
**Leisure Lifestyle and Dropout:
Exploring the Experience of Amateur Athletes in Competitive Sport**

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between amateur athletes' leisure lifestyle and dropout. Athletes often neglect aspects of their life outside of sport, as training, practicing, and competing takes up most of their time. Having an unbalanced leisure lifestyle can have negative effects on well-being. To examine this issue, a multiple qualitative case study approach was utilized. Participants chosen for this study were ten ex-competitive amateur athletes from Canada, who competed at a high-performance level of sport (i.e., senior level), and dropped out prior to reaching their goal of reaching higher elite levels of play. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about their background in sport, their experience coping with challenges and dropout, and their leisure lifestyle when playing competitively. Results indicate that athletes had a less than optimal leisure lifestyle prior to dropping out, casual leisure was used as a coping mechanism in this stage, and they perceived their sport positively when it was better balanced with other valued activities. Elite athletes participating in casual leisure activities are able to balance sport with other important aspects in their lives, potentially leading to a more positive perceptions of their involvement in sports, putting them less at risk of dropping out.

Keywords: leisure lifestyle, serious leisure, casual leisure, dropout, athlete well-being

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Introduction

Individuals are said to be serious about sport when it becomes so important to them that they are willing to commit all the time and effort required to be their best, at the expense of other interests (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). However, research has demonstrated that an unbalanced leisure lifestyle (e.g., between sport and other interests) can have negative effects on well-being and quality of life (Stebbins, 2001a). Understanding the effects of the perception of balance between sport and other activities of interest is especially important to consider in stages preceding dropout, as this is the time where individuals may begin to move away from an active and healthy lifestyle (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012). The benefits of being physically active include: lowering risks of cardiovascular disease, type-2 diabetes, obesity, various cancers, injuries and falls, and mental health issues (Miles, 2007).

Thus, the effect of leisure lifestyle and dropout requires examination. More specifically, the relationship between leisure lifestyle and dropout will be examined from ten ex-competitive amateur athletes from Canada. This will constitute a significant contribution to the literature, as the athletes' perspective from a leisure point of view has yet to be acknowledged within this context.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between amateur athletes' leisure lifestyle and dropout. In order to gain insight on this topic, the following questions will need to be answered: (a) do amateur athletes perceive their leisure lifestyle as optimal prior to dropping out?; (b) how is casual leisure utilized by amateur athletes during their sport career?; and (c) how does an amateur athletes' leisure lifestyle affect their perception of sport?

Literature Review

Dropout & Transitions

Dropout in sport refers to athletes voluntarily terminating their sport career before reaching their full potential (Alfermann, 1995). This description is relevant for this study, as the topic being examined is amateur athletes who had the goal of reaching elite levels (e.g. semi-professional, professional, National, and Olympic teams) of play and withdrew themselves from competitive sport before reaching that goal. Dropout is often related to

athletes lacking control over certain situations (e.g. getting cut from teams, conflict with coaches) and having feelings of failure (Butt & Molnar, 2009), which distinguishes it from the term “retirement” (Wyleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004).

Moreover, voluntary dropout decisions can be influenced by transitions (Kadlicik & Flemr, 2008). Transitions in sport are described as turning phases faced regularly by athletes, and often take place between stages of development, specialization, and mastery (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). However, athletes perceive the transition from junior to senior level sports (e.g., going from local competitive teams to National or Olympic teams) as the most difficult (Stambulova et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been said that once athletes leave sport, they have the freedom to pursue valued goals and activities outside of sport, as they no longer have dense training schedules and high performance demands (Boiche & Sarrazin, 2009).

Optimal Leisure Lifestyle

Leisure lifestyles can be optimal or less than optimal in different situations. An optimal leisure lifestyle is what individuals should strive for as it can have positive effects on well-being and quality of life (Stebbins, 2005). Stebbins (2000) defined an optimal leisure lifestyle as “the deeply satisfying pursuit, during free time, of one or more substantial and absorbing forms of serious leisure, complemented by a judicious amount of casual leisure” (p. 189). This encompasses the participation in leisure activities that individually, and in combination, realizes ones human potential and self-fulfillment (Stebbins, 2005). Moreover, it is possible for people to engage in exciting, but less profound, casual leisure by taking part in social activities (e.g., going out with friends). However, casual leisure activities are too superficial to be the basis of a way of living, and therefore cannot be characterized as a lifestyle (Stebbins, 2005).

