Planning Life Outside of Sport: Elite Athletes' Help-Seeking Behaviours Toward Career Support Resources

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Abstract

Despite results showing that planning the transition out of sport is associated with more positive emotional responses and fewer emotional difficulties in retirement, only a small proportion of athletes are using the resources available through support programs. This study investigates factors associated with the help-seeking behaviours toward career support resources of 191 surveyed elite athletes of Canada. Information on perceived barriers to help-seeking, the level of engagement to a career outside of sport, and the use of resources was collected using descriptive and predictive analysis. Results indicate three main perceived barriers to help-seeking: lack of time (51.8%), lack of knowledge (35.1%) and a fear of stigma associated with the use of career support resources (12.6%). Athlete age, sport category (winter, summer) and level of engagement in a career outside of sport are predictors of the use of career support resources.

It is now well known that retirement from sport can bring its burden of difficulties to athletes, namely uncertainty about the future, a sense of loss of control, a feeling of emptiness, difficulties in defining oneself, a sense of loss of identity, depressive feelings and confusion (D'Angelo et al., 2017; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallée & Robinson, 2007; Webb et al., 1998). Despite results showing that planning the transition out of sport is associated with more positive emotional responses, fewer emotional difficulties in retirement, a shorter post-retirement transition period and greater life satisfaction (Alfermann et al., 2004), only a small proportion of athletes are using the resources available through the national support program (Game Plan, 2019). Although several career support programs were developed around the world to help athletes plan their life outside

of sport, help-seeking behaviours toward career support resources are little discussed in the literature.

Over time, multiple studies have been conducted to better understand the difficulties experienced by athletes transitioning out of sport, and the state of knowledge on elite athletes' career transition has changed significantly over the past five decades. Retirement, previously seen as an isolated, negative event, is now considered a transition and is being studied much more broadly, including factors present at the time of, but also upstream and downstream of, retirement. In the early 2000s, the developmental model of transitions (Wylleman & Lavallée, 2004), now known as the holistic model, put forward a new way to explore the subject. Within this model, the athlete was conceptualized as a whole person, an individual who practices a sport among other spheres of life, and each of these spheres was seen as having an influence on the sport career. Rather than something that has to be done at the time of retirement, retirement planning is considered as an ongoing process that takes place throughout an athletic career (North & Lavallee, 2004). This theoretical model marked a shift in the way practitioners intervened with athletes. Sport psychology practitioners expanded their services not only to help athletes adopt strategies and goals to improve their athletic performance, but also to improve their overall well-being through out their sport career (Friesen & Orlick, 2010).

The Creation of Career Support Programs

To help athletes to better prepare for their career outside of sport, career support programs are set up. The most recent overview of career support around the world was done by Stambulova & Ryba (2013) in their book titled : Athletes' careers across cultures. According to the authors, the objective of these programs is to provide current athletes with tools to prepare for their life after sport Stambulova & Ryba, 2013. They also aim to offer support to athletes during this transition, as they may face various difficulties such as psychological distress, a loss of athletic identity, anxiety or fear of rejection (Blakelock et al., 2016; Brownrigg et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2017). For the most part, the resources they offer include career and academic planning, career counselling, lifestyle management support and skills development. They are also designed to offer support during sport retirement (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). In many of these programs, career support is combined with performance improvement services, financial management workshops, and medical and nutrition services (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). In Canada, elite athletes (national team members) have access to various resources through the Game Plan program from the moment they make the national team until two years after retirement. The mission of this program is to support national team athletes to live better and more holistic lives through the development of their skills and network, so that they are able to focus on health, education, and career opportunities both during their high-performance career and beyond (Game Plan, 2021).

The Game Plan program was launched in 2015 as a collaboration between the Canadian Olympic Committee, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, Sport Canada and the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Sport Institute Network (COPISN). This network includes five institutes located in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces (one center representing Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) as well as two centers located in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. COPSIN supports athletes and coaching staff by providing essential services in the pursuit of athletic and personal excellence. They provide training environments as well as sports medicine, education, and sport science research, and support them in their overall development (Institut national du sport du Québec, 2019). Each institute and multi-sport center employs a Game Plan Advisor within their organization to support the athlete in their overall development and to help them navigate through the various resources available. In order to ensure consistency of resources in each province, bi-monthly meetings are held between all Game Plan Advisors

and the program management team to discuss the different practices in place in their territory. Approximately 3,000 active and retired athletes are eligible for the program (Game Plan, 2021).

