

## Journeys of Portuguese athletes to sporting success: the peaks and troughs

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### Abstract

This research examined the experiences of eight Portuguese (former) elite athletes from a social scientific perspective. In so doing it attempted to move away from the tentacles of achievement sport and, in particular, the performance efficiency model that dominates elite sport. Rather, it focused on the subjective and qualitative experiences of sportspeople themselves and gave them a forum to reflect upon the primary socializing agents that played a key role in their sporting success, and on the peaks and troughs on their journeys to sporting success, nationally and internationally. The research design included semi-structured interviews with athletes that excelled in athletics, handball, gymnastics, korfbal and swimming. All eight had achieved outstanding results nationally and internationally. A qualitative approach was adopted for data collection and analysis. Giving voice to the former athletes themselves revealed much about: the primary socializing agents for sport in their lives, as young, teenage and adult athletes; those role models and mentors that influenced their initial and ongoing involvement and specialization in sport, these being the family (usually parents), physical education teachers and peers; and, finally, the peaks and troughs in their careers which usually hinged around sporting success or defeat, failure to achieve expected results, and the onset and impact of injury. Taken together, these findings reverberate with those of other researchers beyond the Lusophone world. They also indicate the emergence and development of a sports ethic in Portugal despite the comparatively late entry of that country into the global sporting arms race.

**Keywords:** sports ethic, elite sport, critical moments, Portugal, qualitative research

### Introduction

It is highly likely that Portuguese athletes are less well known to the readership of this or other English language academic journals. Neither do they have a particularly high profile in the international sports world with the exception, perhaps, of modern day football celebrities like Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Figo and, to a much lesser degree, successful long distance runners Rosa Mota, Carlos Lopes and Fernanda Ribeiro. Having a population of approximately 10 and a half million people, Portugal is a relatively homogeneous country in linguistic and religious terms.<sup>1</sup> Being the thirteenth nation to join the Olympic movement in 1909, Portugal first competed at the Summer Olympic Games in Stockholm (1912). Since then, it has amassed 22 Olympic medals and a range of world athletics titles. These achievements are not insignificant given that a so-called 'new model of sport' was introduced in Portugal in 1974 following the restoration of democracy (Fernandes et al. 2011) that included the establishment of a subsidiary framework for the support of elite sport. Today, however, Portugal is one of the European countries with the lowest rates of participation in sport per capita (Guedes-de-Carvalho and Nunes 2012), it has 'an inferior level of national sport literacy' according to some commentators (Fernandes et al. 2011) and some Portuguese point to the high cost of playing sport as an inhibiting factor in participation (European Commission, 2010).<sup>2</sup> This having been said and despite its relatively small population and land mass,

<sup>1</sup> Portuguese is spoken throughout the country while Catholicism is the dominant religion.

<sup>2</sup> Fernandes et al. (2011, p. 141) have also pointed out that 'the problem of stimulating investment is exacerbated by the gap between rich and poor which has widened over the last decade, one consequence of which is that the Portuguese sport system only meets the needs of the wealthy and healthy'.

Portugal is by no means immune to the global sporting arms race and the drive for elite sports success on the international stage.

