

Beyond the Game: How Developmental Networks Shape Identity Beyond Athletics in Young Elite Athletes

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Athletic identity plays a significant role in shaping the experience of young athletes, which often influences their academic and career aspirations. However, when athletic identity is too narrow, it can limit the ability to explore alternatives beyond sport. This qualitative study explores how the identities of former elite athletes evolved beyond sport and how their developmental networks contributed to their growth. Research can support the transition of youth athletes into young adulthood by identifying strategies for healthy identity development beyond athletics. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the developmental networking mentorships model involves a group of diverse developers, such as coaches, family, or supervisors, actively supporting personal growth. Unlike traditional dyadic mentoring, developmental networks involve developers from different backgrounds who offer multiple forms of support. These networks are valuable for achieving career success and navigating various stages of personal development. A multiple-case study incorporating a narrative, life-history approach was conducted with three former elite athletes to explore the developmental networks that shaped their transitions beyond sport. Guided by the research question of how developmental networks broaden the athletic identity of elite competitive athletes, the interviews centered on participants' academic pursuits, the challenges they faced during their upbringing, and their experiences during their athletic careers. The study findings highlight the importance of developmental networks for young athletes, especially when facing adverse childhood experiences and balancing academics and athletics. The findings, although preliminary, suggest the importance of expanding young athletes' identity for fostering resilience and adaptability, as a singular focus can lead to identity foreclosure, limiting their self-definition. Future directions and implications for youth development program planning, particularly in helping young athletes expand their identities beyond sports, are discussed.

Keywords: Mentorship, developmental networks, elite athletes, youth athletes, athletic identity

Introduction

Athletic identity plays a significant role in shaping the experience of young athletes, which often influences their academic and career aspirations (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). However, when athletic identity is too narrow, it can limit the ability to explore alternatives beyond sport (Brewer & Chatterton, 2024). There are positive outcomes associated with having a strong athletic identity, including increased emotional connection to sport, higher involvement in physical activity and athletic performance, and greater commitment to training and enhanced enjoyment in competing in sport (Edison et al., 2021). On the other hand, past literature emphasizes several negative outcomes, pertaining to having lower tendencies to seek help, engagement in risky behaviors (i.e. substance misuse), overtraining, and injury (Edison et al., 2021). Furthermore, having a strong athletic identity can lead to identity foreclosure

(i.e., a commitment to athletic identity before exploring other roles), making it difficult to redefine oneself after sports, which can lead to feelings of depression and loss, identity crisis, and challenges in career transition (Beamon, 2012). Developmental networks, comprised of individuals who take an active interest and action to advance a protégé's personal and professional growth, can help young athletes explore other options, while still enjoying the benefits of competing in sports (Higgins & Kram, 2001). While research highlights how dyadic mentoring supports identity growth and exploration, there is still limited understanding of how developmental networks influence the identity development of young elite athletes. Research is needed to examine the role of young athletes in actively engaging with important agents who help guide athletes to success beyond sports (Lefebvre et al., 2021). Guided by the research question, how do developmental networks broaden the athletic identity of competitive elite athletes, this paper

presents preliminary findings from a larger study on the impact of relationships on the identity formation of youth elite athletes. The aim of the study is to explore how developmental networks support identity exploration and achievement among young elite athletes, especially those who face adverse childhood experiences while attempting to balance academics and athletics.

Literature Review

Identity and Athletic Identity

While an athletic identity can foster confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging in young athletes, a focus solely on this identity may hinder the exploration of academic or professional pathways beyond sport. Emerging research has begun to highlight how this imbalance can constrain long-term development and post-athletic transitions.

Identity is a complex but essential factor in understanding individuals and the experiences that shape who they are. According to Kroger (2006), identity is multidimensional, encompassing past, present and future selves. It reflects one's historical context, development, social and cultural forces, and personality. Cultural influences and life experiences are foundational, as identity continues to form over time (Kroger, 2006). During adolescence, individuals face the developmental task of achieving identity versus identity confusion, a stage in which they integrate earlier identifications into a coherent and unique sense of self (Kroger, 2006). In the context of athletic identity, young athletes often form a deep connection to their athletic role, which becomes a source of self-definition and self-worth. When they fully explore and integrate this role into their broader self-concept, a strong athletic identity can emerge (Brewer & Chatterton, 2024). However, limited exploration or over-reliance on this role may lead to identity foreclosure or confusion, narrowing their self-definition and increasing risks of transition out of sport (Brewer & Chatterton, 2024).

