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CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN WOMEN'S HANDBALL ELITE PLAYERS – MIDDLE RANKING COUNTRIES SPECIFICS

RAZVOJ KARIERE V ŽENSKEM VRHUINSKEM ROKOMETU – NEKATERE POSEBNOSTI SREDNJE RANGIRANIH REPREZENTANC

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research aimed to study the career development outcomes of women's handball players. The purpose was to identify the socio-cultural factors and personal characteristics that enabled athletes from geographically small countries with middle-ranking national handball teams to fulfil their sporting career goals. Data collection via semi-structured interviews and systematic observation of the athlete's career development commenced in 2012 and lasted one decade. Career development was one part of the questions; the other parts concerned migration and dual careers. Altogether sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted – with players ranked in the top ten players in their national teams, and all had played more than 50 international matches; after the observation phase, the eight players still actively playing at the elite handball level were re-interviewed; all were sports migrants. In the final stage of the study, two additional interviews were done – with two athletes who were among the players with the most successful careers in Europe at that time but not having migration experience. The study concluded that parents and coaches are the most important social support in career development in the first career phase. In the second phase, access to dual career prospects is vital to successful career development, parallel with elite handball sports conditions in a club and national teams. A successful migration path seems to be one of the significant factors in evaluating success in sports career development.

Keywords: career planning, dual career, female handball, career development, migration

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IZVLEČEK

Osnovni namen kvalitativne raziskave je bil preučiti razvoj kariernih poti rokometarki, identificirati sociokulturne dejavnike in osebnostne lastnosti, ki so športnicam iz geografsko majhnih držav s srednje rangiranimi rokometnimi reprezentancami omogočale uresničevanje ciljev v športni karieri. Zbiranje podatkov s pol-strukturiranimi intervjuji in preko sistematičnega opazovanja kariere se je začelo leta 2012 in je trajalo desetletje. Razvoj kariere je bil en del vprašanj; drugi deli so zadevali migracije in dvojne kariere. Opravljenih je bilo skupaj šestnajst pol-strukturiranih intervjujev – z deseti vodilnimi igralkami; ki so odigrale več kot 50 tekem v svojih reprezentancah. V zaključni fazi smo ponovno anketirali osem še aktivnih igralk, ki so imele vse status športne migrantke. V zaključni fazi študije sta bila opravljena še dva dodatna intervjuja – z dvema igralkama, ki sta bila med igralkami z najuspešnejšimi karierami v takratni Evropi, a nista imeli migracijskih izkušenj. Študija ugotavlja, da so starši in trenerji najpomembnejša socialna opora pri razvoju kariere v prvi karierni fazi. V drugi fazi je bila dvojna kariere bistvenega pomena za uspešen razvoj kariere, vzporedno z vrhunskimi športnimi pogoji v klubu in reprezentancah. Uspešna migracijski vzorec se zdi eden od pomembnih dejavnikov pri vrednotenju uspešnosti razvoja športne kariere vrhunskih rokometaršic.

Gljučne besede: načrtovanje kariere, dvojna kariera, ženski rokomet, karierni razvoj, migracije

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INTRODUCTION

Career planning is part of human resource management also in sport as a profession. Havran (2017) lists the main tasks of human resource management in professional sport (case football), underlining the importance of activities related to individual development and career support. There are to answer the questions such as who is responsible for successful career management, who should finance its costs, and who produces direct (tangible) results in player development (Havran, 2017; Ekengreen et al., 2019)). Some valuable research has been conducted on sports economics on the international level, too, relating to human resource management (Byers et al., 2012; Weerakoon, 2016; Lekavičius, 2020) and career research (Stambulova, Ryba, 2014; Ekengren et al. 2018; 2019; Li et al., 2022).

In career planning in modern elite sport the decision for migrations is nearly always part of career planning. Questions concerning broader issues such as globalisation, national identity, and intercultural communication, as well as those relating to more specific matters, for example, 'talent pipelines,' stereotyping, and the ascribing of qualities to athletes from different countries, racial, ethnic, and gender groups, are also part of the migration process (Agergaard, 2008) and part of career development of athletes. Researchers have started to identify specific stressors and challenges for elite athletes, such as cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers to acculturation in migration (Oghene, Schinke, Middleton, & Ryba, 2017; Schinke, Blodgett, Ryba, Kao, & Middleton, 2016) and other challenges in career development (Weerakoon, 2016, Lekavičius 2020): which concern transitions of athletes through the developmental processes of career stages and the establishment of dual careers (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard & Selänne, 2015; Ryba, Stambulova, Selänne, Aunola & Nurmi, 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Agergarad & Ronglain, 2015; Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020).

Athletes in modern sports are nowadays influenced by different challenges (f.e. globalisation, professionalism) and new possibilities. For athletes from small countries seems to be even more important to plan their career in sports to reach higher standards in their chosen sport. Handball is one of the most developed sports in Europe, but also many differences in handball career development conditions between countries. For our study, female handball players from middle-ranking countries were selected from Slovenia (SLO) and Switzerland (SUI). The countries exhibit some similarities for elite female handball players; both countries are geographically small, with middle-ranking national teams and a comparatively small number of elite female handball players, with limited possibilities for regular participation in high-level handball

competition. In the last decade, SLO ranked between 10th and 15th place and SUI between 20th and 30th in Europe, according to the 2020 EHF women's national team ranking.

