Achievement despite adversity: A qualitative investigation of undrafted National Hockey League players

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Abstract

Adversity is viewed as both an inevitable and important experience for elite athletes (Howells et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore elite athletes' perceptions of the experiences and characteristics that helped them to overcome a shared sport-specific adversity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 professional athletes (M_{age} = 27.25; *SD* = 3.28 years) who had progressed to careers in the National Hockey League (NHL) despite not being selected in the annual Amateur Entry Draft. Participants discussed their long-term objectives of playing in the NHL, previous experiences with adversity, certain psychological characteristics that facilitated their progression (e.g., competitiveness, passion, confidence), and the significance of social support as key factors that helped them to overcome the initial and subsequent adversities associated with being unselected during the Amateur Entry Draft. Practical implications and proposed avenues for future research are discussed within the context of the study's limitations.

Keywords: achieving, draft, hardship, professional sport, social support

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Human achievement and the antecedents to success and failure have long been topics of interest in academia. In fact, Galton (1869) is credited as one of the first to propose that factors beyond innate ability must be considered in relation to individual achievement. Indeed, across a variety of domains (e.g., sport, academics, military), a number of relevant factors are known to contribute to individual achievement, ranging from genetics (e.g., the ACE gene and its regulation of blood pressure with implications for sprinters; Sawczuk, Maciejewska, Cięszczyk, & Eider, 2011), physiology (e.g., musculature in Olympic rowers; Kerr et al., 2007), psychology (e.g., psychological resilience; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), to the social environment (e.g., access to opportunities and resources; Côté, Macdonald, Baker, & Abernethy, 2006). Importantly, the degree to which these factors contribute to achievement is dependent upon various environmental demands that an individual may encounter (for a review, see Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). In elite sport, developing expertise requires athletes to dedicate considerable time and effort to training, and demonstrate a willingness to engage in competitive, comparison-laden situations (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Rees et al., 2016). Accordingly, the ability to engage with challenging and potentially negative events is considered to be a prerequisite to high-level athletic achievement (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

Athletes' engagement with negative experiences has garnered increasing attention from sport psychology researchers in recent years (e.g., Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017). In part, this trend can be attributed to athletes' acknowledgement that their engagement with negative experiences contributed to their subsequent sporting achievements (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Howells & Fletcher, 2015). For instance, Olympic champions have noted the unlikelihood

of their success if it had not been for the difficulties they had encountered and subsequently learned from during their careers (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Similarly, clear examples can be gleaned from autobiographies of elite athletes, whereby they attributed success to their ability to handle negative events they had encountered (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). There is a growing desire from a talent development perspective to understand how controlled experiences with challenging circumstances can be used to develop the characteristics demonstrated by elite athletes (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012). For example, Collins and MacNamara (2012) suggested that the exposure to potentially negative events or experiences would help athletes develop the skills and characteristics required to enable them to engage with the challenges of elite sport.

To better understand athletes' engagement with negative experiences, sport researchers have utilized a range of psychological concepts and theories. Interestingly, the application of a variety of approaches combined with growing interest in the topic has led to a lack of clarity regarding certain concepts and constructs within the field (Howells et al., 2017). For example, investigators have used the terms *stressors, adversity,* and *trauma* to describe a range of similar negative events or experiences (e.g., injury, poor performance) encountered by athletes (Howells et al., 2017). Conceptually, the term stressor applies to a broad range of negative experiences, with adversity representing a threshold beyond which refers to more severe negative experiences (e.g., Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007). Similarly, the term trauma is appropriately used when referring to an individual's physical, psychological, and emotional distress that results from exposure to stressors or adversity (Day & Wadey, 2016). Importantly, regardless of the terminology used in reference to negative events or experiences, an extensive body of literature

supports the potential to obtain psychosocial benefits and adaptive outcomes from such events (e.g., Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010).

In addition to athletes' engagement with a variety of stressors and adversities, researchers are also interested in the athlete outcomes stemming from these experiences. For instance, Seery (2011) found that people with a history of experiencing adversity had better mental health and well-being than those who experienced low or high levels of adversity. In addition, positive appraisals of adverse experiences are generally associated with improvements in psychosocial attributes (e.g., motivation, confidence), stronger relationships within one's social support network, and/or changes in life philosophy (Seery, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Research pertaining to sport specifically has adopted several terms to describe the adaptive outcomes that can result from athletes' negative events or experiences, including stress-related growth (SRG; e.g., Galli & Reel, 2012), adversarial growth (e.g., Howells & Fletcher, 2015), and posttraumatic growth (PTG; e.g., Day & Wadey, 2016). In referring to the range of terms utilized, Howells and colleagues (2017) recommended that researchers interested in the effects of athletes' negative experiences should "carefully reflect on the specific focus, findings, and context of their research and adopt terminology accordingly" (p. 151).

Within the broader psychology literature, and in reference to the human lifespan, experiencing adversity is considered to be largely inevitable (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007). Transition phases during an athlete's career represent inevitable experiences that may be perceived as adversity, with those that are predictable being considered normative transitions. For instance, the transition from amateur to professional sport is unrealistic for most athletes, which gives many individuals the opportunity to plan for an alternative career. This can help mitigate the stress associated with the transition out of competitive sport (Stambulova,

Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). Non-normative transitions, such as being forced out of sport (or an anticipated level of sport) earlier than predicted, pose the greatest likelihood of being perceived as a challenging experience because an athlete may not have fully processed clear alternative objectives and coping strategies (e.g., Raabe, Zakrajsek, Bass, & Readdy, 2018; Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004). This can create high levels of stress for athletes because of the uncertainty about their future careers (Stambulova et al., 2009). Considering that the majority of research on adversity in sport has explored a range of experiences of elite athletes from a variety of sports (for a review see, Howells et al., 2017), contextualizing responses in relation to a consistent, sport-specific adversity could offer an informative perspective pertaining to athletic achievement.