The resources offered are divided into five pillars:

1. Career: career counselling, career planning, job searching and access to a network of flexible employment and internship opportunities as well as career transition support for retiring athletes. Retired athletes can also participate in Youtoi2.0, a two-day workshop followed by six months of group calls with game plan advisors to provide them with tools to navigate their transition out of sport.
2. Education: academic counselling services, a network of post-secondary institutions offering accommodations to be able to fit with the athlete's training, competition and travel schedules, free access to an online tutoring platform, access to massive open online courses (MOOC),[1] scholarship for the coaching education program[2] and access to full scholarships for several management programs at Queen's University who are partners of Game Plan.
3. Skill Development: resources enabling athletes to acquire and develop skills in a variety of useful areas such as financial management, sponsorship, sleep and stress management, through workshops, webinars and conferences.
4. Networking: access to mentors and an employer network, access to events with former athletes and labour market professionals.
5. Mental Health: mental health support services and workshops on various healthy lifestyle habits.

These resources, available free of charge, are delivered by a team of advisors (one per province). They are developed and optimized on an ongoing basis by program administrators and the team of advisors. In addition, the services are presented and promoted in various ways (social media, email, blog, various media, etc.). But despite the availability of the resources and the efforts made to promote them, the program statistics showed a resource utilization rate of only 36% of athletes in 2019.

Help-Seeking Behaviours of Elite Athletes

The literature on athletes' help-seeking behaviour toward psychological and counselling services indicates that several factors may act as barriers. Multiple studies around the world show that a fear of stigma can make it difficult for athletes to seek out mental health resources (DeLenardo et Terrion, 2014; Lopez et Levy, 2013; Gulliver et al., 2012). Research on student-athletes from American universities show that non-take up of the mental health resources was mainly explained by public stigma (negative attitudes individuals believe others have toward them because of a certain type of behaviour) and self-stigma (negative attitudes that individuals have toward themselves him or herself because of a certain type of behaviour) (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Whato et al., 2016). Fear of stigma was also mentioned by interviewed elite athletes from Australia who reported being ashamed of asking for help and fearing it would affect their social relationships (Gulliver et al., 2012). These same fears were also reported by professional British soccer players when interviewed on mental health difficulties and help-seeking (Wood et al., 2017). The perception that an athlete has to be physically and mentally strong can also contribute to the fear of stigma. When questioned on the subject, student-athletes from a Canadian soccer league said they believed this perception might stem from the fact that there are no visible clinical symptoms associated with a mental health disorder. Additionally, they suggested that soccer athletes often experience considerable physical pain during games and therefore must have a strong mental

1 Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are free online courses available through different universities around the world and open for anyone to enrol in.

2 Certification program to become a certified coach.

stamina to match their physical stamina (DeLenardo & Therrion, 2014). Fear of appearing week was also raised by interviewed elite athletes from Ireland in a study by McArdle et al. (2014). Athletes from these studies also mentioned being concerned about the potential consequences of stigmatization on their athletic careers, such as losing their status in the eyes of the coach. They were concerned that coaches may choose to prioritize the well-being of the team over that of the individual (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012).

Other factors were also identified in the literature as barriers to help-seeking. Between training, competitions, travel, medical appointments and school, athletes manage a very busy schedule. Therefore, lacking time to seek out resources was mentioned in research (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2006). A lack of knowledge about mental health was also pointed to as a barrier to help-seeking (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2017). Athletes report experiencing ups and downs in their emotions every day in addition to having to make constant physical efforts for their sport. It is difficult for them to determine if they are exhausted because of training or because of the anxiety or depressive feelings they are experiencing (Gulliver et al., 2012). This lack of knowledge about what mental health disorders are is reflected in a study conducted by DeLenardo and Terrion (2014) in which most of the participants suggested that athletes who claim to have a mental health disorder may actually be giving themselves an excuse or a way out to justify their unwillingness to compete or to miss a training session.