The research question of our research is to find out the characteristics of a successful career development in women's handball players from geographically small countries with middle-ranking national handball teams

Career planning and career transition

In career transitions literature, an athletic career is viewed as a developmental process, which includes career stages and transitions, underpinned by the modernist logic of competitive sports (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004, Bon et al, 2022). As athletes progress along the athletic developmental continuum, aspects such as the multiple demands of individual and team training, competitions, travel and rest periods, for example, become more intensive and time-consuming. Life as an elite athlete presents many conflicting and competing demands, such as dual career obligations, possible transnational migration, communication in a new language and a new culture, as well as different models of career progression.

Geographic mobility is essential to the development of a professional or semi-professional playing career in many sports, including handball and can be crucial for an athlete's career trajectory. The closely intertwined relationship between migration and career development is particularly relevant for the highly skilled labour force (Meyer, 2001), including some elite athletes. Athletes, coaches, and sports administrative personnel are increasingly migrating across national and continental borders for work (Maguire & Falcous, 2010).

Figurational sociological perspectives on sports labour migration have been employed to understand how global networks of power influence the flow of sports labour migration (Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire, 1999). The main focus in micro-sociological analyses has been directed toward developing typologies for athletes' motives and reasons for migration (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 2004, 2013; Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Bon et al, 2016; (Schinke, Yukelson, Bartolacci, Battochio & Johnstone, 2011). Some studies highlight that motivating and demotivating experiences of migrant athletes interweave with their adaptation processes, state interventions, and (implicit) integration strategies in sports clubs (Agergaard, 2008; Botelho & Agergaard, 2011).

Research at the individual analysis level of sports careers takes into consideration the extent to which athletes' development involves their athletic and post-athletic careers, including transitions occurring in sports, as well as in other domains of athletes' lives (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Moreover, intercultural and intracultural variations in athletes' career pathways call for increased contextual sensitivity in career research (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Sociological research on sports labour migration and psychological research on athletes' career transitions have generated some overlapping research themes (e.g. motives for migration and adaptation, push and pull factors, identity, social support and networks). Researchers in both fields have identified that social and individual factors play an important role in shaping athletes' experiences (Agaard & Ryba, 2014).

In a collaborative effort to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of a transnational athletic career, Agergaard and Ryba (2014) focused on discerning female athletes' crucial career transitions and adaptation processes, which could be defined as normative (i.e. predictable) and non-normative (i.e. more idiosyncratic and less predictable) turning phases in athletes' career development, triggered by a set of demands with which athletes have to cope to continue successfully in their sport or adjust to their post-sports careers (Stambulova, et al., 2009; Bon et al., 2022).

Individual coping is emphasised as a key factor in determining the career transition outcome - either a positive experience or a crisis during transition. Other studies advocated for the need to open up the athletic career framework to a multiplicity of meanings, underpinning career pathways in various socio-cultural contexts, which influence how athletes make sense of themselves and their careers, and to consider the decisions they make (Ryba 2011; Ryba & Stambulova, 2013; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013).

Sport-related challenges of fitting into the training routines and the playing style of a new team proved to be central to players' experience and feelings about migration (e.g. Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013; Schinke et al., 2016), developing a sense of belonging (Ronkainen, Ryba, & Selänne, 2019; Ryba et al., 2015; Schinke, Bonhomme, McGannon, & Cummings, 2012). Some researchers pointed out the essential role of the family, friends and supporters (Light, Evans, & Lavallee, 2017; Ronkainen, Khomutova, & Ryba, 2019; Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, & Ng, 2012). Ryba et al. (2015) describe three migrations phases (pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, and socio-cultural adaptation) of the cultural transition model. The pre-transition

refers to the activation of psychological mobility, which typically involves various ways of planning for future relocation and psychological disengagement from the athletes' current origin (Ryba, et al., 2015).

Dual career considerations

Dual career (DC) is becoming one of the crucial topics in the career development for many elite athletes. Stambulova & Wylleman (2019) synthesised the empirical findings into two major categories: DC in sport and education and DC in sport and work. While both DC types were addressed in the European DC Guidelines (2012), DC in sport and education has been, until recently, the central focus of the European DC discourse. For example, athletes find combining sport and work more difficult than combining sport and studies because very little support is provided to employee-athletes, for example, a flexible work schedule (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Female athletes also choose additional work to support themselves financially more often than male athletes (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér & Lindahl, 2015; Bon et al., 2022; Fuchs et al., 2021).

The specific aim of our study was to develop a contextualised understanding of the ways in which elite female handball players from small countries constructed and developed their careers and life trajectories through migrations and dual career.

