

# Superwomen? Young sporting women, temporality and learning not to be perfect

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## Abstract

New forms of neoliberal femininity create demanding horizons of expectation for young women. For talented athletes, these pressures are intensified by the establishment of dual-career discourses that construct the combination of high-performance sport and education as a normative, 'ideal' pathway. The pressed time perspective inherent in dual-careers requires athletes to employ a variety of time-related skills, especially for young women who aim to live up to 'superwoman' ideals that valorise 'success' in all walks of life. Drawing on existential phenomenology, and in-depth interviews with 10 talented Finnish sportswomen (aged 19–22), we explored their experiences of lived time when pursuing dual-careers in upper secondary sport schools. Exploring participants' bodily experiences of inhabiting the achievement life-world, we analyse how these sportswomen either learned ways of living up to this ambitious script or came to understand the detrimental effects of the script, necessitating other ways of being. For those who experience a disjuncture between the 'perfect' and their embodied experience, self-care practices are needed to restore life-world harmony, and orient to alternative futures.

## Keywords

superwoman, existential phenomenology, lived time, women's dual-careers, identity

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In addition to the ever-increasing physiological and psychological demands associated with high-performance sport, today's talented athletes also face increasing societal expectations not only to complete, but also to excel in education. Some studies have found that adolescent athletes achieve better results than their non-athlete peers at school (Jonker et al., 2009), challenging the 'dumb jock' stereotypes still prevalent in the USA (Wininger and White, 2008). Although in US collegiate sport, 'dual careers' (the combination of sport and education) have long been established, in the European context, political actions to promote these careers are relatively recent. After the European Commission published its Dual Career Guidelines of Athletes (European Commission, 2012), research and policy initiatives have increased rapidly; for example, the Finnish Olympic Committee states on its website that 'Dual Career is the Finnish sport system's value choice' (<https://www.olympiakomitea.fi/huippu-urheilu/urheiluakatemiaohjelma/kaksoisura/>). This creates additional expectations for elite athletes to achieve even more within the relatively short duration of their athletic careers. As a consequence of the 'pressed time' perspective that characterises dual career athletes' lives (Burlot et al., 2018), research (particularly in sport psychology) has emphasised the centrality of time-related skills (using time efficiently, career planning, goal setting) in creating sustainable dual careers (Perez-Rivases et al., 2020).

Research indicates a gendered patterning of dual careers, both in the USA (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; O'Connor, 2019) and Europe (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2018). It appears that young sporting women are often more committed to combining sporting *and* educational goals and identities than are sporting men. Despite the growing professionalisation of women's football (soccer) in Britain, many young players also invest in academic excellence (Harrison et al., 2020). In this latter study, one female participant explained: 'I wanted to do really well in uni, I didn't want to go there and just pass, you know I still want a first. And then again with soccer, I want to do the best that I can' (Harrison et al., 2020: 16). Despite the growth of women's sport, however, there remains a staggering structural inequality of opportunity that limits women's social agency in developing a professional athletic career. For example, in Finland where we conducted the present study, only 1.6% of the country's professional athletes in 2017 were women (<https://kihu.fi/arviointi-ja-seuranta/ammattuurheilijoiden-maara-tasaisessa-kasvussa/>). These numbers show that very few women have the privilege initially to construct a single career focused on sport, and dual-career discourses might be particularly relevant for young women, for whom it is more of a necessity to channel their development along these two tracks.

Recent scholarship also raises the question of whether we are witnessing a 'feminisation' of dual-career discourses (Ryba, 2018). This links to broader discussions surrounding the 'feminization' of education (Leathwood and Read, 2008). As Skelton (2002) emphasised, however, simply having a greater number of women in education settings (e.g. in the role of teachers) does not necessarily make these environments 'feminised'. Furthermore, linking masculinity and femininity firmly and unproblematically to male and female bodies neglects how women can also 'do' masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Sportswomen often construct identities emphasising toughness and independence, thus positioning themselves as oppositional to constructions of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The 'ideal' student-athlete is often constituted

through masculinised discourses: she is constructed as highly autonomous, self-confident, manages time efficiently, and is in control of her fate (Burlot et al., 2018).