Professional ice hockey provides a unique context to examine adversity that results from non-normative transitions. Every June, the National Hockey League (NHL) franchises convene for their annual Amateur Entry Draft (NHL Draft) where each of the 31 franchises take turns selecting the top amateur players (18-20 years of age) from around the world. By selecting a player in the NHL Draft, a franchise is reserving the exclusive negotiating rights to offer those individuals a professional contract. In total, 217 amateur players are selected (31 NHL franchises with seven selections each) in the NHL Draft each year. To put the likelihood of being drafted and playing in the NHL in context, Parcels (2002) investigated the advancement of ~30,000 minor hockey players in Ontario, Canada who were born in 1975. Of those ~30,000 players, 48 (0.16%) were drafted to the NHL and only 32 (0.1%) participated in at least one NHL game (Parcels, 2002). This understanding emphasizes the need to explore not only the potential adversities (e.g., not being selected in the NHL Draft) that lead to athlete adaptations (i.e., changes in life philosophies and social support networks; development of psychological

attributes; Seery, 2011; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013), but also the characteristics of individuals who are able to withstand and grow from those incidents (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore elite athletes' perceptions of the experiences and characteristics that helped them to overcome a shared sport-specific adversity (i.e., not being selected in the NHL Draft) during their path to achieving a long-term objective (i.e., competing in the NHL). More specifically, this investigation sought to explore NHL players' perceptions of the experiences and characteristics that helped them to overcome not being selected in the annual NHL Draft and to eventually compete at the NHL level.

Method

Qualitative Approach

Our research was informed by a constructivist paradigm, relativist ontology, and transactional and subjective epistemology (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). Given that we were interested in the unique experiences of undrafted professional ice hockey players, we understood their realities to be both socially and experientially based, yet expected certain elements to be shared by others in similar situations. Indeed, we viewed the process of data collection to represent the co-creation of knowledge between the participants and the investigator. Each athlete possesses a personal history that informs the meaning that they attribute to these socially constructed interpretations, and as all participants went undrafted to the NHL, we sought to explore their perceptions pertaining to their eventual achievement at that professional level.

The Sample: Undrafted NHL Athletes

The most direct developmental paths to attaining the NHL for North American born

amateur athletes are through the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The CHL is an umbrella sport organization that represents the three Tier I (major) junior hockey leagues for amateur players between 15 and 20 years of age. Entry into the CHL often involves drastic life changes for 15 to 16-year-old youth, often requiring a relocation away from social support networks (e.g., moving in with a billet family, transferring to a new high school) to compete for one of the 60 CHL franchises across Canada and the United States. The CHL franchise typically represents an athlete's first exposure to competing against young adults in a competitive schedule similar to that of professional sport (e.g., daily training, extensive travel, large audiences, constant organizational evaluation). These youth become eligible for the NHL Draft at 18 years of age and retain their eligibility until the year of their 21st birthday. Conversely, a second developmental pathway for top amateur hockey players (aged 18 to 24 years) to attain the NHL is through the NCAA, where there are 60 NCAA Men's programs across the United States. Together, the CHL (n = 78) and NCAA (n = 67) accounted for 66.8% of amateur players selected in the 2018 NHL Draft (National Hockey League, 2018). Of the remaining players selected, 32.3% were from Europe (Sweden = 31, Russia = 15, Finland = 14, Czech Republic = 7, Switzerland = 2, England = 1) and 0.9% (n = 2) were from North American teams outside of the CHL and NCAA (National Hockey League, 2018).

Participant recruitment for the current study was based on the principles of purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). We sought to recruit a sample of undrafted NHL players who shared the common experience of overcoming the same sport-specific adversity (i.e., not being selected in the NHL Draft) on the path to the achievement of a long-term objective (i.e., competing at the professional level). In total, 12 undrafted North American born White male

athletes (M_{age} = 27.25 years; *SD* = 3.28 years) were recruited, representing both the CHL (*n* = 7) and NCAA (*n* = 5) developmental streams. After not being selected in the NHL Draft, participants took between 4 to 9 years (*M* = 6.08 years; *SD* = 1.93 years) until eventually participating in their first NHL game (National Hockey League, 2017). The first among our participants made their NHL debut during the 2007-2008 regular season (National Hockey League, 2017), while *n* = 3 participants were still playing for NHL teams at the beginning of the 2018-2019 NHL regular season. Furthermore, their experience at the NHL level ranged from 6 to 304 games (*M* = 152.67; *SD* = 111.10). At the time of recruitment, undrafted athletes represented approximately 15.65% (108 out of 690) of the NHL population, and our sample represented 11.11% (12 out of 108) of the potential participant pool (National Hockey League, 2017).