The most recent development in athlete career support repositions mental health not only as a resource but also as an outcome of an athlete's career development (Stambulova et al., 2020). The concept of athletic career excellence was also recently introduced by Stambulova (2020). This concept is defined as the athlete's ability to sustain a healthy, successful and long-lasting career in sport and in life. In this definition, healthy means resourcefulness and adaptability (i.e., coping with career demands while adding to individual resources), successful means that athletes strive to achieve meaningful goals in sport and life while meeting basic psychological needs and maintaining health and well-being, and sustainable means sustainability and longevity in sport and life (Stambulova et al., 2020). However, although this definition underlines the importance of having access to career counseling resources in order to achieve career excellence. and while several empirical studies have found that athletes who have planned their transition out of sport adapt more easily in retirement (Alfermann et al., 2004; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Lally & Kerr, 2005), few athletes make use of the available resources in place. There is little research on athletes' use of career support resources. It is becoming clear that more research needs to explore athletes' help-seeking behaviours toward career resources to be able to engage them in the planning and preparationfor their life outside of sport. The objective of this study is to predict and define factors associated with help-seeking behaviours toward career support resources and identify the perceived barriers to elite Canadian athletes seeking help.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedures

The data used for this study was collected by Game Plan as part of a yearly survey for their eligible athletes (Canadian national team members) in the spring of 2020. An invitation to respond to this web-based survey was sent by email to 1,788 national team athletes from all summer and winter disciplines. It is important to note that the survey was sent shortly after the first COVID-19 lockdown was announced. At that time, athletes knew the Olympic Games were postponed but were told to continue focusing on their training while waiting for a new plan. Following that invitation, a total of 222 athletes answered the questionnaire. A total of 31 questionnaires were deemed incomplete and excluded from the sample. 191 questionnaires were included in the research corresponding to a 10% response rate, which is consistent with

previous response rates for the survey conducted by the program.

The 191 respondents sample was composed of 57 men (30.0%) and 133 women (70.0%). Furthermore, 83.2 % were competing in an Olympic sport and 16.8% in a Paralympic sport. At the time of data collection, 60.2 % of participants were aged above 25 years old and 39.8% were under 25 years old. A majority of surveyed athletes were competing in a summer sport (80.2%) as opposed to a winter sport (19.8 %). 48.7 % of athletes reported having been part of the national team for less than 5 years and 51.3% for more than 5 years. 52.1 % of participants were currently studying at a level from high school to university at the time of data collection and 47.9 % were not currently studying. 53.2 % of the participants had obtained a university diploma as opposed to 46.8 % who did not. Lastly, 47.4 % of participants were affiliated with a Western training center (British-Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) or institute and 52.6 % with an Eastern training center or institute (Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces).

The questionnaire was made available in both official languages of Canada (English and French) and consisted of closed (multiple choice or Likert scale) questions, as well as a few open-ended questions. An introductory statement specified the precautions taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data, what the data would be used for, who would have access to it, and how long it would be stored. Finally, as the research involved human subjects, a request for approval of the research project's compliance was obtained from the Education and Social Sciences Research Ethics Board at Université de Sherbrooke.

Outcome Measures

Use of resources was documented for eight different services offered through the Game Plan program: appointments with a Game Plan advisor to help the athlete get counseling and navigate the resources[3], online tutoring offered through free access to a platform, career support resources including resume building, mock interviews and job search skills, access to a mentoring program and mental health consultations, access to online webinars on various topics (finance, sponsorship, health, etc.) as well as various workshops (regional workshops, social media workshop, mental health workshop, etc.) and opportunities to sign up for networking activities to meet potential employers. For each of these resources, frequency of use in the past year was documented using a 3-point Likert scale: (1) never; (2) sometimes; (3) often. Participants were also asked to specify if they had attended the Youtoi2.0 transition program (a two-day workshop on sport transition) and if they had received a scholarship for the Coaching Education Program certification or for a business program from Queen's University.