Amongst other things, this drive for elite sports success can be seen in its comparatively late focus on the process of building a competitive sport industry and an increasing academic output on various aspects of sports performance (see, for example, (Malina et al. 2000, Ramos et al. 2010, Massuca and Frago 2011)). It can also be detected in research that has focused on studying the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of elite athletic success (e.g. Riewald and Peterson 2003) skill acquisition (e.g. Leite et al. 2009, Leite and Sampaio 2012), and in debates about, and perceptions of, elite Portuguese athletes as ‘natural’ achievers (see, for example, Amorim 2013, Atkins, 2013; Van Vugt 2014). The type of related academic work, driven mainly by the bio-sciences, is not surprising because a constant concern in elite athletes’ daily lives is knowing more about, and pushing the boundaries of, physical and psychological limits and systematically finding ways to overcome these, as is the need to manage the competitive uncertainties associated with this (e.g. Silva and Rubio 2003). The ‘sport ethic’, including a performance efficiency model, dominates there (as elsewhere) in the actual practice of, and research on, sport. Neglected then in the burgeoning Portuguese academic literature is the *social* experiences of elite athletes themselves, their *social* evolution as athletes and the significant influences on their sporting careers/journeys as seen through *their* eyes years on. Accordingly, understanding how athletes negotiate the path to elite sports success, including the training process (e.g. Iglesias, González, Calvo, Barco & Álvarez, 2010), is an important but under-researched area for social scientists of sport. Of notable intellectual interest in this regard are retired or former elite athletes, for the insights that they can offer can be less constrained by the immediacy of the sports ethic and the drive for performance efficiency. These are typically described as a group that has ‘moved on’ or perhaps even ‘retired’ (Coakley 1983) in their lives and careers. They are potentially able to take a more thoughtful reflection on their sports careers from a more detached position.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly the case for those whose retirement was a planned (voluntary) process rather than a sudden and involuntary event (e.g. Kerr and Dacyshyn 2000, Torregrosa et al. 2004), and for whom retirement was an opportunity to pursue new roles.

It was within this intellectual and national context that this study was conducted with now retired elite athletes from Portugal, the goals of this research being threefold: (a) to raise awareness about sports in, and sports research on, the Lusophone world, both of which have been comparatively neglected in English-speaking academic journals, one obvious reason being language barriers; (b) to make a modest contribution, from an interdisciplinary social sciences perspective, to a greater understanding of the lives of Olympic and World athletes ‘in the round’ across a range of sports, in particular taking into account their career reflections and not just those highlights typically feted in the media, and; (c) to explicate, retrospectively, aspects of the critical incidents – the peaks and troughs – in these athletes’ lives through *their* own eyes, some years on. From this position, it is suggested here that more can be gleaned about the complex path to sporting success. Focusing as it does on retrospective questions about critical moments in, and a sense of identification with, elite sports status, the paper begins with an overview of the interdisciplinary conceptual framework underpinning the research. This is followed by a short methodological discussion about the research design, the use of semi-structured interviews specifically using emotional recall as one methodological strategy, and the interpretation of the data generated in this qualitative fashion. This paves the way for a thematically organized discussion of the primary socializing agents identified by these former elite athletes and the peaks and troughs of their careers *as seen through their eyes*. The paper concludes with some reflections on the enduring role for social scientific research as a counter against the drift towards performance efficiency models of sports sciences and it also suggests further avenues for research. Firstly, there is the case for examining the *social* evolution of elite athletes and the relevance of critical incidents in understanding elite sports careers from a social sciences perspective.

### **The social evolution of elite sports performers**

To talk about excellence in sport is usually to talk about individuals with a ‘special’ propensity or ‘talent’ that transcends the norm (Hill 2007). Although a contested term (e.g. Tranckle and Cushion 2006), this talent allows them to attain peak performance in a particular sport, usually judged on the basis of performance at the highest national and international levels of competition. Genetic factors have been shown to have some impact on elite sports success including heart rate and blood pressure (Wilmore et al. 2001) as well as aerobic performance (Pérusse et al. 2001). Trainability may also be limited by genetic factors (Bouchard and Rankinen 2001). But also of equal importance to sporting success at the highest levels are the quality and amount of training, parental support and other social factors such as the relative age effect. What are usually termed environmental factors by bio-scientists and social factors by social scientists play an equally important role in

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<sup>3</sup> This is notwithstanding the concerns raised by Liston and Moreland (2009) about the important role of self-reflection, on the part of current (and indeed former) athletes, in generating a clear comprehension by them about the social phenomena in which they are/were enmeshed.