Procedure

The first author reviewed each NHL team, accumulating a list of undrafted athletes who participated in at least one contest during the previous regular season. After reviewing the athlete profiles for each player listed on the teams' 23-person rosters, those who had not been drafted were further evaluated for eligibility as participants. For inclusion purposes, we targeted North American-born players because those who develop outside of North America typically graduate through academy-oriented programs that are affiliated with various European professional teams, which was viewed as a potential confound with our research aim. Once a comprehensive list of potential participants was compiled, the first author contacted gatekeepers (e.g., hockey operations staff with multiple NHL franchises, sports agencies) to obtain contact information for the athlete representatives (i.e., sport agents).

After obtaining institutional ethical approval, athlete representatives were approached and asked to introduce the study to their clients. Once interested athletes contacted the first author to

arrange a time to conduct the interview, they were informed of the scope of the project, and were sent a copy of the information letter. Given that participants were located across North America, all interviews were conducted over the phone by the first author. Importantly, whereas there are limitations inherent with telephone interviewing (e.g., inability to identify non-verbal communication, sound quality, participant distractions), they can also facilitate participant comfort and anonymity (e.g., Novick, 2008) and have been demonstrated to provide a similar level of detail as in-person interviews (Cachia & Millward, 2011).

Interview guide. Interviews were informed by a semi-structured guide (available upon request to the first author). This approach enabled the interviewer to begin by obtaining descriptive information about participants' development as elite hockey players, while providing flexibility to either person involved in the interview to explore the key experiences and characteristics associated with the athletes' development. The interview guide was generally organized chronologically, beginning with questions pertaining to formative sport experiences, followed by inquiries surrounding junior, collegiate, and professional hockey careers. Questions focused on participants' expectations leading up to the NHL Draft (e.g., "Thinking back to your junior career, were there expectations for you to become a professional hockey player?"), their experiences with not being selected (e.g., "How did you react to not being selected in the NHL entry-draft?"), and how they overcame this adversity to pursue their objectives of playing in the NHL (e.g., "What course of action did you take following the NHL Draft?"; "Did you turn to anyone or did anyone in particular to provide support during this time?"). Finally, frequent follow-up probes were utilized to encourage participants to elaborate on, or more clearly articulate, their thoughts (Patton, 2015). Although the interview guide was created prior to data collection, questions and probes were refined as the interview process progressed and

contributed to the interviewee's understanding of the athletes' experiences (e.g., Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Karnilowicz, Lütfiye, & Phillimore, 2014). These refinements were based on the reflective online journal maintained by the first author during and immediately following each interview[1]. On average, interviews lasted 37:09 in length (*SD* = 5:00) and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (yielding 129 single-spaced pages).

Data Analysis

Consistent with our research aim and philosophical underpinning, a thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017) was utilized because it allowed us to structure our analysis in a way that enabled us to best understand the athletes' experiences, and to organize our findings to ensure a rich description when conveying results to readers. Throughout the interview process, the first author maintained an online reflective journal that was reviewed prior to transcribing and re-reading the interviews. This led to an intimate familiarity with the data prior to the preliminary coding process, and also enabled the author to review initial impressions of the data, and to situate himself within the social construction of the data (i.e., interaction between interviewer and interviewee; interviewee's perceived agency in their experience). Transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo software, which was utilized to facilitate the organization of smaller segments of text, or codes, that captured relevant content (Braun et al., 2017). After conducting and transcribing four interviews, the research team met to discuss initial impressions of the data and to identify preliminary codes and themes that would inform further analyses (Braun et al., 2017). As data collection progressed, the first author reviewed new data extracts, checking them against the entire data set and the preliminary themes, before documenting

[1] An online journal format was utilized as it afforded all research team members access to the document despite the geographical distance separating them.

objective (e.g., “Did this participant discuss the NHL Draft as an adversity?”) and subjective (e.g., “This participant shared an interesting story relevant to…”) observations in the reflective online journal (Braun et al., 2017). A final meeting with the research team was established to further discuss and refine the specifics (e.g., labels) of each theme, and extracts were selected to relate the themes back to the research question and the literature.

Methodological Rigor

Several methods were employed to ensure methodological rigor in the current study. First, the authors’ use of reflexivity and transparency contributed to the meaningful coherence of our paradigmatic position, stated purpose, and selected methodology (e.g., Tracy, 2010). In particular, the first and third authors have personal experience with ice hockey as athletes, coaches, and managers. Through these experiences, the research team established an understanding of athlete development within ice hockey that informed study design and facilitated recruitment, participant-interviewee rapport, and the interpretation of participant responses. However, we acknowledge that this understanding of ice hockey is based on amateur experience and anecdotal accounts of the plight of professional hockey players, which was discussed as a research team to highlight preconceptions and biases (e.g., Bradbury-Jones, 2007). Similarly, to counteract the geographical distance separating the research team and to encourage ongoing critical dialogue throughout the research process (Smith & McGannon, 2018), frequent video conference meetings were held. The involvement of all members of the research team throughout the process contributed to our reflexivity and the consistency of our approach by affording opportunities to discuss interpretations of the data (e.g., Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results

Generally, athletes discussed a range of factors that helped them to overcome not being

selected in the NHL Draft. Responses were broadly categorized within four overarching themes of (a) long-term objective of playing in the NHL, (b) experienced stressors and adversities, (c) psychological attributes that contributed to success and well-being, and (d) mechanisms that facilitated goal attainment. In addition, as the results are representative of the experiences described by the participants, contextualizing their responses within their specific developmental paths (i.e., CHL vs. NCAA) was an important consideration. Although distinct experiences pertaining to not being drafted became evident during the interview and analysis process, it was also clear that once participants became professional hockey players, their shared label as "undrafted" led to experiences that aligned closely regardless of developmental path. In the following section, quotes are accompanied by a participant number and developmental stream (e.g., P.1.NCAA).