Serious Leisure

The first component of an optimal leisure lifestyle is serious leisure. Elkington and Stebbins (2014) defined serious leisure as the “pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (p. 3). This is representative of the relationship between competitive athletes and their sport. These activities are an opportunity for regeneration, self-expression, enhancing self-identity, and self-fulfillment (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Serious leisure offers benefits to its pursuers such as meeting people, making new friends, a feeling of belonging, becoming part of a social world (Stebbins, 2001b), and positive effects on well-being (Heo & Lee, 2010; Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). However, serious leisure has its costs. Disappointment felt by participants when playing below personal expectations (e.g., losing important games, missing scoring opportunities), tensions between controversial goals or priorities (e.g., attending class instead of a game), experiencing stage fright, prolonged concentration, and intense preparation are all costs of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001a).

Serious Leisure and Central Life Interest

Elkington and Stebbins (2014) have indicated that serious leisure can become the central component of an amateur athletes lifestyle and therefore becomes their central life interest. Central life interest is defined as “that portion of a person’s total life in which energies are invested in both physical/intellectual activities and in positive emotional states” (Dubin, 1992, p. 41). Dubin (1992) said athletes who are involved in a central life interest choose a goal or goals to direct their energy towards in an activity (e.g. sport), and direct their attention towards developing and perfecting the means to achieve the goal(s). This can be exemplified by amateur athletes who will dedicate much of their time to training and practicing than actual playing time (Dubin, 1992). In this particular study, it can also be related to athletes with the goal of reaching elite levels of play in sport.

Casual Leisure

The second component of an optimal leisure lifestyle is casual leisure. According to Elkington and Stebbins (2014), if there is to be self-fulfillment, identity enhancement, and self-expression, one must engage in serious leisure over casual leisure. These activities are usually less substantial and offer no opportunity for a career, as does serious leisure (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). However, casual leisure is still an important aspect of an optimal leisure lifestyle (Stebbins, 2001b). Elkington and Stebbins (2014) defined casual leisure as an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (p. 18). Casual leisure essentially represents leisure activities falling outside the realm of serious leisure activities (Stebbins, 2001b).

There are several types of casual leisure activities, such as play (e.g., dabbling), relaxation (e.g., napping), passive entertainment (e.g., watching TV), active entertainment (e.g., party games), social conversation, sensory stimulation (e.g., sightseeing), and non-career volunteering, some of which may be experienced at the

same time (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Despite the different types of casual leisure, they all share a common feature: hedonism (Stebbins, 2001b). Stebbins (2001b) identified benefits associated with casual leisure, namely creativity and discovery (e.g., making new sounds on an instrument), edutainment (e.g., educational media consumption), regeneration or recreation (e.g., between intense or serious leisure activities), maintaining interpersonal relationships (e.g., interaction with friends), and positive well-being and quality of life. Opportunities to regenerate should therefore be taken if one wishes to accomplish life's obligations, and serious leisure pursuers should enjoy casual leisure moments (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Extending Benefits of Casual Leisure

The benefits of casual leisure extend beyond those mentioned above. Hedonic value has resulted in escapism or the motivation to leave unpleasant situations. Hutchinson and Kleiber (2005) examined the benefits of casual leisure on well-being in difficult life circumstances, and determined that casual leisure can contribute to self-protection, restoring a sense of self, and growth-oriented change. They demonstrated that casual leisure's contribution to self-protection allowed individuals to distance themselves from stressors. It helped with immediate coping during persistently stressful life situations. It contributed to self-restoration by restoring valued self-perceptions (i.e., helped people make efforts to take care of themselves). This increased perceptions of competence, feelings of accomplishment, and sense of control over the situation they were in. It also developed growth-oriented change by increasing appreciation of the moment, creating stronger relationships with others in similar situations, and developed personal strength (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2005). In this study, the difficult circumstances being examined will be in the transitions of an athletic career.