METHODS

Research Design

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed and combined with a small amount of descriptive data to develop a contextualised understanding of the ways in which elite female handball players from small countries constructed and developed their careers and life trajectories through migrations and developing and sustaining sport careers. Responding to the call by Savickas et al. (2009) to explicate the nuanced cultural context underlying career construction, the responses of sixteen female handball players from SUI and SLO were collected. The countries exhibit some similarities for elite female handball players; both countries are geographically small, with middle-ranking national teams and a comparatively small number of elite female handball players, with limited possibilities for regular participation in high-level handball competition. To enhance the transparency and generalizability of the research, we put effort into getting data on all national team players in the 2012 season so that they were

considered representatives of elite female handball players from Slovenia and Switzerland because all were more than five years, with more than 50 playing matches and all having migration experience. Migration experience was the main focus of the first part of the over-investigation of this sample (Bon et al., 2022).

It is to underline that the athletes were very motivated to cooperate, which meant that rich data was collected and could be utilised to build the research and support the conclusions. The players were from the beginning informed about the purposes of the study, besides the scientific also of practical approaches. The authors are still in contact with nearly all athletes who are becoming handball experts and business partners.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to provide a framework for interviews: the participants were asked to recall childhood experiences, memories of family, friends and school, their career development in (and outside of) sport, memorable achievements, challenging transitions and adaptation experiences in different cultural settings. Participants were encouraged to develop their own preferred order in telling their stories.

The data collected from the initial interviews was accompanied by seven years of systematic observation, which was introduced as an objective, well-ordered method for close examination of the aspects of women's national handball team players' career development, especially the characteristics of migration, which helped to obtain reliable data, unbiased by observer interpretation. Systematic observation typically involves specification of the exact actions (national team matches) and attributes (changes in the national team squads), as well as some other available variables about the women's national handball teams in SUI (Handball Suisse, 2020) and SLO (Rokometna Zveza Slovenije, 2020). The data was also collected from media channels and handball federation platforms, then checked with the athletes at the beginning of each interview.

Ethics and protocols of data collection

Ethical approval was received from the regional ethical board. The first author contacted the athletes either face to face or by phone, explaining the aim of the study, ethical issues, and logistics of the interviews. Ethical guidelines were followed by using ID numbers. Furthermore, the athletes were guaranteed that their anonymity would be maintained in relation to any personal or critical data that has not yet been published. It is noted that four of the athletes were prominent current or former players who specifically agreed to their names being used in this

paper. They are public figures whose data is published on different websites such as eurohandball.com and handball club websites.

The interviews were arranged at a time and in a place convenient to the athletes. All main interviews were conducted in person by the first author. At the beginning of each interview, the athletes were informed that the information they provided would remain confidential and that they could terminate the interviews at any time. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, with one exception, were conducted at the national team preparation camps in 2012. In the second series the re-interviews with the players were conducted as three face-to-face and the other online in the season 2019/2020. The interviews with two non-migration athletes (SLO) were done at the end of the season 2020 after finishing their career. Each interview lasted from 50 to 105 minutes. The first author was in contact with all athletes throughout the seven-year-plus period of data collection. For players who stopped their careers, we were informed, that they are all employees; two of them are in the frame of SIU handball.

The athletes

The sample was the most successful female handball player in both countries - all national team players with more than 50 national team matches.

In the main phase of the study, two groups of athletes were included. The first group, in the first phase ('Interview 1'), in the year 2012, consisted of six Swiss players (aged 24.9 ± 4.2) and eight Slovenian players (aged 23.2 ± 6.5). In the second phase ('Interview 2'), after seven years, 8 players who were still playing abroad (seven Slovenes and one Swiss) were interviewed again, with some socio-demographic data being collected (Table 1). At the end of the study also two players (SLO (aged 38, 6) were interviewed.

Table 1. Socio-demographic data of the players in 2012 and data about two additional interviewed players.

<i>Women's handball national team players data</i>				
National Team Players	Age at the time of 'Interview 1'	Age at the time of the first migration	Migration / to the Countries	Years abroad by 2012
SUI (n-6)	26.3 ± 3.08 (20-27)	25.3 ± 7.6 (19-27)	2 (Germany, France)	2.1 (± 0.23) (2- 4)
SLO – Migrant- (n-8)	24.7 ± 2.59 (21- 26)	23.6 ± 3.08 (19- 27)	4 (France, Hungary, Spain, Montenegro)	3.9 (± 0.51)
2 SLO – 2 Non-migration experience players	Interviews after the results of Interview 1 and interview 2			

Data collection – the interviews

The main data collection occurred in three phases of semi-structured interviews, which were recorded for further analysis. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to provide a framework for the interviews. Participants were asked to describe their whole career development from the childhood to the elite level - following by specific focusing questions: 1) whole career development; starting phase, decision, social support, coping with different career challenges, and identifying barriers and resources 2) migration - reasons for, manner of, and organisation of migration; 3) dual career experiences; 4) adaptation strategies and changes in the social environment; 5) general career development and the role of migrations and dual career in career development; 6) career assessment, including their development in the national team; 7) plans about next steps in their careers and the desired future place of residence.