The emerging literature on female dual-career athletes indicates that many might embody 'the perfect' leitmotif of contemporary femininity that captures 'a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the "good life"' (McRobbie, 2015: 9). Forms of new (white, middle-class) femininities constructed in the 21st century have also been coined by US scholars as, respectively: the 'Future Girl' (Harris, 2004), 'Alpha Girl' (Kindlon, 2007) and 'Successful Girl' (Ringrose, 2007). These new individualistic femininities are compatible with many key elements of what Hughes and Coakley (1991) coined 'the sport ethic', such as high ambition, striving for distinction, risk-taking, and refusing to accept external limits. Indeed, athletic achievement (something that is devalued in those forms of 'ideal' femininity where bodily worth is tied to how the body *looks*, as opposed to what it can *do*) can occupy a central role in these 'new' girls'/women's self-construction. As Azzarito (2010: 266) noted, 'both the Alpha and the Future Girl emblematically represent *new* femininities, self-made, ambitious and independent girls, to whom sport and career paths are the most important areas of self-definition and of success in society'. Interestingly, scholars have noted that some versions of the ideal – such as the myth of a Finnish superwoman – have existed in cultural imaginations for many centuries (Lietzén et al., 2015). As Lietzén et al. (2015) noted, the Finnish superwoman myth has been tied to what they describe as 'the mythical Finnish model' where equality is achieved by economic independence through education.

Although Alpha and Future girls might claim agency, resist victimisation and refuse categorisation as 'the second sex' (De Beauvoir, 1972), attempts to live up to these new ambitious femininities can also come at great personal costs. As McRobbie (2015: 4) noted, 'the idea of the perfect is both part of female "common sense". . . and also something potentially dangerous, a mechanism unleashing new waves of self-harm'. Research indicates that endorsing the 'superwoman' ideal can constitute a risk factor for disordered eating (Mensing et al., 2007), with increasing numbers of young women experiencing intensified body-anxiety and even body-disdain (McRobbie, 2015). Whether and how aspiring young women can match their lived experience to these ideals in the world of elite sport is problematic, for: 'despite strong dedication, perfection is unobtainable and failure inevitable' (Roderick, 2014: 143), and pressures to give a 'perfect' performance, both frontstage and backstage, are intense (Roderick and Allen-Collinson, 2020).

Despite the literature on the new femininities and their manifestations in popular culture, there is a paucity of research on how these femininities are actually 'lived and felt' and made meaningful in aspiring sporting women's life-worlds. Building on McRobbie's (2015) notion of 'the perfect', we focus here on pre-elite student-athletes, to explore what it is like to pursue excellence in both sport and education, and what happens if young women's experiences fail to align with the idea of perfection. Drawing on existential phenomenological insights, including temporality as a fundamental component of human experience, we explore the nature of lived time in young women's dual careers when they 'live up to', struggle to live up to, or abandon the cultural ideal of the perfect. The article contributes to sociological understandings of young sporting women's subjectivities in an era of high-achieving young 'superwomen', and the salient role of lived time in structuring the life-worlds of achievement (and 'failure').

## Phenomenological perspectives and lived time

There are many, complex strands of phenomenology, some of which we have charted in our work on sporting embodiment (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2009, 2011a). In addressing what he perceived as the inadequacies of scientific, 'objective' studies of human existence, Husserl (1983), the founder of modern phenomenology, sought to question everyday 'common-sense' as well as scientific habits of thought that left unquestioned extant assumptions and presuppositions regarding phenomena. To identify and reveal the essence or *eidos* of a phenomenon, Husserl (1983: 6) advocated the adoption of the phenomenological attitude, engaging in the *epochē* (a form of bracketing), temporarily to step back from the phenomenon of interest, and challenge the everyday thinking of the 'natural attitude'. Whilst diverging from 'pure' philosophical phenomenology, forms of more 'sociologised' phenomenology acknowledge and subject to analytic attention the wide-ranging and fundamental effects on lived experience of social-structural position and other sociological variables (see Allen-Collinson, 2011b). Phenomenology informed by sociological and/or feminist critiques is thus well-placed to provide a powerful lens on sporting women's lived experiences as situated within a particular historical social structure (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2011b; Chisholm, 2008).

In phenomenological thought, time is not an object or container, but intrinsic to human existence and the very condition for it to be meaningful at all. Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) clarified Husserl's account of temporality where any conscious act is structured by retention and protention, which make it possible for us to recollect past experiences and build expectations for the future. Central to many phenomenological accounts of experience are the specific ways we experience time subjectively, as what has been termed *durée*, the present moment of subjective experience (Schütz, 1967). We might experience time as 'extending', for example, particularly during painful, difficult, or challenging sporting experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2003). Such experiences, particularly during periods of pain, suffering or injury (and rehabilitation), have been sociologically analysed from an emotion-work and interactional perspective by Allen-Collinson (2003) in relation to distance running and 'lived time'/*durée*. As she highlights (2003: 341), during more enjoyable or pleasurable sporting experiences, where the body is performing with relative ease and we feel 'on top of our game', we may experience what Leder (1990) has termed 'temporal constriction' when time seems to pass swiftly and effortlessly. Between these two temporal poles or 'speeds' lies what we might think of as 'objective' time, where our experience largely coheres with clock-time or calendar time.