Reformation, in the context of athletic identity, refers to the process by which athletes successfully transition from their athletic role to a new, coherent sense of self after departure from elite sport (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). It involves navigating the liminal phase, marked by emotional and identity crisis, and ultimately achieving a stable, meaningful identity through a negotiated adaptation pathway (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). This process is often challenging due to hardships such as experiencing an identity crisis, emotional turmoil, and the difficulty of abandoning a salient athletic identity that has been central to the athlete's self-concept (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). Achieving reformation requires key elements such as ongoing identity work, emotional processing, and the ability to retain valuable aspects of the athletic self while

integrating new roles and beliefs (Wittman, 2019). Support systems, such as mentorship, can facilitate this transition by providing guidance and psychosocial support, which are crucial for overcoming obstacles and achieving identity after sports (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). In all, reformation is a complex developmental process that demands resilience, self-awareness, and social support to successfully redefine oneself beyond sport.

Developmental Networks

Developmental networks propose that a protégé acquire a wide and diverse range of developmental agents who take an ardent interest in and action to support a protégé's psychosocial and career interests (Lefebvre et al., 2021). Unlike dyadic mentorship, developmental networks comprise a group of people helping one individual achieve personal and professional goals (Dobrow et al., 2012). There are benefits to having a developmental network, such as obtaining clarity of professional identity. Developmental networks also account for a broader range of support sources, which can provide a more comprehensive overview of a protégé's support system (Dobrow et al., 2012). Mentorship scholars advocate that developmental networks are valuable for achieving a variety of career and personal outcomes.

In their attempt to clarify the concept and its boundaries, Dobrow et al. (2012) compare developmental networks to five related mentorship constructs: multiple mentors, mentoring networks, intraorganizational networks, core discussion networks, and interpersonal networks. The authors contend that developmental networks stand apart from these mentoring constructs in both scope and intent. While mentoring constructs tend to be narrower or context-specific, developmental networks are purpose-driven, systems of support. Developmental networks are composed of multiple developers across diverse social spheres who are actively invested in a protégé's career and psychosocial growth. In contrast, the other constructs may offer support in more limited or narrow ways, without the same emphasis on sustained, multidimensional development. Developmental networks typically involve four to five developers who are actively involved in helping the protégé grow and often encompass both formal and informal relationships, emphasizing the broader and more flexible nature compared to traditional mentorships (Dobrow et al., 2012; Yip & Kram, 2017). Furthermore, developmental networks are broad and can incorporate individuals from different hierarchical levels (i.e., supervisor, advisor, subordinates). These networks are not limited and can involve family and community members who can provide career and psychosocial support for a protégé (Dobrow et al., 2012).

Despite the complexity and broad scope of developmental networks, there is limited research identifying the key attributes that help individuals achieve their goals within these networks. Dobrow et al. (2012) emphasizes the need to examine factors such as personality, demographics, relational expectations, and developmental needs to better understand how these networks function. For example, while identity matching is often important in mentorship, it may not be the central factor within developmental networks. Similarities between mentors and mentees can foster strong career and psychosocial support, but differences may create richer learning opportunities and growth for both parties (Dobrow et al., 2012; Shen, 2010). While the broadness of the concept presents challenges, it also creates opportunities for future research to explore what makes a developmental network unique, including the developers involved, the reason for choosing them, and the resulting outcomes. Lefebvre et al. (2021), for example, examined the developmental networks of Division I college coaches, focusing on the personal and professional development facilitated by these relationships. The study found that coaches could identify developmental agents, such as mentors and family members, who played a critical role in their growth. Each coach shared their gratitude to these networks, highlighting their value in both personal and professional domains. The findings highlight how developmental networks can uniquely shape the experiences of mentees in high-performance settings, such as sports.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which suggests that human development is influenced by multiple interconnected environmental systems (Chandler et al., 2011). These systems include the microsystem, which comprises immediate relationships and settings such as family, peers and schools; the mesosystem, which involves interactions between microsystems; the exosystem, which encompasses external environments that indirectly affect the individuals like parents' workplaces; the macrosystem, representing a broader societal and cultural values and norms; and lastly, the chronosystem, which refers to the measurement of time, eluding to the changes and transitions that occur over an individuals' lifespan and how these temporal factors influence development (Chandler et al., 2011). The current study focuses on face-to-face relationships with mentors and other key developers within the immediate social environment that influences individual development. The quality of these interactions, relational dynamics, and the presence of multiple relationships, like peer