In 'Interview 1', athletes were asked to recall their career development both in sport and outside of sport, including memorable achievements, challenging transitions, especially during different periods and adaptation experiences in different cultural settings. In the second interview, each athlete was given a chronological timeline that was drawn up based on the responses given during the first interview and also based on data collected during the systematic observation and recording of each participant's career by the first author. This information was

used as a support to invite further reflection on the major career events and themes and to check any inconsistencies that emerged during the first interview.

'Interview 2' focused on exploring the shifting discourses of culture surrounding the meanings attached to an athletic career, identity, mobility and migration, performance, kinship and family. 'Interview 2' started with a cross-check of answers from 'Interview 1' seven years prior. All data from the systematic observation (career development, migration in new clubs, playing performance, scoring results, national team performance) was also verified. The athletes were then asked for an overall description of their career thus far and were then asked to address the following three questions; 1) What benefits did your sports career derive from migration? 2) what experiences did you gain to develop your handball and which for your post-sports career, 3) which experiences would not have been possible had you stayed in your home country? The initial interview questions about the background and characteristics of athletes' sporting careers were followed by open-ended questions encouraging athletes' descriptions of the conditions for their talent development. The interview ended with more direct questions about dual careers and how transnational migration had influenced their professional handball career development, their opinions about what they learnt about succeeding as sporting migrants, and how they were able to integrate the benefits of their transnational experiences into their performances for their respective national teams.

Interview 3 was done in 2022 with two players with an extremely successful career, but without migration experience. Interviews were focused on checking the findings of the first part of the study (Bon et al., 2022) that all successful players are of the opinion that migration in women's handball players from geographically small countries with middle-ranking national handball teams is the main factor for having a successful career. They were asked about their experience and feelings comparing with players who are (or were) sports migrants. 'Interview 3' started with a cross-check of the results of interviews 1 and 2; the athletes were then asked for an overall description of their career thus far and were then asked to address the following three questions; 1) Did you have an opportunity to go abroad, and why you didn't decide for it?; The opinion about the benefits and disadvantages which your sports career derives from non-migration, 2) what experiences did you gain to develop your handball and which for your post-sports career, and 3) Which experiences would not have been possible had you would be sport-migrate?

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Interviews with SLO athletes were done in the Slovenian language and with SIU athletes in the German language. The analysis of the interview data was completed in Slovenian by the first author. The quotations selected from the data were translated into English directly, and the language revision for the article was made by an English speaker (second author).

Systematic observation

In the systematic observation phase, descriptive statistics about female handball in SLO and SUI were collected, with comments being added by the authors during this phase. The authors then asked all interviewed athletes to check the information and evaluate the authenticity based on their own experiences. Also, during the systematic observation, many notes, photos, video material, and artefacts were collected by the first author. For descriptive statistics, relevant data for particular players was collected, such as socio-demographical data, the number of transfers between clubs and countries and the general situation in both national handball federations and national teams. The descriptive data from the systematic observation was cross-checked for validity through comparison with the official records of the SUI and SLO handball federation websites and through the European Handball Federation (Eurohandball.com) website.

Data analysis

The final assemblage of data included: audio recordings and transcripts from the semi-structured interviews; structured interview questionnaires containing open comments, including a substantial number of responses to open comment items; audio recordings and transcripts from some focus group sessions; field notes taken while national team matches were being studied; video recordings of matches, preparations and camps); case study notes; documents (reports, minutes of meetings, e-mail communications); diaries, video diaries, observation notes; press clippings and photographs.

Question-focused analysis was used as a starting point when organising the raw data, and the responses that had similar themes and represented the same points were grouped together. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read through several times by the first and third authors. The first author then conducted a thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke

(2006), where initial comments, codes and memos were developed systematically into broader themes and concise phrases.

RESULTS

The basic information about each nation is presented in Table 1 to frame some of the differences and similarities in the results of athlete career development.

Table 2. Data about Switzerland and Slovenia and career characteristics of elite handball players in each country (prior to migration).

<i>Data about handball ranking and specifics about HB career of elite players</i>		
Data	SUI	SLO
Member State	EFTA	EU
Surface	20.7 km ²	41.3 km ²
Population	8.6 m	2.1 m
GDP (2019)	703,165 m	53,743 m
Women's National Handball Team Ranking 2019	24 (68 points)	14 (148 points)
Age at initiation into Handball	Approximately 8 years of age	Approximately 6 years of age
Who motivated and participation in the home country?	Parents/Friends	Elementary school teacher, coach, parents
Number of migrations in home country	Only 2 players - once	From 1 to 5 clubs
Status	Amateur (no payment)	Half - professional (from 100 to 1500 euro)
Playing at The Senior Level In Domestic Clubs (Years)	4.7 (from -2 to 7)	5.4. (from -2 to 8)
Evaluation of their sporting career to date	Successful to very successful	Very successful

SLO and SUI have different handball traditions. According to the EHF women's national team ranking (eurohandball.com), which includes 49 countries, SLO ranked higher than 20th in all the years between 2012 and 2019, and SUI never better than around 20th. While in 2019, SLO ranked 12th in the national team and 10th in the club ranking, SUI was placed 24th in the national team and 22nd in the club ranking (European Handball Federation, 2019).