<sup>4</sup> Lewontin (2000) uses the metaphor of the “empty bucket” to describe the contribution of genes and the environment in development. For him, genes determine the size of the “bucket” while the environment determines the content.

accounting for inter-individual variation (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson, & Wall, 2003) and, ultimately, in elite sports performance. Thus, the development of excellence in sport is the result of a complex interaction of biological, psychological and social factors ((Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson, & Wall, 2003). That is to say, the practices and achievements of athletes are neither limited to, nor are they explainable solely at, the level of the individual for the ‘production, distribution and reception of sporting performances are very much social processes’ (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield & Bradley, 2002). Athletes often make quick decisions ‘in the heat of the moment’ about the appropriate action to take but ‘knowing when’ and ‘how’ does not explain the social context of these decisions. Nor does it explain fully the ways in which choices are always made within specific contexts at any point in time. In short, ‘the reality *outside* and *around* individuals ... how people [in this case, athletes] form relationships with one another and (how they) create social arrangements that enable them to control and give meaning to their lives’ (Coakley & Pike 2014, p. 12 emphasis in original) is a central feature of the *social* construction and development of sporting excellence. ‘Social scientists of sport (can) bring to bear a sensitivity to (this) ... both in the realm of individual perceptions, thoughts, and feelings’ but also in, and through, the use of different thinking tools (Maguire 2014, p. 372).

It is now widely acknowledged that the socio-cultural context shapes who people are – concepts here include personality formation, goals and aspirations for instance – and their opportunities (Schemp 1998). Nowhere is this more evident than within the context of elite sports performance where actions, beliefs and perspectives define how athletes live, practice and learn sport (Baker & Horton 2004; Johnson, Tenenbaum, Edmonds & Castillo, 2008). In this sphere, athletes ‘feel for the game’ is developed, maintained and honed. Importantly, this sporting habitus becomes deeply internalised through practice, that is to say, the knowledge and skills associated with being an elite athlete become almost second nature (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield & Bradley, 2002)<sup>5</sup> such that it is as if these existed almost from the moment of birth. In this regard several studies have identified a clear set of social influences on the social identities, careers and choices of elite athletes. For example, Côté (1999) concluded that the immediate family unit generated opportunities and aroused children’s early interest in sport while those children and their families that participated in extracurricular activities also experienced a greater variety of sports. Equally, research undertaken by Vieira and Vieira (2001) with track athletes showed that, during the early years of learning, those budding child athletes interested in track athletics were influenced by their fathers’ encouragement especially, and by their siblings who also practiced athletics. Lidor and Lavyan (2002) also found that family, friends and physical education (PE) teachers of elite Israeli athletes played a central, if not defining, role in their involvement with sport. Perhaps not surprisingly, most families also sustained athletes’ financial and emotional support. The influence of family members, school sport and support from PE teachers and school coaches on elite athletes was also reiterated by Holt and Morley (2004), Massa et al. (2010), Kay (2000) and Gibbons et al. (2002). In particular, the latter found that a love for sport, and the influence of family and coaches were crucial in the choices made by 816 U.S. Olympians to become elite performers. On the corollary, inhibiting factors in their elite sports careers included insufficient financial support, limited time for life outside of sport and the onset of injuries. Putting the rest of their lives on hold was also a common inhibiting theme for elite child athletes (Brackenridge and Kirby 1997) as it was for adult athletes while pressure from family members was a feature of US athletes’ decisions to leave or finish their competitive sporting careers (Gibbons et al. 2002). Clearly, one other individual determinant of, or factor in, sporting success at the highest level is also the degree to which an athlete’s identity is immersed in, and his/her self-worth is defined by, sport. The transition from a talented youth/child athlete to an elite adult sports performer has a number of key transitions then, some of which rest, crucially, on the support of significant people in the athlete’s immediate and wider social circles. It was within this context that semi-structured interviews were conducted with now retired elite Portuguese athletes, the aim being to give voice to their reflections on, and experiences of, their sporting success.