In order to simplify the analysis, items from the section on use of resources were submitted to an exploratory factor analysis that revealed a satisfying two-factor solution. Items measuring the use of the Youtoi2.0 transition program, the Queen's scholarship program, and the Coaching Education Program had to be excluded because their low participation produced too much missing data to conduct analyses with the other variables. Table 1 shows the two resulting factors and their associated items. The first factor

3 All advisors have training in counseling or career counseling.

Table 1

Categorization of the Resources by Factor

Factor 1 Development resources	Factor 2 Informative resources
Game Plan advisor services	Online webinars
Online tutoring	Networking activities
Career support	Workshops
Mentoring	Game plan summit
Mental health services	

(Development resources) includes resources aimed at supporting the athlete in career development and self-exploration. The second factor (Informative resources) includes resources intended to inform and educate athletes on various topics, such as financial management, stress management, and networking techniques. Each factor was assigned a score corresponding to the mean of all of its items.

Independent Variables

Independent variables included socio-demographic data, perceived barriers to career support services and the athlete's engagement towards a career outside of sport. The perceived barriers to career support resources were explored using the Barriers to help-seeking checklist developed by Givens and Tija's (2002) and modified by Lopez and Levy (2013). This scale identifies potential barriers to the use of mental health support resources. Initially developed for the population of American student-athletes, the scale was adapted for elite athletes and the use of career support resources. Specifically, the questions related to a mental health diagnosis were removed, as well as the questions regarding the school's dean and athletic director, which is specific to a student athlete population. Athletes were asked to check off all items that applied in response to the question: What is keeping you from using the career preparation resources available to you? The checklist was composed of 14 items, such as "difficulty finding or accessing services," "lack of confidentiality," "fear of stigma for using services," and "fear using services will have a negative impact on my sports career" (see Table 2). Items were divided into four theoretical groups. Lack of time and access include all items referring to a lack of time or difficulty accessing the services (4 items), items under lack of knowledge refer to a lack of knowledge of the services (1 items), items included in the fear of stigma group refer to the fear of being stigmatized or recognized if using the services (7 items), and the fear of being misunderstood group includes items referring to a fear of not being understood when reaching out to the resources (2 items).

Athletes' engagement toward a career outside of sport was assessed with the career engagement scale, whom Hirschi, Freund and Hermann (2014) developed and validated with German university students, working professionals and university graduates. The career engagement scale assesses various career behaviours in order to establish the degree to which someone is taking action to further develop their career. Athletes were asked to rank themselves on the level of career engagement that best represents them on a scale of 1 to 5 (never, occasionally, moderately, fairly often, very often). The mention "outside of sport" was added after "career" to the original items in order to avoid confusion with the athletic sport career. The resulting scale was composed of nine items, such as "To what extent have you actively sought to design your professional future outside of sport?" and "To what extent have you cared for the development of your career outside of sport?"

The nine items of the scale have a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of .90 (original scale's alpha is .89). Items were grouped into one variable by calculating the overall average. The variable was then dichotomized as follows: a score between 0 and 2.49 was categorized as little engaged to a career outside of sport and a score of more than 2.50 was categorized as very engaged to a career outside of sport.

All analyses were performed using SPSS v26.0 software. Descriptive analysis (frequencies) were conducted on the barrier scale to determine the proportions of respondents having faced at least one barrier in each category. Comparative analyses were conducted between both usage factors (developmental and informative resources) and each independent variable. Independent variables with significant mean differences on each factor where then included in a multiple linear regression analysis to determine their relative contribution to the factor variations. In all analysis, a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

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Table 2

Proportions of Respondents Having Faced Each Barrier

Categories	Barriers	*n*	%
Lack of time and access	Lack of time to seek out services	65	34.4
	Services not available during my free time	29	15.3
	Difficulty finding or accessing services	28	14.9
	Lack of available services during my free time	27	14.3
	At least one Lack of time and access barrier	99	51.8
Lack of knowledge	Lack knowledge of services offered	67	35.1
	At least one Lack of knowledge barrier	67	35.1
Fear of stigma	Fear using services will have a negative impact on my sports career	12	6.3
	Fear the coaching staff will know I am using services	12	6.3
	Lack of confidentiality	7	3.7
	Fear I will be considered weak	6	3.2
	Fear of stigma for using services	5	2.6
	Fear my teammates will know I am using services	3	1.6
	Fear I will be recognized	2	1.1
	At least one Fear of stigma barrier	24	12.6
Fear of being misunderstood	Counselor or Game Plan advisor will not understand needs of athletes	1	0.5
	Belief that "no one will understand my problems"	8	4.2
	At least one Fear of being misunderstood barrier	8	4.2

