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Toward the Career-Long Psychological Support Services: Insights from Swedish Handball

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this paper share how they developed and validated an applied framework termed the *career-long psychological support services in Swedish handball* (CPS-H). The CPS-H is grounded in career research within Swedish handball and examples of efficient career assistance practice complemented by applied experiences of the first author. The authors used a heuristic approach to sketch the CPS-H initial version, which later was validated in three focus groups with end-users (handball players, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners) and transformed into the validated CPS-H. Promoting a combination of the proactive, educational, whole career, whole environment, and whole person approaches, the framework is structured as having interrelated parts addressing questions: *where* (changes in the contexts), *when* (ages, career stages), *what* (athletes' needs and potential working issues), *who* (support providers), *why* (philosophy shared by the stakeholders), and *how* (forms of services) of psychological support. The authors further reflect on the CPS-H and its implementation and provide general and stage-specific recommendations for support providers. Although the CPS-H is contextualized in a specific sport and culture, some lessons can be applicable across countries and sport boarders.

KEYWORDS

Career assistance; focus groups; framework; handball; psychological support services

Recent developments within the athlete career (sport psychology) discourse (e.g., the cultural praxis of athletes' careers paradigm; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014) and growing overlaps with emerging mental health discourse (e.g., Henriksen, Schinke et al., 2020) led career scholars to introduce a concept of *athlete career excellence*. This new concept is defined as “an athlete's ability to sustain a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport and life” and seen not as “a destination to reach, but more a journey to, or process of, striving for it, in which athletes might need support” (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 14). Helping athletes to strive for career excellence implies to provide *career-long psychological support services* addressing athletes'

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dynamic needs throughout the whole career. In this paper we share our experiences with the development and validation (through critical reflections of the end-users) of *the career-long psychological support services in Swedish handball* grounded in our previous research and applied experiences. This project has a special meaning for the first author, and below is a brief background narrative explaining his interest to initiate and conduct this project.

After having handball player and coach experiences complemented by sport psychology education, I was employed as a sport psychology practitioner (SPP) at the Swedish Handball Federation (SHF). My work with the national team was mainly condensed to a set of individual meetings with the players during camps before big championships. In fact, I was often urged to work in the form of “firefighting,” meaning to work quickly in a reactive manner. Consequently, I was always stressed by limited time and lack of proactive approach. These limitations led to the cases when players’ problems were already shaped, and subclinical mental health symptoms escalated because they didn’t receive help in time. Reflecting on the situation, I realized that the organization and delivery of psychological services in Swedish handball had serious gaps and required changes based on a solid research. This stimulated me to return to academia (but not stopping my work for the SHF) and create a project, supported by the SHF, on studying careers and career assistance in Swedish handball.

This project (led by the first author and supervised by the et al.,) was inspired by several theoretical and applied frameworks. First, we combined theory, research, and practice with athletes’ relevant context(s), as outlined in the *cultural praxis of athletes’ careers paradigm* (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Second, the *scientist-practitioner model* (Shapiro, 2002) advocating for reciprocal relationships between research and practice was taken on board. Third, we took inspiration from the *context-driven practice* approach (see JSPA Special Issue, 2017 edited by Schinke & Stambulova) defined as “...practice informed by reciprocal interactions between consultants, clients, and the cultural/sub-cultural contexts they are parts of” (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017, p. 131). Forth, we used the *holistic athletic career model* (Wylleman et al., 2013) promoting *a whole person* and *a whole career* approaches and outlining stages and transitions in athletes’ athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, and financial developments. Fifth, we were inspired by *the holistic ecological approach* (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) advocating for *a whole environment* with micro- and macro-levels (e.g., club, federation), athletic and non-athletic domains (e.g., coaches, schoolmates)—all influencing athletes’ career development directly or indirectly.