## **Research Design**

### **Participants**

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with eight former elite athletes (two males and six females) from Portugal. All were considered to be high or elite achievers in their time in athletics (n=2), handball (n=2), gymnastics (n=2), korfbal (n=1) and swimming (n=1). The selection of these interviewees was based on three criteria: having had extensive experience (of more than 10 years) as high-performance athletes (Salmela 1996, Fleurence and Cotteaux 1999, Erickson et al. 2008); having achieved outstanding results nationally e.g. as national champions, winners of Portuguese cups, national record holders and so on, and; having competed internationally e.g. at Olympic finals, World Championships, European and Latin American competitions. All interviewees were aged between 40 and 50 years at the time of interview and thus had direct

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<sup>5</sup> In Pierre Bourdieu’s words, ‘the habitus is the expression of social structure through the person, the set of dispositions that orientates actions of the human being. These dispositions are tacit in that we are largely unaware of them but they are rooted in both our past and our present position’ (in Cushion and Kitchen 2011, p. 44).

experience of the emergence and development of the new model of sport in Portugal. All eight held a higher education degree, notably seven in PE and one in engineering. Occupationally speaking, seven were teachers at secondary and university levels and one was a software engineer. Although being retired athletes, only two were coaches in their respective sports and the other six were not involved in sport to any meaningful degree.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted to gain a deeper insight into these former elite athletes' reflections (in particular, their thoughts and feelings) on their careers, and specifically those experiences perceived by them to be critical or defining moments. Initially, a draft interview protocol was developed and piloted with two interviewees, these data not being included in this study. The outcome of the pilot interviews led to further refinement of this protocol e.g. where participants' responses were found to be somewhat limited for various reasons, probes were added. The eight interviewees were contacted by telephone to enquire about their willingness to participate in this study. Having agreed, the interviews were scheduled for a day and location that was convenient for them. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were utilised because they enabled the researchers to seek clarification and elaboration (May 2001), and to have the necessary latitude to probe beyond the initial elicited responses (Smith and Caddic 2012). The opening questions of the interview schedule were mainly non-directive and descriptive. This allowed the respondents to talk freely about those experiences that they, rather than the interviewer, deemed important, relevant, and meaningful. Subsequent questions and probes were divided into two main themes, these being the primary socializing agents for athletes from their perspective, and the self-defined peaks and troughs of their sporting careers. The interview strategy used to help the former athletes to revive their experiences drew on emotional recall (Ellis and Bochner 2000). By emotionally reviving their past experiences, these interviewees were then able to remember such experiences in greater detail. It was also equally important that interviewees were able to talk about their experiences in their own words (Quivy and Campenhoudt 1998), and to elaborate on areas they deemed to be of particular interest or importance. Thus, the interviewees were encouraged to reflect openly on their past experiences and to discuss in detail those aspects of their sporting careers that *they felt* were relevant to this research. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative approach was used for the purposes of data analysis. Using this approach, data collection, coding, analysis, and subsequent empirical findings stood in close relationship to one another. Here, the interview data were systematically explored for content and meaning. This entailed an inductive process in which patterns, themes, and categories emerged following an initial examination, conceptualisation and comparison of the data. In other words, these patterns and themes emerged out of the data rather than being solely pre-determined prior to data collection and analysis. The research process is alive, therefore, and involves a process of constant comparison across the various coding categories that emerge. *NVivo9* was used to categorize the data into sense units and subsequently to aggregate these, firstly into similar categories, and afterwards into research domains. The goal of data analysis was to develop an adequate classification system with minimal overlap between categories (Côté et al. 1993). Therefore, data units (statements, sentences and so on) were clustered into common themes so that similar units were grouped together and separated away from units with different meanings. Through this analysis, data were subsequently divided into three main themes: primary socializing agents; best moments (peaks); and, worst moments (troughs) of the athlete's elite sports career. Necessary precautions were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data (Golafshani 2003). While research methods that rely on recall and retrospection have some necessary limits, particularly when compared to prospective longitudinal methods, the data that emerged from interviews were vibrant and pertinent. This made it possible to glean a real sense of the lives of these athletes, and the importance of significant others to their sporting careers. There follows a necessarily succinct account of these data in line with the three themes identified above.