Results

Perceived Barriers to Help-Seeking Toward Career Support Resources

Table 2 shows proportions of respondents having faced each barrier from the Barriers to help-seeking checklist (Lopez & Levy, 2013), as well as the proportions of respondents having faced at least one barrier in each category. 51.8% of athletes reported at least one item from the lack of time and access barrier category. The lack of knowledge of resources offered was reported by 35.1% of the athletes and at least one item from the fear of stigma barrier category was reported by 12.6%. Only 4.2% of athletes reported at least one item in the fear of being misunderstood category.

Factors Associated with use of the Career Support Resources

Table 3 presents the results of development resource use score and informative resource use score comparisons between groups of athletes defined by each dichotomic independent variable and by the mention of each barrier. The only variable associated with the use of development resources is the lack of knowledge barrier. The results show a lower use of

the developmental resources by athletes who reported this barrier category (M= 1.17, SD=.23) compared to athletes who did not report this barrier category (M=1.29, SD=.31), t (168.9) = 3.05, p < 0.001.

A lower use of informative resources can be seen in athletes who reported a lack of knowledge barrier (M = 1.34, SD = .37), as opposed to athletes who did not report that barrier (M=1.52, SD=.47), t (163.3) = 2.97, p < 0.001. Athletes aged 25 years and over make greater use of these resources (M = 1.56, SD = 0.46) than those under 25 years of age (M = 1.31, SD = 0.38), t (180.5) = -4.11, p<0.001. Athlete seniority on the national team is also associated with the use of informative resources. Athletes with five or more years of experience on the national team use these resources more (M = 1.52, SD = .49) than those who have been on the team for less than five years (M = 1.39, SD = .39) t (183.34) = -2.13, p=.03. Winter sport athletes have a higher Informative resources score (M = 1.62, SD = .52) than summer sport athletes (M = 1. 42, SD = .42), t (180) = 2.45, p = .02. These resources are also used more by athletes affiliated with training centres or institutes in Western Canada (M = 1.55, SD = .47) than those affiliated with centers in Eastern Canada (M = 1.38, SD = .41), t (179) = 2.57, p = .01. Athletes with a university degree use more informative resources (M = 1.52, SD = .45) than those without a university degree (M = 1.38, SD = .42), t (188) = -2.16, p = .03. Being engaged in a career outside of sport is also associated with a higher use of these resources. Athletes who are very engaged in their career outside of sport made greater use of the resources (M = 1.50, SD = .46) than athletes who are little engaged in their career outside of sport (M = 1.27, SD = .33), t (70.20) = -3.52, p = p<.001.

Table 4 presents the coefficients of the multiple regression analysis carried out to distinguish the factors predicting athletes' use of informative resources. Because only one variable is significantly associated with the use of development resources, no multiple regression analysis was performed. The analysis was conducted with the use of informative resources and the independent variables that revealed significant correlations in the previous table (age, sport season, year on the national team, university degree, affiliated training centres and institutes, career engagement scale and lack of knowledge barrier group). As the coefficient of determination shows, the independent variables explain 19% of variance of the use of informative resources (r2 = .19, adjusted r2 = .16). An increase in use of the informative resources was associated with age maturity (b = .19, p = 01). Practicing a winter sport was also associated with greater use of these resources (b = -.19, p = .02) as was being affiliated with a Western training centre or institute (b = -.15, p = .02). The more an athlete is engaged in their career outside of sport, the more they will make use of the informative resources available (b = .24, p<0.001). Athletes who reported a lack of knowledge as a barrier to the usage of resources made less use of the available informative resources. Having a university diploma and the number of years on the national team were not significantly associated with the usage of the resources in this analysis.