Membership information from clubs and national teams indicates that handball is one of the most popular and successful team sports in SLO, and both the women's and men's national teams are internationally renowned. Having a club at the highest handball competition level - Champions League, is one of the biggest differences between SLO and SUI women's handball.

All of the other clubs in SLO and in SUI are at an amateur or semi-professional level. There are approximately 1700 female and more than 7500 male registered players (<http://www.rokometna-zveza.si>) actively participating in one of the leagues in the Handball Federation of Slovenia (SLO HF).

Following the career transition of all athletes in the sample (Table 2), it is typical that parents have an essential role in the decisions for handball and in the organisational part. In Slovenia, where the teachers of physical education are involved in the school system from the beginning (in children aged from 6 to 10 years), girls started playing in elementary school earlier than in SUI. In the study period at SUI, it was not very common to change clubs in the home country mainly because they were at similar levels of organisation and standards of play. In Slovenia, it is common, before progressing to transnational migration between clubs a few times. HC Krim is particularly popular because it has been involved in the European Champions League for more than 20 years. As a result of this status, the Club is more financially secure, and the organisation is more professional and business-like when compared to other clubs in SLO and in SUI.

Transnational migrant characteristics

At the time of the initial interviews, none of the Swiss women's national team players had long migration experiences, on average less than 2 years (1.67). They then migrated to five different countries (Germany, Norway, Denmark, France, SLO), made eleven transfers and spent on average 9.6 years (2 -11) abroad until the season 2019/2020. Only one Swiss national team player is still playing in Germany, and one in SUI, having returned from Germany. All others finished their careers (on average at the age of 30.5). Two of these former athletes are involved in a special SUI Handball Federation (SUI HF) project. One is responsible for women's handball development, and the other is a project manager at the SUI HF. The other athletes have different occupations; three have children, and all are employees, but in post-handball vocational careers, their work is not connected to handball.

In 2012 eight migrant Slovenian players played in five different countries (Hungary, Germany, Macedonia, France, and Poland). In the next seven years, the migration dynamic intensified. By 2019, they had spent on average 9.1 (+1.6 years) years (6-12) abroad, had been playing in eleven different countries (Germany, Hungary, Denmark, France, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Spain, Switzerland, Romania, Austria) and had made 20 transfers between countries and 28 between clubs (especially in Germany). In 2019, two of the athletes were top

professional players (one in France and one in Montenegro) in the top handball clubs in the Champions League and among the top scorers. The others were semi-professionals. Interestingly, in 2019, four Slovenes were playing together in the same German Club in specific semi-professional conditions – all having different part-time jobs organised with the support of club management.

The results indicate that Slovenes had good experiences with clubs in France and are enthusiastic about the lifestyle in France. The dynamic migration path of one Slovenian player especially stands out. Before her first international migration to France in 2010, she had managed to graduate at the Faculty of Sport in Ljubljana. After 6 years of playing handball in France, she returned to SLO because she wanted to play in the Champions League. During her career in Slovenia, she married a French national, had a child and finished her playing career. A year later (in 2018), however, she returned to France and is still playing there. After seven years of professional handball, she started a dual career as a key account manager.

Table 3. Some characteristics of career development from 2012 until season 2019/20.

Data about players and results								
GENERAL BENEFITS FOR ALL ATHLETES				Better career development – compering with those who is remaining playing in the home country only More successful career because of migration Not having tried (to migrate= is the biggest mistake Significant improvement in personal and work competencies Better salary than in the home country Identifying Personal Strengths and Weaknesses Social net				
2012				2019/20				
	Reasons for migration	Goals wanted to achieve	Countries	Competition level	2 nd interview (age)	Migration experience	Achievements	Conclusion
SUI	Not appropriate conditions for handball improvement in home country	Handball improvement; Improvement in Personal and Work Competences	GER, DEN	First or second national league; only one had played in Champions League (one year)	Age 35 /only one player	9 years (GER)	Decision making; Time management; Results Orientation Teamwork; Organisational Skills	A successful career, Handball, life experience; After sport career - return to the SUI:
SLO	Find better organisation, better salary, better/different conditions for dual career	Better quality of life; handball improvement; dual career, learn new language/s	FRA; MNE; ROU; POL; HUN	Six of them played Champion League	31.5 ± 2.19 (27- 36) / 7 players	9.8 ± 1.57 years (FRA; MNE; ROU; POL; HUN, TUR, GER, MKD, POL; SPA, SUI) (8 - 14)	Competencies: Responsibility; Results Orientation; Decision Making; Communication (foreign languages);	Successful career; Dual Career "I have everything here: handball, job, love/partnership ."

Coping with transnational career transitions

All players tried to prepare for their move physically and mentally. They paid more attention to prevention and treatment of injuries and other health problems. Fear of injury was even more obvious in the migration period than in domestic clubs. Their daily life was described as uneasy because of the number of demands they faced. The athletes mentioned perceived social support from family members during the whole migration period. Their partners, on the other hand, were mostly unwilling to adjust their lives to the athletes' careers.

