perceptions and defensive mechanisms relating to the self and the world (Rogers, 1961). Second, by encouraging athletes to set the mentoring agenda, mentors facilitated an empowering environment, which was previously associated with developing thriving athletes (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001). Similarly, Bower (2011) reported that athlete autonomy within mentoring cascaded to other life domains, and developed an individual who lived in accordance to one's personal standards (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Third, by structuring the mentoring relationship such that a clear direction evolved, athletes in the present study reportedly experienced greater purpose in life (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Athletes who developed self-acceptance and autonomy were better equipped to discover their true selves and attain an authentic life purpose that was meaningful, stable and enduring (Ryff, 1989). Purpose in life, above and beyond being an athlete, may enable athletes to cope better with the negative consequences that would normally be experienced with sport-related obstacles, such as injury, poor sport performance, de-selection and sporting retirement (e.g., Ryan, 2015). Fourth, the interaction between the mentoring relationship structure and agenda may have served to foster an athlete's perceived sense of environmental competency. Congruent with this research, previous studies have reported that sport performance was enhanced due to environmental mastery (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Careless & Douglas, 2013). Fifth, mentors and athletes described positive relations with others as a function of the mentoring relationship (e.g., Beumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001). These relations were facilitated by the genuine friendship built within the mentoring experience, whereby a strong mentoring bond fulfilled the basic human need to belong (Keyes et al., 2002). Sixth, structuring the mentoring relationship such that athletes led the agenda fostered an environment that promoted personal development. Additionally, setting the mentoring agenda provided athletes with directions for personal growth that were underpinned by the process of self-reflection.

Fostering PWB is crucial for contemporary athletes, as previous research has reported that self-awareness and discovery assisted athletes to create an identity less fixated on athleticism (Stambulova, 2016), and served as a protective mechanism against the negative consequences resulting from athletic identity foreclosure (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). Athletes who engaged with friends outside of sport, also exercised environmental mastery, developed a more meaningful purpose in life, autonomy, and self-acceptance (Kaplan, Gleason, & Klein 1991). Encouragingly, positive relationships in the present study were found to enhance sport performance, consistent with findings in Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, and Spink (2008). In some cases, the mentor was outside the traditional athlete support network (cf. offline support; Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004), which served to strengthen the relationship by ensuring the establishment of a more genuine relationship. In the context of the present study, most important of all is the relationship we establish with others. As Bloom et al. (1998) summarized, humans are naturally inclined to bond with each other when a shared chemistry is present. The need for connection is a deep human necessity for PWB, as although individuals need people, we also value being needed (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In the case of the present investigation, the mentoring bond experienced by participants largely contributed to their perceived improvements in PWB.

In summary, the present study revealed mentoring as a holistic support mechanism for elite athletes. The practice of mentoring by participants in the present study was congruent with those witnessed in other contexts. Moreover, the pursuit of a meaningful mentoring relationship seemingly assisted mentors and mentees to perceived benefits to PWB. These included assisting athletes to gain self-acceptance, life purpose, realise inherent potentials, develop quality connections with others, and experience a sense of control over their internal and external worlds to determine their desired destiny. The alignment between participant perceptions of how mentoring benefited PWB, and the dimensions outlined in Ryff's (1989) model and at the global level in Lundqvist's (2011) integrated model suggest that mentoring is valuable in supporting athlete to become well-rounded and self-actualized individuals.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

In spite of the unique contributions outlined in this study, two limitations require acknowledgement. First, athlete participants, who were primarily male, may not reflect those within the broader elite sporting environment. Their inclusion may restrict the generalizability of the findings; gathering additional data from other sports and equal distributions of genders would strengthen the existing knowledge base. Second, all athletes who participated in this study had positive mentoring experiences. It may be worthwhile to explore the perceptions of athletes who have not benefited from mentoring.

Future research could explore the role of other variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and spirituality) as they relate to mentoring. Moreover, analyzing the mentoring relationship duration, and the ages and genders within the mentoring dyad may provide greater insight into factors that facilitate effective mentoring. Specifically, we report findings based on athletes receiving mentoring for a minimum of six month time period, in which the athletes' perceived improvements in PWB as a result of mentoring. Exploring the implication of receiving mentoring for a longer duration may yield new insights.

5. Conclusion

This study contributed to the elite athlete and mentoring literature by investigating the experiences of those who engaged in elite athlete mentoring, and whether mentoring may foster enhanced PWB. Overall, this study has shown that mentoring plays a pivotal role in protecting elite athletes from an all-encompassing sport life, in terms of their identities, lifestyles, values, and future visions. Although athletes were highly passionate about sport, it did not restrict their ability to explore other non-sport related aspects of their internal and external lives. Mentees' athletic and personal development were facilitated by a mentor, which was perceived as beneficial to PWB. These findings lend support to the notion that mentoring is a promising and appropriate social support mechanism for elite athletes.

Conflicts of interest

The authors of this manuscript declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research.

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