We started the project by studying (whole) career experiences of Swedish handball players (Ekengren et al. 2018; Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, Carlsson, et al. 2020), proceeded with development and validation of the career-long psychological support system (from now the CPS-H) in

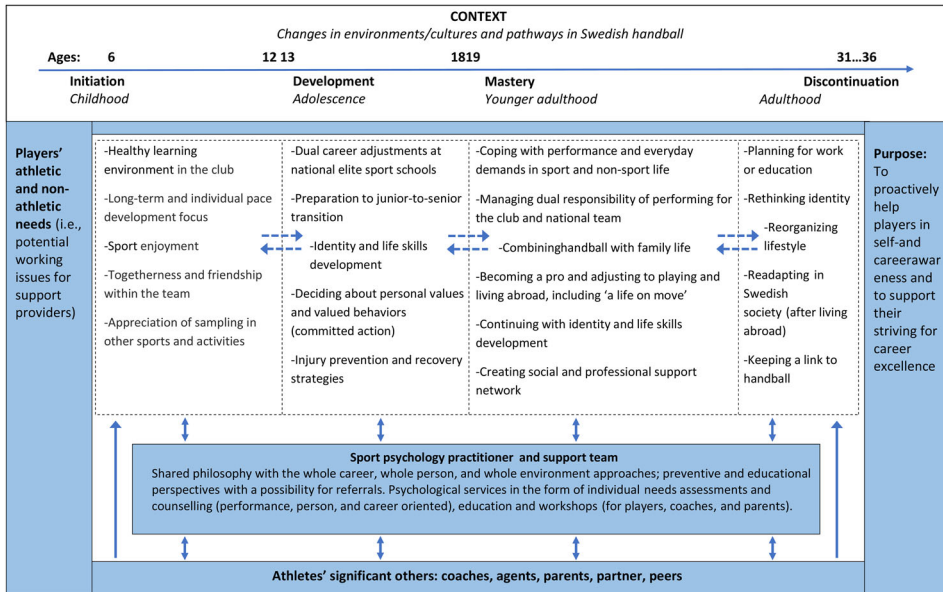


Figure 1. The career long psychological support services in Swedish handball (CPS-H) framework.

Swedish handball (i.e., the focus of this paper), which then was tested in (so far) one intervention study (Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, Ivarsson, et al. 2020).

Development and validation of the CPS-H

The CPS-H is developed as an applied framework grounded in career research within the Swedish handball context, inspired by theoretical and applied frameworks mentioned above, informed by efficient career assistance practice examples (from the literature), and complemented by applied experiences of the first author. First, a heuristic approach was used to sketch the initial version of the CPS-H. The heuristic process involves using different sources and creatively integrated them to form an attainable solution that can be further improved (Martens, 1987). Following the heuristic process, the initial version was discussed several times aiming to create a comprehensive but not “overloaded” framework. Second, we validated the CPS-H in focus groups with end-users (handball players, coaches and SPPs) and transformed the initial version into the validated CPS-H (see Figure 1). Below we briefly describe both the development and the validation processes.

Development of the initial version of the CPS-H

The aforementioned study of career experiences of professional Swedish handball players (both males and females) is presented in two papers. The

first paper (Ekengren et al., 2018) described players' careers stage-by-stage emphasizing changes in Swedish handball context and related changes in their athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational and financial developments outlined in the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013). The holistic athletic career model served as a prototype for consolidating the players' career experiences into *the empirical career model of Swedish professional handball players* (the ECM-H). The most useful aspects of the ECM-H that influenced development of the initial version of the CPS-H framework were (a) contextualized (handball-wise) initiation, development, mastery, and discontinuation career stages (e.g., in relation to age markers for each stage, handball, and educational environments Swedish players proceed through during their careers, professional opportunities available, athletic retirement timing), and (b) players' perceived needs and experiences in their athletic and non-athletic development at each stage. In the second research paper (Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, Ivarsson, et al., 2020) we focused on male and female players' career pathways. The gender differences in the pathways were found from the development career stage and onwards (e.g., more focus on education, less professional opportunities, and earlier athletic retirement in females), but it appeared unfeasible to incorporate them into the CPS-H without compromising coherence of the framework. We see this as both a limitation and a space for the CPS-H further development.