Discussion

Even though the survey was sent during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to assume that awareness of the resources was not raised enough, during the three weeks between the announcement of the Games' postponement and the moment athletes started answering the survey, to significantly affect the data. Athletes were then trying to find innovative ways to train and stay in shape for the next year. The main perceived barrier to elite athletes seeking help via career support resources was a lack of time and access, which included respondents who feel they lack the time to seek help and have difficulty accessing the resources. Lack of time was also perceived as a barrier to help-seeking by athletes in the literature on help-seeking behaviours toward counseling and mental health (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2006). It is interesting to note that one year into the pandemic, during which most competitions and sport

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Table 3

Results of the Differences in Usage for the Development and Informative Resources Factors

Variables		Development resources		Informative resources	
	n	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age					
Under 25 years old	76	1.22	.29	1.31***	.38
25 years old and over	115	1.28	.29	1.56	.46
Gender					
Male	57	1.22	.26	1.45	.42
Female	133	1.27	.30	1.46	.45
Sport category					
Olympic	159	1.26	.28	1.47	.45
Paralympic	32	1.24	.32	1.40	.43
Sport season					
Winter	36	1.24	.24	1.62**	.52
Summer	146	1.26	.30	1.42	.42
Years on the national team					
Less than 5 years	93	1.22	.27	1.39**	.39
5 years and up	98	1.29	.30	1.52	.49
Highest level of completed education					
No university diploma	89	1.24	.29	1.38**	.42
University diploma	101	1.27	.29	1.52	.45
Current school status					
Not in school	99	1.24	.29	1.50	.45
Student (from high school to university)	87	1.27	.28	1.41	.41
Affiliated training centre or institute					
Western	90	1.23	.26	1.55**	.47
Eastern	100	1.28	.32	1.38	.41
Engagement in career outside of sport					
Little	36	1.19	.26	1.27***	.33
Very	154	1.27	.30	1.50	.46
Time and access barrier					
Not a barrier	90	1.23	.29	1.44	.44
Barrier	99	1.27	.28	1.47	.45
Fear of stigma barrier					
Not a barrier	165	1.25	.30	1.45	.45
Barrier	24	1.27	.22	1.47	.43
Fear of being misunderstood					
Not a barrier	181	1.25	.29	1.45	.45
Barrier	8	1.23	.17	1.66	.46
Lack of knowledge barrier					
Not a barrier	122	1.29***	.31	1.52	.47
Barrier	67	1.17	.23	1.34***	.37

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001

Table 4

Linear Regression of Variables Toward the use of Informative Resources

Variables	Informative resources	
	B	*SE*
Age		
25 years and up vs. Under 25 years	.19**	.07
Sport season		
Sumer vs. Winter	-.19**	.08
Years on the national team		
5 years and up vs. Less than 5 years	.04	.07
Highest level of completed education		
University diploma vs. No university diploma	-.03	.08
Affiliated centre or institute		
Eastern vs. Western	-.15**	.06
Engagement in a career outside of sport		
Very vs. Little	.24***	.08
Lack of knowledge barrier		
Barrier vs. Not a barrier	-.14**	.07

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001

seasons were canceled, athletes had much more time on their hands, which resulted in a 20% increase in their use of resources (Game Plan, 2021). This suggests that incorporating career planning into the development plan of the athlete sport career would be beneficial for athletes. This result is consistent with other research suggesting that the most successful talent development environment in supporting athletes involves efforts to integrate the different spheres of the environment rather than fragmenting them, with a focus on the athletes' long-term development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017).

Fear of stigma was selected as the third most important barrier to help-seeking toward career support resources by elite athletes, who feared that accessing the resources would have a negative impact on their sport career. They fear that if coaching staff, teammates or other people were to find out they were using the resources, they would be considered weak for seeking out help. All of these items have also been reported to varying degrees in previous research on help-seeking behaviours of athletes toward mental health and counselling resources (DeLenardo & Therrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012; Lopez & Levy, 2013, Watson, 2006, Wood et al., 2017).

The lack of knowledge reported by athletes in our study refers to the lack of awareness of the available services. In previous research, the lack of knowledge mentioned as a barrier to seeking mental health and counseling refers rather to a lack of mental health literacy (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014, Gulliver et al., 2012). It is important to note that a high proportion of these studies involve student-athletes belonging to a university athletic team. The student community may be more familiar with available services. Unsurprisingly, the lack of knowledge of the services offered by Game Plan is correlated with a decrease of help-seeking in athletes.