Schütz (1967: 57) reminded us that the present contains the future, as 'every action is a spontaneous activity oriented toward the future'. In our everyday existence, our activities show up as tacitly meaningful because we anticipate they lead to something; studying for exams leads to graduation, and sports training leads to a refined skill, improved endurance, and so forth. In Heidegger's (1962) thought, all our experiences are structured as possibilities: we constantly leap ahead of ourselves to what is 'not yet'. Human lives are made meaningful through choosing projects and committing to them (Adams, 2006), with a life project in elite sport as one specifically oriented towards perfection (Breivik, 2010).

Finally, while existential phenomenology provides a backdrop for understanding subjective time, feminist phenomenological scholars have reminded that temporal attunement is shaped by gender (Schües, 2011). As Schües (2011: 75) noted:

Not that the thinking itself can be regarded as ‘typically’ male or female, but the battleground between past and future is personal, and hence female or male in its concrete sense. . . the remembering, but also the anticipating are specifically gendered; when I remember myself I cannot remember just a neutral person. I always remember myself as a girl or as a woman in a particular context and in specific relations.

In the current study, we approach the notion of the ‘perfect’ as a largely invisible background frame of reference that shapes young sporting women’s attunement to the world. The ‘perfect’ can be conceived as a particular type of futuring that shapes young sporting women’s attunement to their life projects, until, for some reason, they are unable to live up to the ideal.

## Methods

This research builds upon longitudinal qualitative data, gathered for the Finnish Longitudinal Dual Career Study (Ryba et al., 2016), which has followed the life course and stories of 18 promising Finnish youth athletes (10 women) participating in the national talent development programme. The study commenced at the start of participants’ journeys in upper-secondary sport schools (age at baseline: 15–16) and focused on exploring subjective meanings of turning points and life transitions in these young people’s developmental trajectories. The longitudinal data were used to gain a deep understanding of participants’ life-worlds, and to design the current study in which NJR conducted a sixth round of interviews (T6). Analysis of the earlier data-sets identified ‘the superwoman’ as one constitutive discursive resource that shaped participants’ sense-making of their lives (Ryba et al., 2020). In the current article, we focus purely on the young women’s stories, with results based solely on T6.

Conducting phenomenologically oriented research requires openness, curiosity and challenging our taken-for-granted familiarity with phenomena (Allen-Collinson, 2009; McNarry et al., 2020a). In our study, the interviewer (NJR) participated in a bracketing interview with TVR to challenge her assumptions about women’s sporting life-worlds. We also conducted a pilot interview with a talented female athlete who was not part of the longitudinal study, to gain feedback and reflect on the design of the interview. All authors contributed to developing the interview questions to invite participants to describe in rich detail their experiences. We were particularly attuned to the felt senses of continuity and discontinuity of youth athletes’ life-worlds and how they talked about the past, present and future. Notes were taken throughout the process to keep track of our evolving understanding of how the young women negotiated the ‘perfect’ cultural script in making life choices and pursuing their projects.

Phenomenologically-inspired research requires participants to describe in rich detail their experience (McNarry et al., 2020a). Since young people sometimes struggle to express complicated understandings, we used creative non-fiction vignettes as a data

collection method to aid reflection (see Barter and Renold, 2000). These portrayed two athletes' journeys (women's stories for women/men's stories for men) through an upper-secondary sport school, to encourage the interviewees to reflect on their journeys, attitudes and experiences of being a talented student-athlete. These vignettes portrayed a collection of discontinuous experiences identified from data generated by the previous interviews undertaken in the longitudinal research. These experiences covered: the transition to upper-secondary school, a conflict between school and sport, a break-up with a girlfriend/boyfriend, performing over expectations, conflict with parents, being abandoned by a coach, transitioning to the senior sport, serious injury and disengagement from sport. Through the use of vignettes as an additional tool to invite reflection, we sought to learn more about how participants were attuned to and navigated through the multiple demands of their life-worlds (including in education, sport and relationships). The interviews were conducted in Finnish and lasted between 73 and 90 min (mean 84 min). Seven participants were interviewed face-to-face and, given the geographical dispersion of participants, three were interviewed via Skype™.