The above literature review has demonstrated both the benefits and risks associated with serious and casual leisure activities. Nonetheless, the relationship between leisure lifestyle and dropout has yet to be explored from the perspective of athletes, which warrants further inquiry, and affirms this study will consist of a significant contribution to the existing literature in leisure and sport.

Methodology

The focus of this study is on amateur athletes' leisure lifestyle prior to dropping out, the utilization of the casual leisure component of a leisure lifestyle, and the impact of leisure lifestyle on the perception of sport. In the hopes of better understanding this issue, a

multiple qualitative case study research design was utilized, and ten cases were chosen.

Yin (2009) affirms that case studies are great for answering “how” and “why” type questions and are used to gain in-depth and holistic understanding of a specific phenomenon or case. This approach suits the exploratory nature of the study and the use of a constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Using multiple case studies also enables comparison, which will help “clarify whether an emergent finding is simply idiosyncratic to a single case or consistently replicated by several cases” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p.27). Baxter and Jack (2008) affirm that this type of study is generally “considered robust and reliable” (p. 550).

Sample

The ten participants (i.e. cases) for this study represented different sports, as there were six hockey players, one bobsledder, one martial artist, one soccer player and one swimmer. The majority of the participants (i.e. hockey players) were chosen based on familiarity, as two of the researchers played competitive hockey themselves. Thomas (2011) characterizes this as a local knowledge case study, and affirms it will provide “intimate knowledge and ample opportunity for informed, in-depth analysis” (p. 514). Exploring other sports proved to be beneficial as well, as it demonstrated the relevance and common occurrence of the issue in sports other than hockey. The selection criteria were as follows: the participants were from Canada, they played sport for a minimum of ten years, they had played a high performance stream of sport, they terminated their sport careers prior to reaching their goal of reaching elite levels of play, and they no longer participate in any form of competitive sport (e.g., university or collegiate, senior level, semi-professional, professional). These criteria added to the quality of the research by properly setting the contextual limits of the analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Participants consisted of nine males and one female aged between 21 and 52 years of age and each of them met the abovementioned criterion of selection for the study.

Interviews - Procedure

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews (i.e., one with each of the participants). The semi-structured format of the interviews gave the researchers the opportunity to guide the conversation, ensure extended discussion, and gave the participant the occasion to provide more information on the subject at hand (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured guide was composed of four main categories with eight general questions, which pertained to the participants’ background

(e.g., can you tell me about your career in sport?), coping habits and dropout (e.g., was there anything that helped you during hard times in your career?), and leisure lifestyle (e.g., what other activities did you do during your sport career?). Sub-questions and probes then differed depending on the participant's answers. The guide was developed, reviewed, and edited by each researcher. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Through personal connection, participants were sent an email in regards to their interest in participating in the study.

Statistical analysis

As the researcher guided participants through the questions, it was anticipated that relevant and interrelated topics would emerge within each interview. Therefore, the opportunity was taken to conduct a thematic analysis on the transcribed interviews using NVivo version 10. Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). All six of Braun and Clarke's (2006) "Phases of thematic analysis" (p. 87) were utilized, as the research team familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed the themes, defined and named the themes, and finally produced the report. To ensure the rigor of this study, peer debriefing and member checking was utilized (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Finally, the findings were organized under three general themes: perception of leisure lifestyle preceding dropout, utilization of casual leisure, and leisure lifestyle and perception of sport.

Results

Perception of Leisure Lifestyle Preceding Dropout

One of the struggles that cases indicated was their difficulty to maintain a balanced leisure lifestyle between sport and the other aspects or activities of interest in their life. When asked to discuss their lifestyle as a competitive athlete and the perceived balance in this area, it became evident that sport consumed most of their free time. Cases indicated the difficulty in having a balance between the serious leisure activity they practiced and casual leisure activities. They expressed the difficulty in living an optimal leisure lifestyle while playing competitive sport because of the amount of time they spent training and playing their sport. Participants' lifestyle became less than optimal as they often neglected casual leisure activities and other values they had outside of sport to pursue their serious leisure activity. Therefore, as a result of the high demands required

to play competitively in amateur sport led to a perceived unbalanced leisure lifestyle prior to dropping out, as described in the following quotes:

Hockey definitely had a bigger part of my life than lets say family or friends or stuff like that [...] I think in any situation anybody that plays [Junior] hockey just to be able to get to the next level, I think its hard to have a balanced lifestyle. [...] I don't think there's a balanced lifestyle possible. (Case 1)

Working out, going on the ice everyday, I didn't have time for anything else. So then you realize "my life is not balanced" [...] You realize that, "I have put so much energy into this, it's not really going anywhere anymore". Even if you tried really hard and you get a scholarship, it's still around hockey. (Case 2)

I was so tired the rest of the time that I didn't really have time for anything [...] I was putting too much into hockey [...] So definitely not balanced at that point and I had to rectify that. (Case 3)

[...] when you go into a sport like bobsleigh and you go over seas for many months at a time it really becomes just sport number one. Everything else is relegating number two. If you want to do bobsleigh, it is your life [...]. (Case 7)

Swimming was 50 percent of my life and everything else in my life had to share the other 50 percent [...] Balance was not present for the most part of my career. (Case 9)

In addition to participants stating that sport took up most of their time, as the level of competition got higher, the social aspect of casual leisure was neglected the most. Not only was it the most neglected, but also, it was the most significant and important aspect of casual leisure that was neglected by participants during their competitive sport career:

Often I had to miss out on things with friends to go to a game two hours away and stuff like that [...] As hockey got more difficult I felt like I had to put more into it if I wanted to succeed. But missing out on a lot of stuff with friends and fun times with them helped me make the decision to quit hockey. (Case 4)

I liked playing all sorts of sport for fun but hockey slowly took over when it became more competitive [...] Same thing for friends. I had friends at school, friends on my street, and friends at the cottage but when I got more serious I only saw my friends from hockey. (Case 5)

Some participants also stated how the social aspect of casual leisure might have been beneficial in helping them maintain a balanced leisure lifestyle during their sport career. Thus, perhaps leading to a perceived optimal leisure lifestyle as a competitive amateur athlete:

Maybe if I lived at home. Maybe that would've been better. Being with my friends, with my girlfriend, I would've been able to have a more balanced lifestyle. Rather than just doing hockey. (Case 1)

If I would've had more time for friends and not just have go to play hockey all the time, I probably would've kept playing a bit longer [...] It would've been more fun because I lost some friends that didn't play hockey with me, just because I didn't have time for them. (Case 4)

In summary, participants were heavily involved in the serious leisure component of a leisure lifestyle at the expense of casual leisure activities. As a result, participants perceived their leisure lifestyle as being unbalanced and less than optimal prior to dropping out of competitive sport. The demands of the sport became increasingly high once participants reached or attempted to reach competitive senior levels of play, it required more time invested into the sport and less time for activities of interest outside of sport.

Utilization of Casual Leisure

Despite perceiving their leisure lifestyle as being unbalanced between their sport and activities of interest outside of sport, and struggling to make the transition from junior to senior level sport, cases recognized the importance of occasionally partaking in casual leisure activities. Cases primarily took part in the social aspect of casual leisure even though it was one of the major components they had to sacrifice when playing competitively. Thus, despite neglecting social relationships outside the sport context, the occasional times they did partake in the social aspect of casual leisure, it did prove to be beneficial. As participants reflected, they acknowledged that social support was crucial in helping them with the difficulties and challenges in their sport career. Casual leisure opportunities, such as social conversation, had sometimes changed the way they perceived the situation and allowed them to perceive the moment differently:

Definitely the billet family I lived with [...] They were really helpful for sure. Then obviously my parents were. My dad was right beside me when I got traded [...] The other good part was that I was moving into a house with five other guys from the team. So that was cool in a way 'cause I got to live with other players on the team. (Case 1)

My father knew that I hadn't made the team and he was the one that was most of all in my hockey career. He was there all my tryouts and he saw pain in my eyes when I didn't make it [...] Growing up my dad always told me that there was more to life than hockey. For the longest time I didn't believe him. I thought hockey was my ticket to everything [...] It made it easier for me to let go. Essentially I realized that what my dad had been telling me for years was true and that I would miss hockey but I wouldn't die without it. (Case 3)

When I stopped the first time my mom was like your dad's friend has a karate school. So she said maybe just take a little break from it and you can return after that. So I was happy about that and I got that break I needed. (Case 8)