Long-term Objective of Playing in the NHL

Across the sample, participants highlighted their lifelong aspirations of playing in the NHL. In this regard, they spoke to childhood instances of rehearsal (e.g., "We [friends] would be out playing street hockey, imagining we were one of those guys on Hockey Night in Canada" [P.3.CHL]) and disclosure to important social agents (e.g., "I remember in school, every project always had something to do with hockey. If I ever had to write a story, it was about trying to make it to the NHL" [P.1.NCAA]), yet conceded to the uncertainty of actually attaining this objective: "I always talked about it and would think about it, but you never know that it's going to happen at that time, or in the future" (P.4.NCAA). Importantly, participants discussed how making their expectations public and consistently revisiting them served to direct their focus towards developing the skills that made them an attractive prospect for NHL teams:

> Usually I'd sit down with my trainer or junior coaches at the beginning of the offseason and set some goals for myself. Not necessarily "I want to get this amount of goals" or "this amount of assists", but I want to get a certain amount of ice time, or I want to improve my defensive game. (P.4.CHL)

Interestingly, as participants' careers progressed and they achieved developmental milestones (e.g., being selected for provincial teams), their perceptions of reaching the NHL shifted from an uncertain to a potentially realistic objective:

> You have this dream from being a little kid. When I was in grade one or two or three, teachers always ask you what you want to do when your older, I would always put down hockey player. So when you grow up and you get closer to that goal, obviously it gets harder, but you realize that it is a possibility. (P.3.CHL)

Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which long-term objectives manifested themselves into the belief that achievement was possible, the athletes discussed the significance of external environmental cues such as feedback from coaches or scouts, or selection to more elite levels of play that validated participants' perceptions that their aspirations were achievable.

Experienced Stressors and Adversities

Although the main area of interest in this study was the adversity of not being selected in the NHL Draft, athletes also chose to discuss other sport-related and personal non-athletic stressors and adversities. Specifically, participants cited organizational (e.g., "undrafted" status, intra-team competition), competitive (e.g., injuries, expectations), and personal (e.g., death of a family member, physical disability) stressors and adversities that provided opportunities for social support and experience of facing adversity that contributed to participants' later experience of not being selected in the NHL Draft.

With regards to not being selected in the NHL Draft, responses should be contextualized in relation to the athletes' prior developmental stream (i.e., CHL vs. NCAA). For CHL players, the experience of not being drafted was viewed as a significant obstacle to playing in the NHL succinctly summarized by: "Not being drafted was probably the biggest low of my hockey career to date" (P.4.CHL), and "It sucked… You're hoping and really wishing your name is going to be called and then comes that sixth, seventh round, and you realize your name isn't going to be picked and it sets in that you weren't drafted" (P.3.CHL). Interestingly, not being selected was not portrayed as saliently for athletes who had taken the NCAA path. As one athlete explained, the extra developmental time afforded by playing college hockey was deemed beneficial: "If I would have been drafted, I'm not sure it would have worked out. I was late to mature and I think that I definitely needed the extra time to go to college and develop physically and mentally" (P.2.NCAA).

Regardless of the contextual differences identified in relation to the developmental streams, a noteworthy finding is that the entire sample perceived that, as undrafted players, they experienced stressors over and above those of their drafted counterparts. For example, decisions regarding promotions/demotions are at the discretion of an organization's management team. By providing more opportunities to drafted players, a management team can enhance perceptions of their ability to select and develop amateur players:

> One thing that I had to overcome was the feeling that I would never get a shot because I was nobody's guy, nobody cared. I was nobody's draft pick. No General Manager [GM] picked me and was like, "Hey, give this guy a chance. Hey, pick this guy." A lot of GM's bring guys up because they draft them, even though there could be a better free agent. I'm

> not going to get that opportunity because [the GM] isn't invested in me like the guys who got picked. (P.7.CHL)

This continued "status" as undrafted led participants to experience perceptions of inequality, whereby their merit was not solely based on performance, but rather, on their teams' decision to provide one of their drafted athletes with opportunities. This contributed to confusion and frustration for participants as they worked to advance to higher levels of their organizations: "It wears on you when you're telling yourself you can crack the code on why guys are making it and you're not" (P.5.CHL). Even when undrafted players felt they performed well, they were unclear about the expectations that their respective organizations held of them:

> I had a good camp and finished top five in fitness testing, but they didn't even give me an exhibition game, so I was a bit frustrated. When I got down to the Central League, I found out nothing was guaranteed and I had to try out for that team too. (P.2.NCAA)

Notwithstanding the confusion and frustration, participants accepted the reality of professional hockey and set about trying to make the most of their opportunities:

> It's just all opportunity, being in the right spot at the right time, somebody gets hurt, you take advantage of that. A lot of guys that I've seen over the past 10 years that didn't get a shot, and they were better than some of the guys that did. (P.7.CHL)

In addition to discussing their experiences as undrafted professional hockey players, participants highlighted other organizational stressors that they had encountered. For example, intra-team competition was discussed as an inevitable ongoing stressor:

> In the NHL, you root for your teammates only to help you, because you're competing against them, really. Whether it be for ice time, money… the team only has so much money for salaries. You want them to do well, but you want them to do well so the team

does well, so you do better. You don't really care how they're doing, it's a tough dog eat dog world in the NHL. It's tough, but you have to take care of yourself. (P.3.NCAA)

Other stressors and adversities discussed by participants included those directly related to competition (i.e., pre-, during, and post-competition). Across the sample, participants had to manage injuries (e.g., concussions, broken bones) that limited or prevented training and performance. In some instances, participants described playing while injured out of concern that giving up their spot to a replacement would result in them permanently losing their position:

> I try to come back from injuries as quick as I can. The more time I'm wasting with someone not watching me, the worse off I am… I'd play hurt because any time I took a game off it was somebody else's opportunity to be seen, and it was a missed opportunity for me to be seen, so I tried to play through everything. (P.7.CHL.)

Another participant framed his decision to play injured as less of a threat to his career, than to giving someone else on the team the opportunity to take his place:

> I played with a sports hernia for 2 years. Then last year when I was with Boston in the playoffs, I had a broken foot… It doesn't necessarily mean that I'm very smart about it (playing injured), but at the end of the day, it comes back to someone is always trying to take your spot. Trying to take your ice time. (P.1.CHL.)

Finally, participants discussed a variety of personal stressors and adversities, including the death of a family member, physical disabilities, and perceived sacrifice of social opportunities. For one athlete, the death of his father at the age of 15 years complicated the decision to remain at home or relocate to a different city during his junior hockey career:

> My dad passed away in the summer going into junior… I didn't want to leave my family here, but ultimately, in my head I think my dad wanted me to go and wanted me to pursue

hockey, so I decided to leave. (P.2.CHL)

Importantly, many athletes who discussed these stressors and adversities (hockey and non-hockey) viewed them as experiences that were leveraged for success during later adverse situations:

> It was a big eye opener and I'm grateful for not having been drafted. Maybe if I get drafted, I coast in and don't work on the things I needed to because I was drafted. So, I think being undrafted motivated me to continue to improve on all the areas that I needed to improve on. (P.2.CHL)

Psychological Attributes that Contributed to Success and Well-Being

The athletes spoke to a number of psychological attributes that contributed to their ability to succeed following their experiences of not being selected in the NHL Draft. These psychological attributes included competitiveness, confidence, motivation, focus, and passion for hockey. Notably, athletes discussed the relevance of different factors at various points in their careers, and described how some were perceived as stable, whereas others changed or could be refined over time.

The athletes described a range of motivational factors across their hockey careers, ranging from being very intrinsic in nature (e.g., enjoyment of play) to more extrinsically based (e.g., competition). It is this competitiveness that participants' felt helped them to overcome not being drafted and to continue to progress in their careers: "I feel like I'm prepared to go to greater lengths to make sacrifices to keep playing and to play against the best, and to live out my dream" (P.1.NCAA). Interestingly, when participants reached professional hockey, they recognized that their opponents also possessed a high level of competitiveness. This required participants to elevate the intensity and consistency in competitiveness that they brought to every

game: “I’ll always remember my first pro game. It was within the first couple of shifts of the game that I realized this was men playing to put food on the table for a family” (P.4.CHL).

Participants also discussed the importance of having stable and enduring confidence in oneself, regardless of the inevitable fluctuations caused by performance slumps, injuries, or being unselected in the NHL Draft. For example, one goaltender said: “You’d be lying if you said there wasn’t tough times, and you definitely doubt yourself. But, I always thought I could play in the NHL and, you go through tough stretches here and there, but I always believed in myself” (P.6.CHL). In addition, participants revealed specific experiences that they felt enhanced their confidence. For instance, several athletes eluded to their success against NHL-caliber competition in training scenarios when participants were still amateurs: “I got a lot of confidence from playing with them [NHL players] in the summers and seeing that I could play as well as these guys who were already successful in the NHL” (P.2.NCAA).

Being a competitive individual and having enduring confidence appeared to be important, yet athletes also discussed the necessity of being able to focus their attention to things that were within their control. “At the end of the day, the cards are all in your hand. You’re the one who can control how hard you work, how much training you do, and your understanding of that stuff evolves over time” (P.1.CHL). Considering the nature of elite sport, frequent distractions vie for athletes’ attention, and participants discussed the necessity to focus on the “right things”. For example, the social environment presented opportunities (e.g., parties, vacations) that required management and self-control because of the potential to detract from athletes’ progress. Beginning in late adolescence, they recognized that the pursuit of sporting excellence requires sacrifice to ensure proper preparation for sport training and performance:

When you’re a junior player in high school that’s the biggest thing on your mind. You’re

missing out on high school parties, you're missing out on graduation… But at the end of the day, and I heard this from someone, that the parties in the NHL are a lot better than the parties in high school (P.1.CHL).

More specific to performance, participants shared that their advancement to higher levels of competition often coincided with the inherent tendency for social comparison (e.g., point totals, teammates' fitness levels), a practice that often had a negative impact because it led to critical self-evaluation in areas that were out of their control. In addition to acknowledging how this could lead to insecurities, participants recognized that being overly distracted by outcomes (e.g., scoring, representing their country in international competition) during their junior and college careers had an adverse impact on their performance, which may have caused teams to avoid selecting them in the NHL Draft. One participant discussed the recruitment efforts of Canadian University coaches during his final year of CHL eligibility (i.e., overage season/year):

During my overage season, [Canadian] schools came to talk to me. I just shut them out. I wasn't ready to focus on life after hockey. You just want to finish your overage year strong, and hopefully get a contract offer from the NHL and make the most of it. There were times I thought, "What if I have to go to school next year and the dream is over?" But I put that in the back of my head. It was always my focus to stay positive and not lose focus of my dream. (P.3.CHL)

Notably, these athletes emphasized the importance of being able to prioritize and focus on objectives within their control, and how this realization helped to advance their development.