Having moved abroad, some athletes reported mixed feelings - big expectations and many doubts at the same time. Some remember chaotic feelings and a wish to go home, primarily because of homesickness but also because the conditions and values in foreign clubs were different from expected. Individual coping is emphasised as a key factor in determining the career transition outcome, along with perceived social support from the family, team-mates and also team officials.

By moving to German clubs, Swiss athletes avoided or minimised language difficulties; however, SLO players mentioned that learning German or French was quite a big language challenge.

Dual career during career transitions

Most of the thirteen athletes had dual careers in 2012, combining handball training obligations with studying during the migration periods. Their dual career goals were obligatory for nearly all of them. *SUI: Switzerland was not 'big enough' for my sport career dreams. I liked knowing that sport would also be my profession. I hoped to discover how the other European countries are organising sport. I decided to study sport in Denmark, the 'heart of women's handball'. I was ambitious in sport and in my other career."*

Handball players enrolled in distance education courses. The majority of the athletes showed interest in working in either sports management or some other sport-related business after finishing their handball career. All athletes also mentioned their families' demands that they finish their education.

In 2019, of the 14 athletes, six graduated in sport-related studies, one in social studies, two in economics and three became teachers. Six Slovenes had dual careers, playing handball and working. One Slovenian finished her education before her first migration, and the others during the migration. All said that they consider a dual career essential and that it had been part of their

plans from the beginning. One Slovenian player mentioned that migration gave her dual career a special push: *"When I was at home, I expected my mother to remind me about school. Now I know that I somehow considered my school as my mother's business and not mine. When I moved abroad, I finally realised that everything in my life is my responsibility, including my education."*

Career evaluation

The fact that they got the possibility/invitation to play in foreign clubs was a big success for them. The athletes from 2019 also saw migration as an opportunity to evaluate and reflect upon their whole life, not just their handball career. SLO: *"At the beginning of my career, I decided I would do everything to succeed, to show all friends and relatives – that I will be "The player"* SUI: *"I'm proud of myself. I felt that migration made me a stronger person. I improved my self-esteem and became many important life competencies."*

Of the eight Slovene athletes, only one returned home and finished her handball career in Slovenia. The remaining seven were still sports migrants in the 2019/2020 season and were at the same time either studying or working. Two had children and were combining elite sports and studies with family life. All athletes were happy about their decision to become sports migrants. An important piece of data is that many of them had objective reasons not to play for their national team anymore, such as the risk of injury and the demands of their Club. The athletes regretted not playing for the national team anymore but indicated there were several problems in trying to do so. It is worth mentioning that Slovenes were more reserved when asked about their national team than in all other questions. Only one player is still playing for the national team. She is one of the best athletes in the French league and the European Champions League, playing right back.

Only one player from SUI in 2022 was still an active migrant with a dual career. One Swiss player, who migrated at the very young age of 19, returned home after two years and then prolonged her career by playing in SUI. The other players from SUI mostly finished their careers abroad, returned to home country around the age of 30, starting different professions and having children. They are all happy about choosing a sports migration experience, but they are satisfied with their life in SUI. Their biggest disappointment and regret is the low ranking of their national team, though they underlined their better performances for the national team having international experience in their foreign clubs.

Two players were interviewed after the results of the first part of the study confirmed that in Slovenia that there are important factors in different phases:

The study concluded that in women's handball players from geographically small countries with middle-ranking national handball teams, parents and coaches are the most crucial part of social support in the very first phases of career development. However, doubt was also presented about the right decision about chosen sport, handball: *"My dear daughter, wouldn't you rather handball play something at the home garden grass....?"* Such opinion was at the very beginning of the career, but similar to nearly all other stories, parents were very closely connected with athletes in the first phase. *"At the beginning of the second phase of my career, when I entered as a very young girl in the first team, my father was my first supporter. In many cases, it was even so that really talented players were changing the lifestyle of all families." It was not only that the entire family was coming to watch over handball matches; all weekends we spent around handball, discussing matches and players."*

In the second career phase, access to dual career prospects represents key points of successful career development. *"To finish the education that was in our society always the most important."*

Both interviewed players absolutely agree that the model of successful female athletes from geographically small countries with middle-ranking national handball teams identified several key factors for a successful career in the competition phase of the career; These factors included excellent handball skills for top-level sport; adequate level of education and a realisation of their quality of life aspirations and trajectories as significant factors in evaluating their success, both as athletes and on a personal level external to the sport. And migration is one of the most important factors and an important value and sort of proof of dedicated athletes. *"I must admit that I do regret not going abroad. I had a call from one of the leading clubs in Europe, but I was not bold enough to move there: I'm happy with my career, but this sport migration experience is missing somehow. "*

Also, second interviewed player agrees with conclusion about key factors in career development. She was not planning to migrate to other clubs because, at the time of her active career, she was a member of a leading Slovenian club, also one of the leading in Europe, and she was sure about having everything she needed for a successful career. Her lifestyle changed; she became a famous and recognisable person in society and earned a lot of money. Nowadays, she understands that migration means something else, means life experience. *"Although I'm*

happy with my career, I am somehow envious of players nowadays who can gain experience to migrate and change more clubs and countries."