mentoring groups or developmental networks, are critical components within this system. While dyadic relationships are important, research highlights that multiple microsystem settings—such as peer groups and networks—also play a significant role in personal and career development. More research is needed, however, that explores mentoring networks from the perspective of the mesosystem, where connections between settings like home, school, and sport environments shape the mentoring experience (Chandler et al., 2011; Crawford, 2020; Yip & Kram, 2017).

Methods

In the current study, we employed a multiple-case study using a narrative, life-history approach to explore how developmental networks influenced the transition of former elite athletes beyond sport. In-depth, semi-structured interviews, along with photo elicitation, were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Interview questions focused on participants' perceptions of support, identity, and life beyond sport. For example, participants were asked: Can you describe a moment in your athletic journey when you felt fully seen, valued and supported—not just as an athlete, but as a whole person? What qualities do you think make a coach or mentor truly supportive of athletes like you? How have sports influenced the way you think about school, family, or your future? Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length. The lead author interviewed three former elite athletes (mean age of 32.3) were selected based on their former elite athletic status (i.e., individuals who competed in high performance athletics at both senior elite levels; Lundqvist et al., 2023). Participants were asked to identify and list the agents who helped support them during their time performing in elite competition. Using a qualitative, two-step approach, the researchers explored the developmental networks of the three participants. Specifically, an initial co-constructive visual map was used with each participant to sketch out their developmental networks, allowing them to identify key influences (i.e., people, coaches, mentors, family) in their lives (Bagnoli, 2009). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the study participants.

This study followed an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995), in which participants' narratives were used to explore how developmental networks shaped their transitions beyond sport. The data was analyzed using a descriptive coding approach beginning with in-case analysis of each participant. The analysis emphasized how participants told their stories, allowing the first author to interpret and depict developmental networks as they emerged through their lived experiences. Additionally, a

case-oriented comparative approach was used, which aimed to use rich descriptions of a few instances of a particular phenomenon to facilitate an in-depth comparison of individual cases and motivations (Della Porta, 2008). A discussion on the similarities and differences between the developmental networks of each case, along with their implications for the participants' identity evolution, follows the analysis. Although three participants were interviewed in the study, only two were selected for comparative case analysis.

Results

The Case of Flash

Preliminary findings indicate that Flash's developmental network played a significant role in supporting his identity exploration and achievement as a young elite athlete navigating both academic and athletic pressure, despite the presence of adverse childhood experiences. Evidence suggests that Flash had multiple mentors who helped him navigate and balance elite athletics and psychosocial development, thereby assisting in the formation of a broader sense of identity. Flash had multiple mentors who served in different roles to help him develop. For example, Coach G acted more as an individual he could talk to about personal matters, as they both shared similar upbringings.

His background was the same. He would talk to us about, you know, a lot of his family being in and out of jail. My stepdad was very abusive to my mom. Very abusive. Like I used to run like I was a track star. This isn't funny, but I used to have to run to the police. I used to wait for her in the middle of the night for her to scream my name.

Flash did not have an easy home life, but he leaned on Coach G for support during tough times. He said they both connected because they shared similar backgrounds and upbringings. Flash explained that Coach G understands the stress of having loved ones at risk, as he experienced family members experiencing risk of deportation or incarceration, and they would openly share those fears. Whenever Flash came to him for advice about what was occurring at home, Coach G would share stories from his own past and the challenges he faced. Flash said those talks always left him feeling more confident and reminded him that he had the strength to push through.

Upper class, lower class, coach don't play man. And he was brought up in all that, you know? You know, he immigrated here from another country. You think it's bad? No matter how bad you think it is, you can overcome that.