### **Primary Socializing Agents**

As has been established elsewhere – in other work from Portugal and in research in other European countries – the nuclear and extended family was important in defining children's and adolescents' attitudes towards, and motivations for, sports and leisure activities (e.g. Lorenzo and Sampaio 2005, Sharp et al. 2006). Moreover, family members, especially parents, were crucial in young people's acquisition and development of sports expertise and skills development (Côté, 1999; Baker, Côté, & Abernethy, 2003), Côté et al. 2003). The role of the family was also found to be quite decisive in this research. Parents' multifaceted intervention began early in the lives of their children who went on to become elite athletes. According to the interviewees, parents had the greatest influence on their uptake of competitive sport from a young age as well as the particular choice of sport in which they had major success. In the words of some interviewees:

“My father encouraged me and would come out to watch me. Whenever I went anywhere to play, my father would come along. My mother just a little later but my father would always come ... and that, I think, is very important” (Interviewee 2)

“I had no say in the matter at the time ... my parents enrolled me in gymnastics and who was I at 7 years old to say I did not like it. I even thought it was cool to do some somersaults and cartwheels ... I never questioned anything at all” (Interviewee 3)

“My father... we were 4 children and he told us that we had to practice some sport, so we chose” (Interviewee 7)

“My parents were the ones who decided that I should learn how to swim” (Interviewee 8)

Parents offered leadership throughout the process of enrolling their children in particular activities, providing transportation and communicating information about their child’s sporting interest and development to various coaches. And, as their children matured, particularly in the context of performance and competition at higher levels, perhaps not surprisingly the type of parental involvement also changed. Then, aspects of parental leadership tended to decrease in relative comparison to their financial and emotional support. Parents fulfilled the latter function in particular as they continued to play a crucial role in helping their children to endure, and deal with, the many unanticipated pressures that came with elite level competition. Alongside this, another group of significant role models emerged, not only as primary socializing and reinforcing agents for sport in this case, but also as agents to generate and sustain further commitment to competitive sport specialization and the development of sports expertise.

Contact with sport is a decisive factor in acquiring lasting sports habits (Fairclough et al. 2002). In this sense physical education teachers are ideally placed to make a lasting impression on young and aspiring athletes and to help them acquire lifelong sports habits (Penney and Jess 2004, Morton et al. 2010). As (usually) active members of the educational and sporting systems in Portugal and beyond, PE teachers are major mediators for young people, often being socialization and development role models for them (Holt and Morley 2004, Makopoulou and Armour 2011). A striking feature for all interviewees was the fact that physical education teachers were a second but equally important group for all of the retired elite athletes in this study, in that it was the teachers who influenced the paths of the interviewees in school sport, extra-curricular and club sport.

“Most coaches were physical education teachers there at the college which provided the technical teams with an excellent complement” (Interviewee 1)

“A PE teacher was the one who awakened this thing about handball in me, telling me that we may have a way of being in life, if we are able to have integrity, honesty with ourselves, we can be better, if there is dedication ... there is only room for the best” (Interviewee 2)

“Under the influence of my PE teacher I wound up coming to athletics” (Interviewee 5)