[...] obviously I had a lot of support from my parents and from my girlfriend [...] Especially when it got tough. My parents were always very supportive [...]. (Case 9)

Furthermore, participants utilized the social aspect of casual leisure as a tool for escapism during difficult times, as it allowed them to relieve themselves from the stressors they faced. By engaging in social activities and passive entertainment activities as a group, it allowed them to take a temporary break from thinking about sport and helped them maintain their well-being during the difficult moments in their sport career:

[...] hanging out with friends because we would never talk about hockey so it would always be fun when we hung out [...] It gave me a chance to stop thinking about hockey so much and shift my focus to other things. (Case 4)

Going to the cottage was my favorite thing to do during the off-season. It helped me get away from training and decompress after a long season. It's just too bad I didn't have that during hockey season [...] it gave me the chance to spend time with friends and family. (Case 5)

[...] my friends and I would try and do once a week we'd get together and just chill and do something relaxing like hang out, go for a walk, go for dinner, just chill out and do nothing [...] Just to get talking with friends definitely helped me de-stress [...] Even though I wouldn't get to see them all the time we would make the effort once in a while just to hang out. (Case 10)

In addition, some participants mentioned the sensory stimulation (i.e. travelling) aspect of casual leisure becoming important to them, at times during and after their decision to drop out of competitive sport. During their sport career, travelling became a coping mechanism and a useful tool for escapism as well. However, as mentioned, travelling was helpful after withdrawing from competitive sport as well. After withdrawing from his competitive sport career, one case stated that he was able to reconnect with his

interest in travelling, as it helped him cope with that moment of leaving sport and made him realize he had made the right decision:

I didn't do many activities at all. Something I guess you could say I sacrificed, that right now is a big part of my life, is travelling [...] I remember more the moment that made me think I made the right decision. Like school, starting to travel, reconnecting with friends [...] doing something with my life that matters. (Case 2)

[...] during my bobsledding time there was a lot of travelling for the sport was fun. Travelling for the sport was fun. It was the travelling and going places and tracks and different countries in Europe that was fun. It kept my mind off things and what was going on. (Case 7)

Some participants also expressed how the practice of sports, other than their main practiced competitive sport, became helpful when trying to cope with difficulties. They were able to participate in many sports casually during their competitive career, which helped maintain their well-being at times:

[...] when I had difficult moments, I would do more sports. But instead I would integrate more sports, like racquetball, a bit of hockey, I started lifting weights [...] I have to say at that time I did a lot of cycling and did competitions in cycling. That was another aspect of sport I let go [...] and it started to come back slowly. (Case 6)

In high school I would play on some of the other sports teams and stuff like that and that was for me, a way to do something different than soccer [...] I was not playing on competitive teams so I was able to do that and just enjoy it and have fun [...] It was a de-stressor kind of thing and I really enjoyed it because it was different than soccer. (Case 10)

In summary, despite having to sacrifice participating in casual leisure activities, the occasional times they did participate in such activities, it was utilized as a coping mechanism, helped with regeneration, helped change their perception of the moment,

allowed them to escape the stress of the moment, and helped them maintain their well-being. This was particularly thanks to the social aspect of casual leisure.

Leisure Lifestyle and Perception of Sport

After dropping out of competitive sport, cases indicated that their lifestyle was perceived as much more balanced, thus, closer to an optimal leisure lifestyle. They struck a balance between the many aspects and values in their life, ultimately leading to positive effects on their well-being. Dropping out of competitive sport and continuing to play casually or recreationally has therefore changed their perception of the sport they practiced, since it is better balanced with the other aspects of their life. Now, cases have renewed their enjoyment of their sport based on how it is incorporated into their lifestyle, as the following quotes suggest:

Now I'm having fun. The only reason I play is because its fun. If playing in beer leagues or men's leagues wasn't fun, I wouldn't be playing. That's why I stopped playing [Junior] hockey. It wasn't fun anymore [...] At the end of my career I was like "I don't want to go play tonight, I don't want to go to practice". Its like it was redundant to me. But now, I look forward to the Thursday night game. (Case 1)