Flash relied on Coach K for support in exploring career opportunities. Coach K often worked "behind the scenes," regularly speaking with scouts and recruiters about Flash's ability to excel both on the field and in the classroom. Flash shared that Coach K was always setting

him up for success, specifically traveling to various sports campuses and community service events, and consistently speaking highly of him to others, highlighting both his athletic and academic accomplishments.

Lastly, Flash's family (i.e., uncles, mother, and grandparents) served as significant role models in his life. He spoke especially highly of one uncle, who was a scholar-athlete and excelled both on the football field and in the classroom. Despite being only ten years older, Flash shared that his uncle "raised him". During challenging times at home, Flash leaned on him for care and guidance. He looked up to his uncle, who would walk him to school every day or pick him up from sporting events. His uncle would allow Flash to spend time with his peer group, exposing him to safer environments and serving as a protector. When home life became difficult, Flash would turn to his uncle for safety and comfort. Unfortunately, when his uncle left for college, Flash's home life significantly worsened, underscoring just how essential his presence and protection had been.

Flash's mother and grandparents also served as key role models, offering advice and support. Each played a part in helping him stay focused on academics, athletics, and graduating from high school. His grandfather, who worked as a custodian, faced racism at his school, prompting Flash to get into several fights in his defense. However, his grandfather would urge him to stay out of trouble, stay focused, and prioritize his education and sports. His grandmother echoed similar sentiments, stressing the importance of graduating, something many in their family had not achieved due to hardships. Even now, as a school principal, Flash shared that his grandmother still asks how his "first day of school went," insinuating the value of education in their family.

Flash described his mother's influence as "tough love." She taught him "hard lessons" and pushed him and his siblings to become the best versions of themselves. She was especially hard on Flash because she saw his potential to graduate and build a better future. Flash expressed deep gratitude for his family's influence, as well as his coach, who helped him navigate adverse childhood experiences and encouraged him to reflect on life after sport. Due to their investment in him, Flash now takes pride in giving back, mentoring, and supporting the students he serves in his role as Assistant Principal in his local public school.

The Case of Frank

While Frank did not have a fully developed developmental network, preliminary findings suggest that certain individuals played supportive roles that influenced his identity exploration and academic-athletic journey during his time as an elite athlete. While he had two key mentors who supported him, overall, he felt undervalued and isolated upon arriving at college. Frank shared

that when he joined his college basketball team, he was dismissed by the head coach and felt the coaching staff believed he was not good enough to compete at that level. This perception left him feeling devalued on campus and even led him to consider transferring. He did not feel a sense of belonging during his freshman year, often traveling home and avoiding spending weekends on campus and getting reassurance from family and friends back home. As a result, his academic performance suffered, despite his genuine love for school, because he tied his academic self-worth to his athletic performance.

I definitely didn't feel like I belonged there for a while. So, there would be days where I was like, man, I'm ready to transfer. I'm ready to get out of here. I really wasn't going to class because, in my mind, I'm not going to be here. I don't care about my grades.

Although Frank briefly mentioned how his family (i.e., mother and father, peers and friends) back home served as a support group, Frank credited his assistant coach as a critical support figure during his time competing. His assistant coach regularly checked in on him, encouraged him to stay on campus, and reminded teammates to include him in social activities. His assistant coach acted as a closely connected mentor (Austin et al., 2020). Frank said this consistent support helped him push through his challenges.

Like he would just text me, instead of going back home, he was like, hey, just come hang out with so-and-so. I'm going to have so-and-so text you or reach out to them. If it wasn't for him, I would have got out of there. He literally was texting me all the time.

Similarly, his roommate played a key motivational role, encouraging him to attend events and stay focused on his long-term goals, including graduating as a first-generation college student.

My roommate was very supportive. He made sure I was showing up to places on time. Like, man, you got to go do this. You can't mess this up. You have to go.

Frank explained that his sense of belonging began to shift once he gained more playing time and was eventually promoted to the starting lineup. With his increased role on the basketball court, he began feeling more valued academically and socially. His grades improved, and he became more engaged in campus life. Reflecting during this period, Frank expressed deep gratitude for his assistant coach and roommate, acknowledging that without their support he likely would have transferred to another school.