For two of the interviewees, friends also played an influential role at particular developmental stages of their lives and sporting careers. This was not surprising given the noted importance of peer groups and friendships on adolescents’ attitudes, behaviours and choices. More specifically, as teenage athletes, the interviewees’ relationships with their peers changed in that the importance of the peer group usually expanded on their personal, social and sporting development. At the same time, emotional dependence on parents decreased by degrees. During their teenage years, interviewees’ friends appeared as a dominant social world, not only because the teenage athletes spent time with their groups of friends but also because this was the strongest social force in their lives at that time (Mota and Sallis 2002). In the words of one interviewee “I think the great influence to start practicing korfbal turned out to be my group of friends” (interviewee one) and, in another’s, “Yes, I ... started out under a friend’s influence” (interviewee four). Taken together, the experiences of some of our interviewees reinforced the importance of peer dynamics in physical activity and sport (Gibbons et al. 2002, Mota and Sallis 2002, Macphail et al. 2003). For not only are many young people attracted to sport because of the prior involvement of their friends (e.g. Lorenzo and Sampaio 2005, Woods 2008) but, in addition, it is an opportunity to make new friends and to have fun away from school requirements, a play form of association. In that regard the peer group is a major reason why some young people choose particular sports (Weiss and Petlichkoff 1989, Brustad et al. 2001). Having sketched aspects of their early years and teenage involvement in sport through the eyes of the interviewees’ themselves, next is a focus on the implications of results (victories and losses) for them as they reflected on their respective journeys to sporting excellence.

### **The best moments: the peaks**

According to Shields and Bredemeier (2009, p. 174) “winning can be appreciated as an enjoyable outcome that confirms the value of the effort. It feels good, and there’s nothing wrong with celebrating a victory. Winning sometimes carries rewards and – so long as you won fairly – there is nothing wrong with enjoying them”. Here, the eight interviewees indicated that: firstly, the results and victories functioned in the short-term as a reward but, in the longer-term, they were a stimulus for further work, dedication and sacrifice, all of which are acknowledged as being fundamental to the pursuit of a career in high-level competition and to the embodiment of the sports ethic (Coakley, 2003), and; secondly, they had a tangible passion for their respective sports while

competing. This finding was consistent with other studies (e.g. Gibbons et al. 2002, Massa et al. 2010) in which a love of competition, pleasurable practice and a desire for winning were also evident. On their sporting journeys, there were prominent moments in the lives of the interviewees, the most important and unique for all eight being directly related to the success they achieved in their sport. For instance, some of our interviewees said:

“It was when we managed to lead the team to third place in the World Championship, which was never considered possible for such a small country with no great tradition in korfbal” (Interviewee 1)

“When I went to the finals of the 1992 Olympic Games. We were Olympic finalists at the time with the eighth best time in the world. This was a very important moment” (Interviewee 4)

“Without doubt the Olympic Games, and later in 1992, the European championships and a few months later the Ibero-American championships” (Interviewee 6)

“Participating in the World Championships, in Latin cups ... There were three in terms of wins, plus the Portugal Cup” (Interviewee 7)

“The national records, the national titles for the club, then some of the Latin Cup medals for first and second place, and a presence in a B-final in the European Junior Championship” (Interviewee 8).

Not surprisingly, these interview excerpts clearly demonstrate that their self-identified sporting peaks corresponded with situations of emotional richness and fulfilment in their sporting lives. Certainly, the fact that these athletes had long felt the desire to achieve fulfilment through sport activities came through strongly, as did their focus on setting long-term goals in order to maximize their sporting prospects (Zaar et al. 2012). Accordingly, the self-identified troughs along this journey were also a function of these same goal and task orientations.

### **Worst moments: the troughs**

For Shields and Bredemeier (2009, p. 174) “the true competitor embraces an orientation to loss that sees within it the potential for growth and gain. Disappointment can be very real and quite painful following a significant loss, but resilience is an important life skill. Even in the shadow of loss, hope is essential”. For them then, coping with disappointment and the distress that sporting defeats may generate is an indelible feature of modern sport. It is the case that throughout their sporting careers, athletes (whether amateurs or professionals) experience moments of great difficulty, some of which may even generate unhappiness, anguish and suffering.<sup>6</sup> It was within this context that the athletes interviewed here identified two main troughs and emotional lows, namely not achieving certain results (including sporting defeats) and experiences of injury. Increasingly personal, social and political importance is attached to elite sport success, often at the expense or demise of what could be described as the spirit of sports participation. Because of this sports ethic (Coakley 2003), loss or the failure to achieve certain results can generate anxiety and unhappiness. For a number of the interviewees, failure was still tangible as were the emotions associated with this.