Another psychological attribute that participants deemed valuable to improvement and eventual opportunity to play professional hockey was their self-determined motivation. From childhood through to the present day, participants described a desire to dedicate the necessary

time and effort to improving themselves in areas relevant to ice hockey. One participant provided the following anecdote:

> Practice would finish, some of us would head to the gym, and others would be like, "What are you doing? Why are you going in there? We just finished the hard work." The odd day, you'd feel like not doing it. It could be a lot easier to just head over to Subway and hang out and go home and play video games. Instead, I would dedicate 20-30 minutes to get this workout in, which in the long run made me better. (P.4.CHL)

Participants also recognized external sources of motivation that contributed to the direction and intensity of their efforts. For example, one participant described the effect his father's unexpected death had on him, "Knowing that this is what he wanted me to do, it kind of pushed me forward, made me want to work a lot harder. I wanted to make him proud" (P.2.CHL).

The passion for the game of hockey was described as a key attribute to each participants' life and a main contributor to their eventual achievement. Whether it was practice, competition, or informal play, athletes expressed feelings of enjoyment and appreciation for what hockey had contributed to their lives. One athlete said, "It doesn't matter what's going on with your life, you always have the sport that you love to play. You can go out there and have fun and forget everything else" (P.2.CHL). Participants viewed passion as an important prerequisite to athlete development. For instance, one athlete summarized a sentiment held by many of the other participants when he stated, "If you don't have passion for [hockey], you're not going to enjoy going to the rink every day to get better" (P.3.CHL). This passion seemed to facilitate the training and development that helped each player to eventually reach the NHL.

Furthermore, the ability to separate thoughts (i.e., cognitions) and emotions (i.e., affect)

related to hockey from their everyday responsibilities (e.g., spending time with family) was also something that participants felt was important:

> One of the things that helped me was to know that there's more to life than just hockey. Knowing that hockey isn't everything helped me get away from the game, so when I was home with my family, I wasn't thinking about hockey, I was thinking about them. Then, when I got to the rink, my passion was even more so because it's not like my life every day was consumed by hockey. (P.7.CHL)

In contrast, other participants had more difficulty finding this balance, with one participant stating: "I have a hard time letting things go, letting things just roll off my back I guess... I think that definitely hurts my enjoyment of life in general" (P.3.NCAA). Overall, passion for the sport appeared to contribute to the necessary dedication, yet certain athletes were better able to control this passion than others.

Mechanisms that Facilitated Goal Attainment

Each participant discussed a point in their careers where they recognized that they would be unable to succeed unless they addressed the weaknesses that were preventing professional organizations from offering them a contract. Specifically, they credited the social support, changes in goal setting strategies, and the adoption of deliberate practice to be of the utmost importance.

Participants discussed social support from family members, teammates, coaches, and sports agents, especially during adversity. Parents played a particularly important role in this regard, since they were the most stable and enduring source of social support. For one athlete in particular, not being drafted left him emotionally unable to face his peers because of an overwhelming sense of shame for not having achieved his goal. As was the case for many of the

participants, the emotional support he received from his parents helped him to move past the difficult experience and return to the pursuit of his objectives: "My mom asked, 'What's wrong?' And I mumbled to her, 'Well I didn't get drafted.'… She said, 'You have to remember this feeling and know that you never want to feel that again'" (P.4.CHL).

Appraisal support from credible hockey figures (e.g., coaches, sport agents, scouts) in the form of positive reinforcement regarding athletes' potential and ability was a key mechanism of goal attainment for participants. For one athlete, a scout from an NHL organization told him that he was on track to play professionally: "That meant the world to me. I couldn't believe it, I was like, 'If someone who works in it thinks that, then…' It wasn't a random person saying it. It carried weight and I decided to go for it" (P.1.NCAA). Clearly, inspirational feedback from key social agents communicated at impressionable times (e.g., following a disappointment) enhanced athletes' self-beliefs and redirected their focus.

Goal-setting was an important process that directed participants' focus and training efforts. This was described as an informal and introspective practice prior to participants' experience of being passed over in the NHL Draft. As adolescents, athletes' goals tended to be outcome based, ego-oriented (e.g., point totals), and driven by social comparison—often leading to performance issues. An adjustment to more task-oriented goals often occurred in conjunction with failure and appraisal support from credible hockey figures:

> "As things moved on, it was always a goal to be drafted to the NHL, but when that didn't happen, I turned back to getting better every year. Improving on the things that scouts or external sources told me needed improvement" (P.3.CHL).

This ability to accept feedback from key social agents and integrate this information into action was an important step in future professional hockey opportunities.