For this paper, by combining the research findings with insights from applied sport psychology/career assistance literature we consolidated the following basic notions that were the most useful for the CPS-H. In today's sport, athletes' careers are complex, intense, and dynamic. Therefore, players' career demands/challenges and corresponding needs change across the career stages and influence not only performance, but also health, lifestyle, well-being, and transition coping; athletes' mental health is considered as an important resource but also an outcome of healthy and successful career development (Henriksen, Storm et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2020). The CPS-H adopted *a proactive approach* focusing on helping athletes to increase awareness of current and forthcoming challenges, become more resourceful and adaptive, and prevent crisis-transitions and mental ill-health (Henriksen, Schinke et al., 2020; Hong & Coffee, 2018; Stambulova, 2017). In the proactive approach, *education* of all relevant stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents) is central and helps to reduce a need for clinical interventions and treatment. For example, athletes need assistance in developing life skills, balancing sport with other activities and life issues (e.g., education, family, work, recovery), in linking their past experiences with present situation, and perceived future (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2020; Torregrossa et al., 2020). We adopted *a whole*

person approach (i.e., athletic and non-athletic development) to follow athletes *over time* (i.e., across career stages) and *across the various environments* (e.g., club, national elite sport school) *and contexts* (e.g., sport, education, moving abroad). As result of this approach, the initial version of the CPS-H was structured as attempting to answer the following questions: *where* (changes in the contexts), *when* (ages, career stages), *what* (athletes' needs and potential working issues), *who* (support providers), *why* (philosophy shared by the stakeholders), and *how* (forms of support services).

Validation process of the initial CPS-H

Three focus groups were organized based on Krueger and Casey (2015) guidelines to collect stakeholders' feedback on the initial version of the CPS-H. *The players' focus group* involved three professional handball players with experiences from the youth national team; *the coaches' focus group* consisted of four elite and well-educated coaches with at least five years' experience at national elite sport schools and/or youth national teams; *the SPPs' focus group* was formed by three practitioners with a master's degree in sport psychology and currently working with elite athletes. The first author moderated all the focus groups using a design similar to Pehrson et al. (2017) when they validated the empirical model of the junior-to-senior transition in Swedish ice-hockey. This design included the following steps: (a) the moderator introduced himself, the aim of focus group and ethical issues, invited participants to briefly introduce themselves, (b) the moderator presented the CPS-H initial version and ideas behind it (e.g., the summary of the handball career study and the ECM-H, major applied approaches), (c) the participants were asked for their initial feedback on how do they like/dislike the idea and the CPS-H as a whole, including its different parts, (d) each participant received a task to mark the content of the CPS-H they agreed and disagreed with, and to add any comments or ideas, (e) the participants discussed their opinions within the group and helped the moderator to summarize the message/outcome of the focus group (their collective opinion about the CPS-H as a whole and revisions the group suggested). The moderator encouraged critical and strategic thinking (e.g., what more can be done, what is missing). Focus groups lasted between 60 (players) and 120 minutes, and the groups' discussions were recorded and then content analyzed together with written summaries. This analysis revealed that the participants did not focus much on the details of the CPS-H but mainly on the framework as a whole and on potential changes the CPS-H might bring to Swedish handball if approved and implemented at the national level. Two major themes, reflective of the focus group discussion, were identified: "It is time to move from a result

focus to a whole person approach” and “The CPS-H can be seen as a new map for Swedish handball”.

It is time to move from a result focus to a whole person approach. The participants in the focus groups (especially the players and the SPPs) emphasized that overestimating the significance of sport results creates unnecessary stress in the already stressed system of contemporary sport. As commented by the SPP1, “Many players feel bad because there is too much focus on results these days.” Player 1 echoed: “It’s only when you won that you have done something good.” Focusing mainly on sport performance (i.e., winning and losing), supporting early sport specialization, using selection procedures too early or with uncertain criteria were mentioned to describe “the unhealthy and irresponsible system valuing results as the main outcome of sport” (from the discussion of SPPs).

Discussions among the participants revealed that a different perspective is needed through the entire career with a focus on players as whole persons. For career stakeholders, the whole person approach implies perceiving players as people who play handball but also have non-sport interests and other activities in life, and who can use their handball career as a benefit or resource for a career after sport. The players suggested to pay more attention to helping athletes develop various life skills, especially career planning, stress and time management. Developing various life skills could be useful in searching for optimal life balance and wellbeing: “You can’t just think of handball all the time, then you’ll get overwhelmed. You need to find ways to refocus and to relax ... to let go of the result-focus” (Player 3). Life skills were also seen as useful in coping with transition from one environment to the next (e.g., from the local club to the national elite sport school or from Swedish club to the foreign professional club). The SPPs and the coaches agreed that during the initiation and development career stages (i.e., up to the transition to the senior level) a long-term development focus to support players’ enjoyment and continuation in handball should dominate and be shared by clubs, schools, and families. The players mentioned that enjoyment and fun should not be forgotten to counterbalance stressful life of an elite/professional player (e.g., enduring tournaments, performing for the club and the national team, playing abroad) even at the mastery career stage (i.e., when being senior players).