After transcriptions were completed, NJR coded and started to thematically analyse the transcripts, noting key experiences and the meanings participants assigned to them. We then identified more general patterns and the temporal structure underpinning participants' accounts that shape experiential realities. The co-authors, all with substantial experience of working within existential-phenomenological and/or feminist-phenomenological methodological approaches, were involved in developing and contesting interpretations and developing phenomenologically-sensitive readings of the data.

In our data analysis, we identified three 'ideal types' of young sporting women: those who were 'living up to the perfect', 'struggling to be perfect' and 'ditching the perfect ideal'. As with other scholars who have drawn on the notion of 'ideal types' (e.g. Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2016), we acknowledge that all 10 participants' accounts do not neatly fit into one category or pattern. All personal stories have their nuances and complexities; however, all accounts had a dominant pattern that fell within one of these three types.

To preserve a rich sense of young women's subjective experiences, we portray these ideal types through three individual athletes' accounts ('Katri', 'Jaana' and 'Nea'; all names are pseudonyms). These three young women portrayed the most representative cases of the types identified in the data. Focusing on three illustrative cases, rather than including quotes from all participants, has the advantage of preserving a rich sense of the first-person perspective and the temporal structure that is central to phenomenological thought, while also showing complexities and contradictions of lived experience.

## **Results: three women's accounts**

### *Living up to the perfect ideal*

The first of our ideal types is represented through Katri, who, at the beginning of the longitudinal research, had expressed her ambition to become a collegiate swimmer, to compete in the Olympics, and become a lawyer. She remarks: 'my mum just said that in the seventh grade I was sitting in the car and saying that I will go and study in the USA'.

At the end of upper-secondary school, Katri appears to be ‘on track’ with her life plan: she has graduated with excellent grades and received an athletic scholarship to the USA. However, not everything has followed a neat, linear progression: last season’s performance was difficult, and she was disappointed with some of her matriculation exam results. Recalling a disappointing performance in the national swimming championships, Katri reflects:

It was a big disappointment. . . I am a competitor and it’s frustrating when I feel I cannot use my potential. . . [But] If I get disappointed badly. . . I forget about it quickly. I don’t continue ruminating about it.

In orienting herself to athletic excellence, Katri is making selective engagements with the past in order to inform her present and future. While disappointments rapidly become a forgotten past, for her, repeated successes become her embodied anchor of self-confidence:

I am a person of routine. I always wake up for morning training at the same time and do everything in the same order. . . If I repeat something, I get a lot of self-confidence from that. If something goes well once, I am: ‘okay’. Do it three more times and if it goes well the fourth time, then it gives me a lot of self-confidence. Then I know that it will also go well the next time.

Katri’s storying is shaped by contemporary neoliberal discourses of girlhood/womanhood, where female subjectivity is constructed as powerful, confident and in control (Azzarito, 2010). However, besides these discursive resources, she also draws on her own embodied knowledge garnered from past successes, to ground her confidence and inform her ‘futuring’. As such, her attunement to the life-world is constituted by a sense of becoming, and she draws on past experiences as a resource for imagining a bright and promising future.

Despite her high ambitions, Katri explains that she does not need to be perfect *every* day. Reflecting on the matriculation exams, she recalls:

Everything just went very well. I didn’t notice being very stressed out. I had a study plan and if I didn’t have the energy to study some days, I didn’t stress out about that either. . . Also training went well. [And] when it went badly [I didn’t think], ‘oh no, now I must train very hard’. . . I could maintain a rational approach to training.

When asked to elaborate on why and how she has been able to succeed, Katri cites possessing several time-related skills often promoted in contemporary dual-career discourses. She expresses being skillful in time ‘management’ as well as planning and goal-setting, seeking to demonstrate that she is in control of time, has time and also makes time. She continues:

I understand that I can say no to some things. Sometimes I feel that my friends keep promising too many things and then they cancel because they notice that it’s too much. . . I have learned to manage my time and stick to my plans.