For many of the participants in the current study, the transition from ego-oriented to task-oriented goal-setting coincided with the adoption of deliberate practice habits. Athletes discussed how, as they matured, they realized that elite level skill and hockey knowledge were not innate characteristics. Rather, practice habits specific to improving weaknesses were viewed as a necessity to reaching the NHL: “My first few goalie camps… That’s where I figured out what real practice habits were… deliberate practice, attention to detail, you know, making sure you are trying to get better every single practice" (P.6.CHL). Self-regulating practice habits and learning to identify and address specific weaknesses were deemed to have helped participants advance to higher levels within the sport and break into professional hockey:

> I think as you move up the ranks you realize what your strengths and your weaknesses are, so you’re able to focus more on your weaknesses, which in my case has always been my skating. So, you find out who can help you with your skating, you know, who the good skating coaches are out there and how they can help you. You realize that you can’t just be complacent with where you are. You have to develop your weaknesses and I try to focus on that. (P.3.CHL)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore elite athletes’ perceptions of the experiences and characteristics that helped them to overcome a common sport-specific adversity (i.e., not being selected in the NHL Draft) toward their paths to achieving a long-term objective (i.e., competing in the NHL). Professional ice hockey players discussed their experiences with this adversity and other stressors throughout their careers, and the general themes identified throughout the interviews involved their (1) long-term objectives of playing in the NHL, (2) experienced stressors and adversities, (3) psychological attributes that contributed to success and well-being,

and (4) mechanisms that facilitated goal attainment. The following includes a discussion pertaining to the key findings of the current study, and discourse related to limitations and future research directions.

Previous investigations of elite athletes' engagement with adversity indicate that the source, frequency, intensity, and duration of such experiences can be variable (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). The present study involved interviews with undrafted NHL players because not being selected in the NHL Draft is considered to be an (sport-related) adversity. Objectively, this perception is supported by the fact that undrafted players comprised a modest 15.65% (108 of 690 NHL) of the NHL population at the time of recruitment (National Hockey League, 2017). From a more subjective socially constructed perspective, the NHL Draft represents the selection of athletes deemed to be suitable for the highest levels of competition. As such, not being selected reflects professional organizations' opinions of an athlete's ability at 18 years of age, and their capacity for future development. Participants' reflections pertaining to whether not being selected in the NHL Draft itself was an adversity is largely influenced by the context within which they were embedded, since clear differences in relation to developmental streams were identified in the current sample (i.e., CHL, NCAA). Athletes who competed in the CHL viewed going undrafted as a negative experience because it represented a missed critical milestone. Comparatively, athletes who competed in the NCAA felt less strongly about being unselected because the prospect of becoming a professional did not become realistic until the end of their collegiate careers (i.e., 22-24 years of age). However, an important finding from the current interviews extends past the NHL Draft per se, and relates to the "label" that followed athletes from both developmental streams in perpetuity for the duration of their careers. In

addition to the uncertainty and less direct route to the NHL, participants also discussed unique hockey-related stressors that were attributed to their status as undrafted players.

Unfairness and inequality were issues that seemed to be consistently experienced, whereby athletes spoke to the tendency for their drafted teammates to be given more opportunities to advance within their organization, largely attributing this as a means for management to corroborate their draft and athlete development strategies (i.e., an experienced organizational stressor). Positional competition is common in elite team sports that rely on intra-team cooperation (e.g., basketball, ice hockey) and where two or more athletes compete for playing time (Harenberg, Riemer, Karreman, & Dorsch, 2016). Participants' evaluation that drafted players received more opportunities appears to be a perception of positional competition that is likely influenced by individual factors such as competitiveness and goal-setting (Harenberg et al., 2016). Similarly, these athletes also felt their position on a team was threatened when, for example, they were injured (i.e., an experienced competitive stressor), since job security or their position on the team seemed to be quite precarious. These experiences in and of themselves would likely not meet the threshold-dependent criteria often associated with adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000), yet researchers have argued that the cumulative negative effect of ongoing day-to-day stressors should also be considered in this area of work (Howells et al., 2017). Clearly, these undrafted athletes felt that they were at a disadvantage even once they had attained the highest level of competition, and this was largely attributed to a lack of control that they felt within the organization (e.g., Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012).

Another key finding worthy of discussion involves the identification of social support as a critical mechanism for athletic success. Hidi and Renninger (2006) proposed social support to be integral to the development of interest through the introduction of an activity, providing tasks

and environments that challenge and create opportunities, and by serving as role models. It is also suggested that advanced phases of interest development are associated with more ambitious goals (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), and this was certainly evident in participants' sharing of their vision of playing in the NHL with key social agents (e.g., friends, parents, teachers) in structured (e.g., school assignments) and unstructured activities (e.g., deliberate play; Côté, 1999). The act of imagining future personal or professional status is referred to in the literature as "possible selves", and is thought to positively affect motivation and behavior in the pursuit of long-term objectives (Bateman & Barry, 2012). Although the longitudinal influence of long-term objectives is not yet clear (Bateman & Barry, 2012), participants' acknowledgement of their goal of reaching the NHL during the different phases of their careers indicates that it was an influential factor in their eventual achievement. By encouraging youth to develop long-term personal objectives, we may be influencing their confidence and motivation to pursue their interests. Key social agents (i.e., parents, coaches) are invaluable resources in the development of "possible selves" by providing challenging environments that reinforce healthy expectations.