The CPS-H can be seen as a new map for Swedish handball. Moving further from deemphasizing results and emphasizing players as whole persons, the focus groups’ participants reflected on the dynamics of athletes’ needs across career stages, and how these dynamics might inform applied psychological work and cooperation between support providers. Here are some quotes from different supporters: “This [the CPS-H] helps to understand what the players’ needs are and when ... I find it most useful for describing

and coordinating shared duties, and also as a basis for good discussions” (SPP 2). “I think it’s right to have it as a part of the coach education provided by the Federation ... these ideas are linked to leadership ... open our eyes and make key issues visible” (Coach 1). “There’s a need for us [SPPs] to see and care for the whole person ... because it is of mutual interest that athletes cope successfully both in life and when performing” (SPP 3). The focus groups’ participants also recommended that the SHF should take a lead in accepting and implementing the CPS-H as a potential “new map for Swedish handball.”

Description of the validated CPS-H

The validated version of the CPS-H is presented in [Figure 1](#). It is structured as having several interrelated parts addressing the questions *where*, *when*, *what*, *who*, *why*, *how*, and *for which purpose*. The *purpose* of the CPS-H (see the right side of [Figure 1](#)) is to proactively help players in self- and career awareness and to support their striving for career excellence. In order to meet the purpose of the CPS-H, support providers should have a good comprehension of Swedish handball context, that is *where* athletes are “situated” at different career stages and in which cultures they are immersed (see the upper layer of [Figure 1](#)). At *the initiation stage* the players are typically in local clubs, play regional tournaments, often combine handball with other sports, study at regular schools, and training foci are on sport learning and enjoyment. At *the development stage*, new environments are involved (e.g., national elite sport schools for 16–19 years old with dual career programs) and new learning and performance opportunities/challenges appear (e.g., the SHF player education, national camps, youth national team, playing in double age category, higher level of tournaments). Entering *the mastery stage*, players strive to succeed first in the transition to the senior team and second, to a professional club. After coping with the junior-to-senior transition, the players find themselves in a league club, and some of them join the national team. It is also common for Swedish senior players to combine handball with studies at a university or with a part-time job. Players who succeed in their striving for a professional contract (especially males) move abroad (usually to Denmark or Germany) often for several years. Many of them are accompanied abroad by their partners, build families, and become parents. During *the discontinuation stage* players return home, readjust in Sweden, plan for the future, and then implement/correct these plans (e.g., come back to education, begin a vocational career, volunteer at local handball clubs). Level of career demands (e.g., physical, psychological, sport, and non-sport) and relevant stress level progress from the stage to stage increasing risks for

injuries, burnout, and other forms of compromised physical and mental health. Therefore, the *proactive* and *whole person* approaches should become more influential as careers progress and athletes are getting more aware and autonomous.

The environments and contexts athletes are involved in, require their adjustment and imply learning respective competencies, and accepting relevant cultures (e.g., national elite sport school culture, Swedish handball culture, culture of a professional club abroad). Players' movements through various environments/contexts mean that at the different *when* (i.e., the ages and career stages in the CPS-H) athletes might have partly similar and partly different challenges to deal with, and corresponding *needs of support*. Players' needs organized in the stage-by-stage manner is the central layer of the CPS-H, showing the *what* should be the foci of support providers and *when*. To navigate practitioners about potential working issues in supporting athletes' careers and to keep the framework parsimonious, only major needs (supported by focus groups' participants) are included in [Figure 1](#). The dotted lines between stages roughly outline players' normative transitions and indicate that career development is less linear than the framework implies, and that players might move back and forth in learning life and performance competencies (indicated also by arrows).

The bottom layer of [Figure 1](#) (linked by arrows to the central one) describes the *who* (SPPs, support team, athletes' significant others), the *why* (potentially shared philosophy of the support team with, e.g., the proactive, educational, and whole person approaches) and the *how* (forms of psychological services, e.g., individual consulting, group workshops, coaches' and parents' education) of the CPS-H.