“I failed with the ... and therefore didn’t have access to the final ... It was a big disappointment and I was very sad because I felt I was able to go to the final ... and it was something that marked much ... but I think its’ part of the sport ” (Interviewee 6)

“Not going to the Olympic Games in Los Angeles was clearly the worst time ... because me and some of my teammates were a tenth (of a second) of the minimum time set by the Olympic Committee” (Interviewee 8)

“In the world championship I was not able to obtain the minimum (of points) to go to the Olympic Games” (Interviewee 3)

“I obtained the minimum time to go the European championship in [location deleted], but then I was the first to be eliminated ... at the European championship ... it was frustrating” (Interviewee 5)

Beyond these occasions identified as competitive failures in their sporting careers, the interviewees also identified injuries as key moments associated with unhappiness, anguish and suffering. This was to be anticipated given the burgeoning literature on the effects – psychological, emotional and social – of injury on athletes (see, for example, Roderick 2006, Roderick 2012, Waddington 2000), for any constraint that deprives athletes from full participation in training or competition, however briefly, constitutes a key driver of unhappiness. Indeed, the risk of suffering an injury has been identified elsewhere as one of the issues of most concern to elite athletes (e.g. Mellalieu et al. 2009), not least because injuries are also identified as a potential contributing factor to drop out from high performance sport in particular (Gibbons et al. 2002). The ability to recover quickly – physically, mentally and emotionally – and to resume training and competition is clearly associated, in psychological terms, with this risk of injury. This is a factor that also determines the path and success of athletes (Lorenzo and Sampaio 2005) in real and perceived terms. In fact, similar to research in the UK, the US and elsewhere, injury was defined by the interviewees here primarily in terms of its inhibiting

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Graham Thorpe (former international cricketer), Kelly Holmes (Olympic track and field athlete), Darren Eadie (former professional footballer) and Marcus Trescothick (former international cricketer), all of whom have commented publicly on the impact of sport on their private lives.

effects on participation in training and in competition. For these reasons, and beyond competitive failures or losses, their self-defined troughs also included:

"The moments of injury because they are times when we feel unable to continue and put the doubts whether it is worth continuing" (Interviewee 1)

It was when I was running and broke an arm and was close to the minimum for the championship of Europe and did not achieve it" (Interviewee 4)

"When I got injured seriously, was an important time. I was 19 years old, rupture of the anterior cruciate meniscus, ligament external and internal, needed 1 year and 8 months to get back" (Interviewee 7)

"Some injuries, shoulder, ... I had tendonitis in both states ... I had a time when the doctors told me, forget it, no more swimming ... those times were the most difficult ... times that when, in the final stage, I began to lose competitions" (Interviewee 8).

Some interviewees also revealed that they continued to train and compete while injured.

"I did all games with my feet bound with the 'tape' ... was no way to know which was worse ... because the foot and the joint was always fragile" (Interviewee 1)

"After maybe 3, 4 years that I have begun to train, an injury appeared that accompanied me throughout the rest of my sporting career" (Interviewee 4)

The retired athletes normalized these injuries, in all cases regarding them, and the management and acceptance of risk, as part and parcel of the sports culture. For them pain was ever present and injury was defined only in terms of that which prevented full participation in training and/or competition. Like many other athletes around the world, those interviewed here were evidently socialized into a sports culture that normalized and trivialized pain and within which pain and injury were a necessary feature of the sports ethic (Hughes and Coakley 1991 cited in Neuman 2003, Young 2004). This encouraged them to strive for distinction, to make sacrifices in the process, to train and compete within the presence of pain and to push all physical limits in their quest for success. It was also clear that the self-identities of these former athletes was defined mainly in terms of the status they had in the context of sport (Malcolm 2011), and in terms of the relationships they had with others in the sports subculture. For this reason, a competitive loss, a failure to achieve desired results, and injuries had a notable impact on their athletic identities. It is to these, and other related secondary findings, that we now turn in order to conclude the paper and to consider the future implications of this work.