Discussion

Preliminary findings highlight the impact of relationships on the evolution of one's identity in the lives of young athletes, especially those balancing elite athletics while navigating adverse childhood experiences. The findings highlight

how multiple broad relationships can help young athletes evolve beyond sports. Those who have a strong athletic identity may struggle to transition or define their values solely based on their athletic performance (Brewer & Chatterton, 2024). While preliminary, the findings suggest that multiple broad relationships may help broaden one's athletic identity. For Flash, he mentioned how the relationships he built with his coaches supported both psychosocial and career development far beyond the playing field. Flash shared that Coach K would act as a sponsor, as he would "set him up for success" afar from sport, as they navigated "behind the scenes" when he was preparing to transition to college. Furthermore, Coach G engaged in core discussions, as both Flash and Coach G would have conversations about personal matters and how to navigate these trials to stay focused on his goals. Additionally, Flash mentioned how his uncles, mother, grandmother, and grandfather served as role models, encouraging him to stay focused on school and sports, avoid trouble, and advance his career to graduate from high school (Dobrow et al., 2012).

According to Dobrow et al. (2012), relationships within developmental networks play a crucial role in the development of identity. These networks can provide proteges with confirmation, confidence, and continuity, which are key components for identity evolution. Through these relationships, individuals gain knowledge, develop career competencies, and receive support that fosters both personal and professional growth. Each participant in the study had built multiple relationships, though only one referenced having a broader, more diverse set of developmental agents. For instance, Flash relied on Coach G for guidance in navigating adverse childhood experiences. Coach K served as a sponsor offering strategic advice about pursuing elite athletics at the collegiate level while planning for a professional future. Flash's family, including his uncle, mother, and grandparents, also played vital roles, encouraging him to stay focused, succeed in school, and pursue higher education.

Frank, in contrast, showed signs of having a developmental network during his time competing in elite athletics but lacked four to five agents to fully complete a developmental network (Dobrow et al., 2012). Still, both his roommate and assistant coach served as psychosocial support, as both managed to encourage Frank to trust the process. Additionally, his assistant coach acted as a close connector, placing him in situations that would allow him to feel more of a sense of belonging, such as texting teammates to meet up with Frank to feel supported on campus (Austin et al., 2020). He was initially dismissed by the coaching staff and felt isolated from both campus life and his teammates. Research suggests that individuals with a strong athletic identity may struggle to transition or define their self-worth beyond athletic performance (Brewer

& Chatterton, 2024).

While Frank briefly mentioned a support system at home, his identity as a student-athlete weakened, leading to declines in both mental health and academic performance. It was not until his assistant coach and roommate stepped in as consistent sources of support that Frank began to regain a sense of belonging. Still, one could argue that this growth was reactive, influenced by increased playing time and recognition rather than supported by a diverse and proactive developmental network like Flash's.

Frank reflected on how much easier the transition to college might have been if his closest peers, whether teammates or not, had come with him. While that is not always feasible, it points to the importance of intentionality in the formation and activation of developmental networks. Teaching youth athletes to build and sustain supportive relationships early could help prepare them to seek guidance during difficult transitions. According to Barker (2006), mentorship relationships that involve consistent check-ins and honest dialogue throughout different stages of development can promote smoother transitions and lasting growth. Preparing young athletes with the tools to develop such networks early may be key to fostering resilience and identity evolution beyond sport.

Conclusion and Limitations

While preliminary, the findings suggest that relationships may have a profound impact on the development of youth elite athletes and their evolution over time. However, further work is needed on how developmental networks impact the evolution of identity of youth elite athletes over time. The current study had important limitations worth noting. The first limitation is the small, male-only sample. As researchers, there is a heightened awareness of the need to explore this work further with a more diverse sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how developmental networks function across different backgrounds and experiences. The preliminary findings presented primarily address the contributions of individual mentors, rather than the impact of multiple mentoring relationships on athletes' identities. The way these relationships function as a network, specifically influencing several aspects of identity, remains to be explored. Ultimately, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of intentionally teaching young athletes how to establish support systems to navigate challenging transitions, thereby fostering healthier transitions, and promoting long-term wellbeing (Brewer & Chatterton, 2024).

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