Reflections and recommendations

In this paper we shared how the idea of a career-long psychological support service in Swedish handball was crystalized and how the CPS-H was developed and validated in three focus groups with potential end-users. We didn't find any examples in the literature that could be purely followed, and therefore, we took on board basic tenets on the cultural praxis of athletes' careers (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014), the scientist-practitioner model (e.g., Shapiro, 2002), the context-driven practice approach (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017), the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013), and the holistic ecological approach (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), complemented by recent focus on athletes' mental health in relation to their career development (Henriksen, Schinke et al., 2020; Schinke et al., 2018; Stambulova, 2017). We also relied on good practice examples from career assistance literature (e.g., Torregrossa et al., 2020). These mentioned

models and frameworks were combined with major findings from our research project on career development in Swedish handball (Ekengren et al. 2018; Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, Carlsson, et al. 2020) to heuristically develop the initial version of the CPS-H. The first sketch of the CPS-H was discussed, challenged, and revised several times within the author group until we were basically satisfied with the structure. We think that the structure of the CPS-H based on answering the questions *where, when, what, who, why, how, and for which purpose* is easy to understand and this was confirmed by the focus group participants. A difficult aspect in filling in all parts of the structure was to find a “proper” balance between the holistic (overall) view of the players’ careers and the details about the content of each part (e.g., how much should we include about the context or how detailed should the description of players’ needs be). Keeping in mind differences between athletes in terms of their personalities and identities, their environments, networks and life circumstances, we stayed with an intermediate degree of detailedness. We presented clusters of needs (e.g., preparing for the junior-to-senior transition) to give support providers a direction, but at the same time stimulate them to search for more information from and about the players they work with. We mean that practitioners using the CPS-H are expected to be able “to zoom” into different parts of the framework and enrich relevant content, based on their experiences and expertise. The focus group participants suggested a *map* metaphor for the CPS-H, and this is a challenge for support providers to apply it to the respective *territory* (i.e., concrete cases and circumstances).

Despite the benefits we see for implementation of the CPS-H (e.g., proactively prepare players for forthcoming challenges/coping and minimizing or preventing crisis-type situations and mental health issues) there are some limitations related to this process. First, support providers (SPPs, members of the support team, athletes’ significant others) should be educated about the CPS-H and develop a shared support philosophy. Second, there are organizational challenges in implementation of the CPS-H, for example, who should keep the whole *map* in mind and be responsible for players’ smooth transitions between the different environments/contexts? The SHF currently plans to incorporate the CPS-H into their player and coach education, create the professional development course for players’ support providers working at different levels of the system (e.g., at national elite sport schools, clubs, national youth, and senior teams) with the first author as a leader of these developments. Third, as recommended by the focus group participants, the CPS-H can be further expanded: “What happens when they turn 36? That is also life, and career continues” (SPP 3); “Can we create a ‘recycling system’? For example, connecting retired players to work at national elite sport schools and youth national camps. They

have ... a lot to share” (Coach 1). Fourth, the CPS-H also needs testing. We have recently completed one intervention study addressing mastery stage players’ needs that shows promising results (Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, Ivarsson, et al., 2020). More interventions testing the CPS-H and its various parts are welcomed.

The CPS-H is a context-specific framework, but we think it can be useful for the readers to look at their services from the career-long and developmental perspective. This means to position their clients in relation to career stages and roughly anticipate their potential (current) needs, keeping in mind linking these needs to the player’s past experiences and perceived future. The proactive, whole person, whole career, whole environment and educational approaches are well-known, and if thoughtfully combined might bring a new quality to the psychological support services. Specific techniques in *how* to provide the services depend on many factors (e.g., the client, the SPP’s professional repertoire and experiences), and therefore, we recommend only the direction to follow. This direction is from working more with athletes’ environments to promote a mastery climate, enjoyment, support of other interests, de-emphasizing results (at the initiation career stage) to providing direct SPP’s support to athletes addressing their performance, lifestyle, dual career, and personal needs at the later career stages helping them to become more resourceful and autonomous (e.g., Henriksen, Storm et al., 2019). We have provided some career stage-specific recommendations complementing the CPS-H description and [Figure 1](#) below.