## Conclusion

The goals of this research were threefold, all of which have been achieved by degrees here. The research has heightened awareness about sportspeople, and research on sportspeople in, the Lusophone world, both of which have been comparatively neglected in English-speaking academic journals to date. It has also made a modest contribution, from an interdisciplinary social sciences perspective, to a greater understanding of the lives of Olympic and world-ranking athletes 'in the round' across a range of sports, in particular taking into account their career reflections and not just those sporting highlights typically feted in public. Finally, it has also explicated, retrospectively, aspects of the critical incidents – the peaks and troughs – in these athletes' lives through *their* own eyes many years on. Focusing as it did on retrospective questions about critical moments in, and a sense of identification with, elite sporting careers, it is now possible to suggest future avenues for further research into the complex path to sporting success, the crucial environmental or social factors that play a key role in this process and, the implications of the sports ethic for individual sportspeople, and for society as a whole. Here it was identified that family (and parents in particular), physical education teachers (also acting as coaches in some cases), and friends were primary agents in the journey to sporting success. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the perceived peaks and troughs of the former elite athletes' careers revolved around competitive success, defeat/loss, and failure to achieve predicted results and the onset and effects of injury. While many of the findings reverberated with those of other research beyond the Lusophone world, the present study has some national significance given that it indicates the existence of a sports ethic despite the comparatively late entry of Portugal into the global sporting arms race. This raises a number of questions about the extent to which the design and implementation of training programmes for athletes *and* coaches could, and should, be informed by a greater understanding of the social and environmental factors underpinning sporting success. For instance, there are those athletes who, for a combination of reasons, are more able to cope with the duality of moments of real or perceived failure (brought on by low prestige, injury, defeat, lack of sponsorship and so on) and the public glory and personal satisfaction that come with success and victory (Silva and Rubio 2003). Other athletes can also manage to attain some distance from their primary self-identification as sports competitors, this being a means of prolonging their careers at the highest level. Yet still, there are those who are far less concerned with such issues as identity, training and life post-sport (Hickey and Kelly 2008). This provides a unique set of challenges for those charged with responsibility for developing elite sport, elite coach and elite athlete development systems, many of which vary across national and cultural boundaries (see, for example, Liston et al. 2012). Perhaps the experiences of the former athletes interviewed here could be utilized in a positive way, in a mentoring and human development capacity, for future generations of Portuguese athletes. This, it is argued here, would be one means of reorienting our thinking away from "a model that emphasizes uncritical appreciation of performance

efficiency or bioscience understanding” of sport and towards the potential of human development (Maguire 2014, p. 2).

The development of elite sports systems around the world is at a particular point in time where more and more athletes have increasing access to high quality training and coaching. Bio scientific studies of human performance in sport have developed in parallel with this. However, ‘the performance efficiency and bioscience model encourages a type of academic practice in which the researcher becomes a technocrat who thinks and speaks in performance terms and reflects the concerns of the sport-industrial complex and the bioscience health nexus’ (Maguire 2014, p. 4). It is for this reason that we conclude this discussion with a reiteration of the importance of a social scientific understanding of athletes’ choices, their thoughts, hopes and dreams (e.g. Hemery 1986), particularly if we, as researchers, are to counter the drift towards a more restrictive and narrower scientific understanding of physical education, sport, leisure and exercise. In this regard, the methodological approach used here was situated within a framework that valued the subjective, qualitative and particular experiences of athletes. This approach placed former Portuguese athletes at the centre of the research with the conviction that the findings will have relevance to those seeking to answer challenging questions about the winners and losers in global elite sport, the costs and benefits of the elite sports system for the individual sportsperson, coach or parent, for the community and for society as a whole.

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