DISCUSSION

In the last decade, nearly synonymous has become a statement that for a successful sports career in elite female handball is to play at the highest level internationally and to be a sport migrant in prominent sports clubs. Sports migrations have intensified worldwide (Magee & Suden, 2002; Maguire & Falcous, 2010; Magee & Sugden, 2002), very intensively also in women's handball (Agregard, 2008, Bon et al., 2016; Bon et al. 1 2022). This research study focused on the career development of elite handball players from countries with comparatively small populations and handball federations (SLO, SUI) and on the identification of specific stressors and challenges for athletes, such as dual career challenges, as well as cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers of acculturation, as presented in Schinke et al., (2019) by Ronkainen, Ryba, & Selänne (2019) and Bon et al. 1, 2022.

Career development in sports consists of several phases. In the first phase, the social support from family and friends is the most important; in the second phase is the significant role of coaches and clubs' management. In the elite level phase, the most significant findings of this research study are that all participants are convinced that their sporting career has been successful, and even more successful than the careers of those who are also national team athletes but chose not to migrate. Also, two not migrating players agree with this finding. The findings of this research reveal that the most potent reasons for the transnational migration of elite athletes from small countries, such as SLO and SUI, are handball development, dual career possibilities and better quality of life and career prospects. While for Swiss athletes, the prime reason for migration was the development of their handball skills; they were also interested in trying new and different life experiences. Slovenes, on the other hand, wanted to advance their sports careers together with many different benefits, including gaining new life experiences in a different country, trying something new, and leading a more modern life independent of their parents. It is possible to compare the results with the studies on migrant athletes in the Nordic region (Ryba, Ronkainen, & Selänne, 2015; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015), which revealed that athletes' career trajectories, lived experiences and psychosocial functioning were closely linked to career discourse practices, professional

opportunities, and to social policy about migrants in their countries of origin and temporal settlement.

The results confirm other authors' conclusions, for example, Ryba et al., 2018; Schinke et al. 2016; Ryba et al., 2015; and Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013, that the sport-related challenges of fitting into the training routines and playing style of a new team proved to be central to athletes' experiences and feelings about migrations. Athletes from countries with a smaller population and small national handball federations who migrate to strong handball clubs in bigger national federations believe that overall club support and being valued by the coach and team-mates are essential factors in an athlete's career. The athletes were often skeptical and doubtful of their own qualities and talents, coming from a small country. This feeling was more typical for athletes coming from SUI. In 2012, some athletes reported difficulties in developing a sense of belonging. With the help of different coping strategies and the support of other club members, they nonetheless mainly managed to adapt to the new environment quickly. As described in similar studies, where some athletes complained about the complexity of their acculturation experiences, inequality of opportunities and the difficulty of developing a sense of belonging (Ronkainen, Ryba, & Selänne, 2019; Ryba et al., 2018; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ryba et al., 2015; Bon et al., 2022). The athletes also reported having similar feelings at the beginning of the transnational migration experience. The athletes with nearly a decade of migration experience also explained that with hard and dedicated work, they had attained a good position in the Club, felt valued, formed treasured friendships, built a network of friends, and found good business opportunities.

Apart from handball-related issues, migrant athletes from SUI and SLO described some other challenges in the migration process, such as learning a new language (especially Slovenes) or adjusting to different cultural norms, as already reported in migrations studies (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Kontos & Arguello, 2010; Ryba et al., 2015). The athletes in this study mentioned the benefits of acquiring some specific occupational skills (e.g. psychotherapy, coaching, and beauty therapy), expanding their social network, learning some essential life skills such as cooking and housekeeping, becoming familiar with the new lifestyle and different socio-cultural perspectives.

The findings of the present study confirm those of other researchers about the essential role of family, friends, and other supporters, coaches, and mentors in the migration process (Light, Evans, & Lavalley, 2017; Ronkainen, Khomutova & Ryba, 2019; Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, &

Ng, 2012). The athletes also pointed out the crucial role of team-mates. Former team-mates or national team team-mates provided support in the first phase of the migration process and, in some cases, were the key factor or enabled and organised the whole migration process, recommending the athletes to coaches or clubs by presenting their competencies, providing contact information, etc. Although very competitive at training sessions and matches, the new team-mates often turned out to be pleasant, amiable, and supportive in their free time away from the court.

The possibility of having dual careers is noted as an essential consideration for all athletes, although it was not such a frequent and well-known consideration at the beginning of the research period. For the Slovenes, in particular, education seemed to have taken priority even over handball development. Six Slovenes finished their education during migration and one beforehand. The one Slovenian player without dual career experience, who by 2019 had not finished her education, proved to be a unique case. She had been playing in the highest-ranking professional women's handball clubs in the EU for more than a decade and had, in her own words, a special 'dual career' with her 10-year-old son. The athletes who decide to stay in a foreign country for a longer period (as is the case with nearly all Slovenes) have to deal with all three phases (*pre-transition*, *acute cultural adaptation*, and *socio-cultural adaptation*) of the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2015).