[...] now that its way more balanced into my life, now its fun times, I play hockey with friends and that's it. Nothing more to it and that what I want, just to have fun. (Case 2)

Definitely a lot more importance was put on hockey during [Junior] years so it did take more out of you. I wasn't tired per se but the year off really refreshed me [...] Now its just you know for the guys and seeing them at the rink and enjoying the sport for what it is. (Case 3)

[...] now its really great and I feel balanced. I'm swimming and trying hard to swim because I'm enjoying it now. (Case 9)

I was eventually able to slow down on that level and just now play more for fun and just the odd time I pick up a game with some friends. I still enjoy the sport. (Case 10)

Additionally, participants stated how their lifestyle now has allowed them to incorporate more time for casual leisure activities. This has contributed to maintaining their well-being and a positive perception of the sport they once played competitively. They expressed their enjoyment of playing the sport as a hobbyist and at recreational level now that it is better incorporated with their other activities of interest:

My perception of the game was that I was always trying to look at every negative aspect to try and justify [leaving the sport]. I wanted to completely eliminate it so that I could go and just play with friends in beer leagues. Just for fun. No pressure. And balance the other things that I never really had in my life [...] Include family and friends to a good degree, [...] Include travelling to a good degree [...]. (Case 2)

I really got bored with hockey [...] It became a chore for me to play and I had no interest in it anymore [...] Now I love playing just recreationally. I feel like I take it more serious now than I did when I played competitively. I can do whatever I want, hang out with friends, have time for school, work, travel, whatever, and still play once in a while. (Case 4)

[...] now I play for fun with the buddies. It's a good time and there is no pressure. Sometimes it can be hard because you see yourself deteriorating, like you are getting worse and worse, but everybody is in the same boat so it's not a big deal [...] we are all just there to have fun. (Case 5)

I try to tell myself to look for the things that I enjoy. So I'm piecing it together and I guess because that's my focus, that's sort of my priority; if I'm swimming it's allowed me to strike a well-being. (Case 9)

Now that I don't play at that level I'm able to enjoy other activities. I love tennis recreationally, doing other sports, running [...] Going for walks and other things that I never really did before [...] I think it's nice to have a balance in activities [...] I have a different outlook. (Case 10)

In summary, although athletes have dropped out from playing competitive sport and their goal of reaching elite levels of play, they now play at recreational level. This has allowed them to have a renewed enjoyment of their sport and as a result of living a more perceived optimal leisure lifestyle. Now, they are able to partake in casual leisure activities while playing the sport they once invested much of their time and effort to.

Discussion and Conclusion

Dropout is often related to athletes' lack of control over certain situations (e.g., getting cut from teams, conflict with coaches), and having feelings of failure (Butt & Molnar, 2009). Participants expressed that being cut from teams, conflicting with coaches and organization members, being out-skilled, and lack of playing time as some of the factors increasing their desire to drop out of competitive play, which supports Butt and Molnar's (2009) previous findings. Kadlicik and Flemr (2008) also stated that voluntary dropout decisions could be influenced by transitions, especially the transition from junior to senior level sport (Stambulova et al., 2009). Participants of this study all recognized the difficulties associated with adapting to this transition and ultimately chose to dropout either at this transition or after briefly playing in competitive senior level sport.

Findings of this study suggest that serious leisure pursuers in sport are in a central life interest as they were fully invested physically and mentally to their activity (Dubin, 1992). However, this was one of the factors that lead to an unbalanced leisure lifestyle, as athletes often neglected valued interests and activities outside of sport (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014), particularly social relationships. This also came at the expense of athletes' well-being and quality of life when playing sport competitively as they were unable to perceive their leisure lifestyle as optimal (Stebbins, 2001a). Findings also support the costs of serious leisure, as participants felt disappointment at times from not playing as well as they could have, and were required to give extensive periods of mental and physical preparation to their activity if they wished to succeed and reach their goal of playing in elite sport (Stebbins, 2001a).