It is interesting to note that resource accessibility is not addressed in the literature on elite athletes. This may be due to the fact that many of the studies focus on student-athletes, who usually have access to mental health support resources directly on the campus where they study. This is not the case for high-performance athletes outside of varsity sports associations, who may train outside of their national center or even their country for many months in a year.

Results also show that multiple factors influence help-seeking of elite athletes toward the informative resources from the Game Plan program. There were differences in help-seeking behaviours between athletes under 25 years old and those 25 years and over, between athletes practicing a summer sport and those practicing a winter sport, and athletes affiliated

with a Western training center or institute and those affiliated with an Eastern training centre or institute. Differences in help-seeking behaviours were also found between athletes who had a university diploma and those who did not, and between athletes who were very engaged in a career outside of sport and those who showed little engagement in a career outside of sport. More specifically, the results from the regression analysis show that athletes ages 25 and above were making more use of the services. The results also show an greater use of services among elite athletes practicing a winter sport and those affiliated with a centre or institute in Western Canada. Athletes who are more engaged in a career outside of sports use the services more than those showing a lower level of engagement in that type of career, which highlights the benefit of career counseling services when it comes to helping athletes find a career outside of sport that resonates with them. The factors predicting or influencing help-seeking toward career resources, such as sport category, age, and level of engagement in a career outside of sport, have not been studied before in the literature; therefore, our findings cannot be connected to previous studies.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for professionals helping athletes planning their career outside of sport, program administrators, and people involved in developing career counseling programs for elite athletes. The results highlight that younger athletes are less likely to use the services. Therefore, a formal onboarding process with new national team members could help raise awareness about the different resources available to them and also educate them on the benefits and importance of planning their career outside of sport. The athlete's level of engagement in a career outside of sport also plays a role in their help-seeking behaviour, which suggests that resources that help individuals explore their interests, values and skills outside of sport, such as career guidance, could improve their utilization of career support resources and engage them in preparing for their life after sport. The main barrier (lack of time and access) highlights the importance of taking the busy schedule and time constraints of the athlete into consideration. If planning their life outside of sport is not part of their mental and physical preparation, athletes have to find time outside of their already very busy schedule to pursue their study, access the resources and plan their transition out of sport. The findings from this research suggest that formally integrating these types of services into athletes' sport development planning would improve their service usage. Just as time is often set aside in the athlete's schedule to see a physiotherapist, mental performance consultant, etc., academic and career planning could be considered part of the athlete's development plan. This strategy would also help lower the fear of stigma by showing athletes that their team endorses seeking help. Educating the coaching staff on well-being and performance and the benefits of career planning, and encouraging them to promote the use of services, could also contribute to reducing this barrier. Further research should investigate how the impact of the athletes' environment and their expectation and valuing of the services impact their help-seeking behaviours toward career resources.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is the modest sample size. The survey was sent during a period of uncertainty, at the beginning of the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and just after the 2020 Olympic Games were officially postponed. Athletes were bombarded with mass emails and communications and were busy trying to figure out how to adjust. Even with these circumstances, the response rate was on average the same as past surveys sent to the same population in the last 4 years (Game Plan, 2021). This study contained unequal sample sizes with respect to gender. Female participants outnumbered male participants (70% vs. 30%). Participants were all national team athletes from different Olympic and Paralympic sports. The findings cannot therefore be generalized to student athletes

belonging to a varsity team or even to professional athletes.

Conclusion

In light of the scholarly literature and the results of this research, help-seeking behaviours of athletes toward career support are similar to those toward mental health resources. A lack of time stands as a barrier to help-seeking toward both career support resources and mental health resources. This is also true for the fear of stigma barrier group. More specifically, individuals fear what people might think of them for accessing the resources. Athletes also fear that using these resources will negatively impact their sport career. Results from the career engagement scale show the importance of educating potential users about the benefits of being engaged in a career outside of sport in order for them to make greater use of the services and therefore help better prepare them for their transition out of sport. Based on our findings, addressing the stigma linked to the use of career support resources and integrating the planning of a career outside of sport as a part of the athlete's journey would help increase usage of the services. Additionally, program administrators should seek to promote these services more intensively to younger athletes (under 25 years old) and those without a university diploma due to their lower use of the resources.

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