The pre-transition refers to the activation of psychological mobility, which typically involves various ways of planning for future relocation and psychological disengagement from the athletes' current origin (Ryba et al., 2016). Slovenian athletes interviewed in the season 2019/20 with 8-12 years of migration experience intended to stay in the new countries (Germany, France). All athletes worked through each of the three phases, also acute cultural adaptation and socio-cultural adaptation. All underlined the demands and the need for investing a substantial amount of time and energy, but no one found the adaptation phases problematic - quite the opposite. They highlighted the benefits of knowing different cultures, gaining excellent life experience, and developing skills and competencies. These benefits were acknowledged also by Swiss players, who primarily migrated to improve their handball skills.

All athletes considered their careers successful, and not one of the elite players mentioned regretting going abroad. They admitted having some difficulties in the pre-transition and acute cultural adaptation phases. After adapting to the new environment, they compared their careers with those who had not migrated and felt like they had got more out of their handball careers.

As one Slovene concluded her story: *"In Slovenia, in my Club, everything was at the highest level. The club management organised everything for us players; They were ready to help me with study and with apartment. But I decide to go abroad. Going abroad was one of the best decisions in my life."*

In the recent history of women's handball, we have witnessed a phenomenon in which many of the best athletes in national handball teams are migrants, including SLO and SUI. The aim of this study was to contribute to the scientific part of handball and to find a contemporary model for a successful sporting career for female handball players from small national handball federations. In the career development, both Slovenes and Swiss believed that migration was a key point in their career development, but Slovenian athletes' main reasons for migration went beyond handball as they pursued better life prospects, including better possibilities for dual careers and acquisition of different life competencies, including having better communication and personal relationships in their Club and receiving a more substantial and more regular salary.

The migrations of Slovenian athletes were more frequent, with many more transfers between clubs and countries (11 countries, 26 migrations), with the migration period lasting longer. Slovenes described their first migration as a big, difficult and stressful step in their career, but also as the best decision of their life and career. Five of the SUI handball athletes returned to Switzerland, only one prolonged her career, being dedicated to her dual career (working in a Rehabilitation Centre) but expressed no doubt about returning to Switzerland in the future. *"I knew from the beginning of my migration experience that my future would be in Switzerland. Occupational and opportunities in life are too excellent in Switzerland to stay elsewhere."*

It is quite a different situation with Slovene athletes. Seven Slovenian athletes prolonged their career playing abroad and were still active in the season 2020/2021. They were also ready to remain in the new country with their families and organise their post-handball career there (in Germany, Switzerland, Montenegro, and France). This represents a new trend in Slovenian handball migration because, in the past, nearly all Slovenian women's handball migrants returned home in the post-handball career phase (Bon et al., 2016; Bon et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The research in this study provides some suggestions for more structured career development in women's handball for elite athletes coming from geographically small countries with similar characteristics, such as SUI and SLO. The present study aimed to explore the career development, especially migration (characteristics, reasons, goals, dual career strategies, coping with barriers, competences development) and considerations for success. All athletes stated that they have more successful careers because of migration, more than if they would stay playing in their home country, and more than their national team-mates who are staying to play in their home country; they stated the significant improvement in personal and work competencies; also important is the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses, what is the ground for further personal development.

Our research on the sample of Swiss and Slovene elite handball players was longitudinal, long-lasting, very complex and brought significant results, but the study also has some limitations. Although our participants were all national team handball players and all public persons, being present in different and they agreed to cooperate in the study non-anonymous, the reviewers in general research on this sample (Bon et al., 2022) clearly demanded to cover the identity of the players for the scientific work. The limitation is probably also that we have not followed players who stopped playing during the one-decade data-collection phase of the study. Also, a post-handball career would need to be followed, especially regarding occupational and lifestyle patterns. Now it seems that all Swiss athletes have returned to Switzerland, but nearly half of the Slovene remain to stay abroad. Nearly half of all have businesses or professions connected with handball in both countries.

On the basis of the research findings we can conclude that the career pattern of a successful women's handball player from a geographically small country with a middle-ranking national handball team includes: a) excellent handball skills and migration experience; b) an adequate level of education; c) dual career goals from the beginning of the career; and e) high personal ambition and emotional connection to handball. Furthermore, many former migrant athletes use their international experience to contribute to women's handball development as managers or team officials within national handball federations. Analysing the significant number of former elite national team athletes and migrants employed at the top of women's handball organisations, we can conclude that these former athletes developed specific skills, and specific

personal and work competencies, for such positions as a result of their specific career development.

The authors would encourage further studies about career development in elite female sports to discover other socio-cultural and personal characteristics. It would be interesting to compare career development between countries with different handball traditions and according to handball level (also EHF quality ranking, number of clubs or players). Comparison of factors that enable successful sporting careers and satisfying quality of life may differ also from male to female, and research into causative factors for this difference is also of interest for future research.

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