Participants also discussed the multidimensional nature of social support, in that informational, instrumental, appraisal, and emotional support were all identified (e.g., parents, teammates, coaches; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Shumaker & Brownwell, 1984). Previous research has shown that adverse experiences can facilitate the development and enhancement of athletes' social support (Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010; Seery, 2011), which was consistent with our findings. For example, appraisal support (e.g., communication relevant to individuals' self-appraisal; Langford et al., 1997) from key social agents at impressionable times (e.g., following the NHL Draft) was a consistent occurrence among athletes that enhanced self-confidence and motivation, and directed their training to focus on the weaknesses that

facilitated their improvement. Overall, our findings support previous research indicating that social support is important for the buffering of – and positive adaptations to – adverse experiences (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Seery, 2011).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered in light of certain limitations. Considering the use of retrospective interviews, information obtained from participants was susceptible to egocentric biases, by which participants may have overestimated their personal influence on their experience, undervaluing the contributions of other factors and entities (Benson, Eys, Surya, Dawson, & Schneider, 2013). As a closely related issue, there are several challenges with recruiting professional athletes (e.g., contact through "gate keepers" and formal channels, demanding travel schedules), and this resulted in only being able to conduct a single interview with each participant. Yet, it is worth noting that we were able to recruit 11.11% (12 of 108 undrafted NHL players) of undrafted players who competed in at least one NHL game during a given regular season. Nevertheless, research in this area would benefit from longitudinal designs whereby temporal changes in athletes' perceptions and resources could be explored. Specifically, interviews with or behavioural observation of athletes leading up to, during, and immediately following a selection process in both older (i.e., NHL Draft) and younger adolescence (i.e., CHL Priority Selection Drafts) would contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms by which different factors influence athletes' engagement with such adversities. Furthermore, future research utilizing interview methods to investigate adverse experiences would benefit from the use of real-time videoconferencing opposed to phone interviews, as the former could better capture non-verbal communication elicited from participants and further contribute to the co-construction of knowledge (e.g., Trondsen, Bolle, Stensland, & Tjora, 2014).

Participants were also recruited for this study because of their demonstrated ability to overcome adversity, but their experiences at the NHL level varied from 6 to 304 competitions. Considering the likelihood that the experience of an established athlete would differ from someone competing to prove their value to a professional organization early in their career, it would be interesting to contextualize the value of adversity at varying stages of a professional career. In addition, it would be helpful to understand the perspectives of different team support staff (e.g., scouts, managers) when evaluating and developing prospects. Considering the amount of funding and research (i.e., scouting, background checks) that goes into drafting a player, it would be beneficial to test and understand the proxy measures that contribute to these decisions.

Practical Implications

A number of practical implications can be proposed based on this study's findings. Participants described not being selected in the NHL Draft as an adversity due to the resulting improbability of reaching the NHL (CHL participants), which also led to feelings of inequality and insecurity during their subsequent professional careers (CHL and NCAA participants). Considering how these athletes discussed these periods as highly impressionable times, sport psychology or performance consultants should be attuned to the inevitable and stressful periods that their clients will encounter during their careers. Many sports include selection processes such as they NHL, so being prepared to help athletes engage with such experiences is critical. For instance, encouraging athletes to engage in dialogue with key social agents (e.g., peers, family) could facilitate their experiences of emotional and appraisal support, and could represent an opportunity to discuss and reinforce actionable task-oriented objectives. From an organization's perspective, it is certainly reasonable for professional organizations to base personnel decisions (in part) on the financial investment they have made to their drafted players.

However, they could nevertheless dispel the feelings of inequality experienced by undrafted players in several ways. Organizations could be transparent about their prioritization of drafted players, which would help undrafted players focus on their development (Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2016) rather than trying to understand how personnel decisions are made. Amateur hockey organizations (e.g., CHL) could also help prevent perceptions of inability at the time of being unselected by recognizing alumni who have reached the NHL despite not being selected in the Annual Draft.

Another practical implication of this research is that organizations, parents, and other hockey-credible figures should encourage aspiring players to move from a social comparison and outcome-oriented focus to a more task-oriented approach by helping athletes understand the areas of weakness that are prohibiting their advancement to professional hockey. Based on the present findings, athletes who understood where they needed improvements seemed to have engaged with the challenging experiences more adaptively (e.g., deliberate practice focused on improving weaknesses, training with elite level athletes during the offseason). Parents also represent important agents during a child's engagement with adversity. The athletes from this sample noted that the emotional support they had received from parents during specific adversities helped motivate them to cope with and overcome the challenges they faced. This point reinforces parents' roles in helping young athletes to manage demands associated with sport participation (Harwood & Knight, 2014).

Conclusion

Experiences with adversity are common for athletes aspiring to reach the highest levels of sport (Howells et al, 2017), and are often variable (e.g., duration, intensity) and derived from numerous sources (e.g., personal lives, sport organizations). Within the current sample, the

ability to succeed throughout an unconventional path to attaining the NHL appears to have been influenced by athletes' long-term objectives, their psychological attributes, and certain mechanisms that facilitated their goal attainment. When young athletes are encouraged to pursue their sport of interest, they develop a broad conceptualization of their future-self (i.e., possible selves; Bateman & Barry, 2012) that is refined through experiences and social support (e.g., heeding critical feedback from professional hockey organizations). It is also important to note that social support at impressionable times led to changes in athletes' goal-setting and training practices (i.e., adoption of more deliberate practice), which led to improvements in areas of weakness, and eventually to the opportunity to play professionally. In recognizing important contributions of these factors over varying periods of athletes' careers, future research investigating athletes' experiences prior to, during, and following adversity may be useful in exploring how these factors can best be leveraged by athletes.

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