At the initiation stage, it is important to ensure that young athletes’ significant others understand the players’ need in a safe and healthy club environment and know how to organize it. Youth sport in Sweden relies mainly on volunteer coaches (often from parents), and to educate these coaches is a task for SPPs. To maintain players’ interest in sport and increase the likelihood of children returning to the next training, enjoyment of sport and discovering new skills should be at the forefront of the coaches’ practices. For example, observing the club environment the SPP might question the coaches: “In what way do you support the players’ need for togetherness and friendship within the team?.” Discussions about such a question might counter-balance performance focus and lead to including more playful activities in the club, facilitating children’s communication and team building.

At the development stage, dealing with two major (and often overlapping) transitions is the core of the players’ needs. First, in the early part of the development career stage, is the dual career transition to the national elite sport school. This transition brings the players new challenges (e.g., moving away from home and beginning an independent living, doubled training

loads from having club and school practices, higher educational standard), but also new support resources (e.g., professional coaches, experts, including SPPs available, studying sport specific subjects, good facilities, state-funding), which student-athletes need to learn how to utilize. The second major transition is the junior-to-senior transition, and youth players must work hard to prepare themselves physically, psychologically, and socially to be a part of a senior team (e.g., Passos et al., 2017; Pehrson et al., 2017). This period is also important for the development of players' identity and personal values. Life skills (e.g., career planning, goal setting) and value training can be instrumental for helping players with this involving individual or group discussion of themes like: "Why do you play handball?," "What a handball player you would like to be?," "What do you value the most in your life now?," "How do you see your life in the future?." The work around these themes should then proceed along the whole career.

At the mastery stage, the support providers must take into account the more diverse (than at the previous stages) career pathways taken by the players. After graduation from the national (or local) elite sport school, some players move to purely club-based development or continue dual career at the university level, while others search for and get professional contracts abroad and move there for several years. The best players also have a double responsibility to play for their clubs and the national team. The mastery stage is an intense and stressful period in life for all the players, when they try to realize their potential in handball and initiate important changes in their non-sport life (e.g., creating own families, becoming parents). Therefore, support providers might have in mind to: (a) help athletes to balance their lifestyle (e.g., stress and time management), (b) update their career plan and make career decisions, (c) prepare for the transition abroad and re-adjustment when moving back home, and (d) preliminary retirement planning. To meet each player's individual needs the coordination and communication between different members of the player's support team (e.g., SPP, clinical psychologist, nutritionist, physiotherapist) is central at this stage (Wylleman, 2019).

At the discontinuation stage, the players begin their post-sport life (e.g., education, vocational career, changes in the lifestyle and family) and need support from SPPs in making decisions and plans, re-thinking their identity, searching for new life meanings, and using in life what they have learnt in sport. Often such psychological support is not available because the SHF mainly invests into active athletes. The players' former clubs only expect "paying back" from retired players (e.g., volunteer coaching) and are unaware that athletes might struggle with career and life issues. The CPS-H advocates for continuous psychological support patronized by the SHF

(e.g., for one-two years after the athletic career termination based on athletic retirement research; Stambulova et al., 2007) to prevent crisis-type athletic retirement and facilitate players' meaningful contribution to the society in a new role (e.g., Schinke et al., 2018).

To sum up, the CPS-H can guide the support providers in helping athletes throughout their careers to better understand themselves, their sport and life issues, and strive for career excellence. Although the CPS-H is contextualized in regard to a specific sport and culture, we believe some lessons can be applicable across countries and sport boarders. Using the CPS-H as a pioneer example, we encourage practitioners to adopt a developmentally-oriented-type-of-thinking about their athlete-clients. This means, for example, (a) to be aware about athletes' normative career transitions and prepare them in advance, (b) to constantly work on helping athletes to develop resources to deal with their current and forthcoming challenges, (c) to follow athletes' development in and outside of sport, and help them to balance sport and non-sport life, (d) to work with athletic environments helping relevant stakeholders to coordinate their efforts to optimally support athletes' performance, well-being, and development. We do hope that the CPS-H will provoke discussion in the field, inspire the readers to challenge our ideas and possibly create analogous frameworks helpful in working with their clients and within their respective contexts.

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