The casual leisure component of an optimal leisure lifestyle was sacrificed as a result of the heavy investment required in amateur athletes' serious leisure activity. However, the occasional participation in casual leisure activities such as travelling, other sports outside of the main practiced sport, and social conversation with friends and family proved to be effective coping mechanisms in this difficult circumstance. Casual leisure activities were useful for regeneration purposes, giving a buffer to stressors and

helpful when seeking escapism (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2005; Stebbins, 2001b). Thus, Hutchinson and Kleiber's (2005) belief that casual leisure during difficult life circumstances contributes to self-protection, restoring a sense of self and growth-oriented change was evident throughout the analysis. Social relationships in particular, are utilized as a coping mechanism during difficult moments for a competitive amateur athlete, which demonstrates a transferred application of Hutchinson and Kleiber's (2005) findings from their population to athletes.

Furthermore, it was demonstrated that serious leisure pursuers in sport are typically required to live a less than optimal leisure lifestyle as the demands of their activity increase. However, after dropping out of competitive sport, amateur athletes are now able to pursue activities of interest, such as various casual leisure activities, which is consistent with Boiche and Sarrazin's (2009) findings. Results from this study extend on these previous findings by discovering that athletes have a renewed enjoyment of their serious leisure activity (i.e. sport) after eventually returning to play recreationally. They have learned to incorporate their interests in activities outside of sport while enjoying to their play serious leisure activity recreationally or under a more casual form. Thus, they are able to include a generous amount of casual leisure while continuing to be involved in their serious leisure activity now as a hobbyist, and lead a perceived optimal leisure lifestyle (Stebbins, 2000). Including a generous amount of casual leisure appeared to positively influence the participants' perception of their leisure lifestyle, and allowed each of them to continue to play. Participating in this capacity promotes an active and healthy lifestyle without having a negative outlook on sport or physical activity, which could increase the participants' well-being and quality of life.

Athletes are considered to be some of the healthiest, as they are very active individuals. However, participants in this study reported having negative experiences while pursuing competitive amateur sport as serious leisure and ultimately chose to drop out in search of a better leisure lifestyle balance. Ironically, the perceived unbalanced leisure lifestyle may have driven these athletes away from activities that kept them very active and healthy. It is difficult to affirm whether a better leisure lifestyle balance could help amateur athletes stay in competitive sport, but it is evident that this was related to an improved perception of the sport they practiced. Participants needed to withdraw themselves completely from playing competitively in order to achieve a better balance, but once balance was achieved, they could enjoy participating in the sport recreationally, now as a hobbyist.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. First, only ten cases were analyzed for this study. Second, six case narratives were very similar, i.e. represented men's hockey in Canada. Although this provided a manageable data set, it also narrowed the scope of the study and limited the transferability of the findings. Third, the constructivist paradigm and nature of this study suggests that bias may exist. This, in addition to the familiarity of the researchers with the context of six of the participants, suggests future researchers might interpret the data differently.

Further inquiry on athletes' perceptions of their leisure lifestyle during their amateur athletic career is required. Future research should therefore examine how coaches, trainers, and policy makers develop amateur athletes and Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) frameworks, and the significance of amateur athletes' values outside of sport during their athletic career. The inclusion of casual leisure to help prevent competitive athletes from dropping out, the measurement of perceived casual leisure benefits, and best practices for facilitating casual leisure participation in competitive sporting programs should also be explored. A first look at how this can be achieved based on this study's results is to look at athletes' training and playing schedules to identify where casual leisure participation can take place for athletes. Athletes' schedules are increasingly demanding at higher levels of competitive sport and thus, require a closer examination at how many days athletes train, how many matches there are (i.e., per week, month, etc.) and how much time is left for athletes to partake in activities of interest outside the sport context.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that competitive levels of sport can potentially be harmful to amateur athletes in competitive sport. Pursuing competitive sport at senior levels means increasing demands in time dedicated to sport and the sacrifice of values outside of sport, which ultimately leads to a perceived unbalanced leisure lifestyle. Neglecting components outside of sport, such as casual leisure activities, can lead to a negative perception of the sport, despite the benefits these types of activities have to offer. As a result, this can potentially increase the desire for amateur athletes to dropout of competitive levels of play. Moreover, pursuing sport recreationally as a hobbyist can potentially be more effective in keeping people active. Athletes playing recreationally are able to balance the sport with other important aspects and activities of interest in their lives, which in turn leads to a positive perception of the sport, and allows them to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle.

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