In many parts of her account, Katri's orientation to her life projects seems almost mechanistic: she sticks to routines, stays rational in moments of disappointment, has a schedule for studying and training, and maintains her long-term dual-career goals. However, a vital element of her commitment to sport, to which she often refers, is the embodied sensation of 'feeling good *now*' and in-the-moment when she is swimming: 'I think it is important to enjoy what you do'. She goes on to describe why she is drawn to swimming in particular:

I think the best thing about swimming is when you get to train. Somehow it is just cool. . . Some other people like it when training is over and they're like 'wow, I've done something'. But for me, the best sensation is before a hard training session when you feel a bit anxious. And during the session, when you feel the lactic acid, but it is just, like, I have to keep going. There is something about that.

Katri's comments above resonate strongly with research by McNarry et al. (2020a, 2020b) that similarly demonstrates the 'embracing' and normalisation of sustained 'hard training' in performance swimming, as part of the 'endurance work' (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; McNarry et al., 2020a) that characterises many sports requiring a level of endurance and tolerance of heavy training loads. Katri admits that there are some days when she is feeling fatigued, but then she reminds herself that 'in the end, you are doing this for yourself'. Her 'normal' days are 'good' days when she goes to the swimming pool 'for a couple of hours, to do your own thing'. Therefore, swimming is framed agentially as being part of her 'own' time, something she *wants* to do, and not what she *has* to do.

Katri is among two of 10 female student-athletes involved in the longitudinal study, who sustained a dual-career throughout upper-secondary school and into higher education. Her story shows a selective and skillful engagement with the successes and failures of the past and embodied pleasures of the 'now' to inform her view of a bright and successful – if not necessarily perfect – future. Her long-term plan and sense of 'becoming' allow her to maintain a sense of harmony of the life-world (Jarvis, 2007) despite moments of disappointment and failure. Rather than merely chasing a remote dream of the future, however, she also stays grounded in the present, 'owns' her time, and finds immediate pleasure from her daily engagement with swimming. As we go on to consider next, Katri's experiential realities stand in stark contrast to those of other young women who struggle to be perfect.

### *Struggling to be perfect*

The second of our ideal types is represented through Jaana who was, at the time of the interview, pursuing university education and aiming to restart an athletic career in athletics that had been disrupted due to injuries and problems with her coach. She started her journey in upper-secondary sport school by moving away from home, and remembers the transition as a turning point when sport started increasingly to dominate her life-world:

In secondary school, I had other hobbies, also non-sport hobbies, but then the choice came. I moved away from home and totally disengaged from all other hobbies. Training became



focused, not something you do [just] twice a week, but there was more of it. I noticed that I was talented, and I developed more.

While competitive sport had been intertwined in Katri's anticipations of the future for some time, Jaana experiences a discontinuity when entering upper-secondary school, when she begins to see herself as a *serious* athlete with ambitions of athletic success. She seems almost surprised when experiencing the power and potential in her athletic body: 'You start noticing that you are doing well against very good athletes. So, I thought that I should really put effort into this'. When asked whether such a realisation changed her ways of training, Jaana explains:

Well, at least it became very serious. My self-criticism went over the top at some point. I couldn't deal with *any* mediocre training sessions. All training sessions were supposed to be good, and harder than the previous session. I became very ambitious.

While Katri expresses being able to tolerate a 'bad' day's training, feeling confident that within the 'bigger picture' she is still 'on track', Jaana, in contrast, indicates that she needs to achieve perfection *every* day in order to feel good about herself. Her temporal horizon thus becomes restricted to the present, which is experienced as intensive self-competition. Similar to Katri, Jaana has equipped herself with 'skills' to manage and organize time, and she recounts that her use of time is 'extremely efficient'. However, driven by this need always to surpass herself, she starts to become aware of actually beginning to hurt herself. She reflects on the skills that both help and harm her in pursuing her life projects:

*Jaana:* Many psychological skills. . . they are kind of good, but if you become too good at them and use them too rigidly, life just becomes an unhealthy achievement.

*Interviewer:* can you give me an example, for example in sport?

*Jaana:* well, for example, perfectionism. You're never satisfied with anything. With running, I always had to run faster or longer. . . Even if I knew I wasn't supposed to do that, but I just wanted to do it perfectly and better than last time. . . I did know what kind of training loads are reasonable, but I still didn't follow them. And also in other things in life, it's difficult to be satisfied with normal performance. . . You feel you could have done it better.

Jaana's account illustrates how her life-world becomes shaped by the sport ethic (Hughes and Coakley, 1991: 310, italics original) where '*being an athlete involves refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of possibilities*'. Although a 'perfect' training session could provide some momentary satisfaction post-session, for Jaana the bodily movement has lost the sensory satisfaction of 'feeling good now-in-the-moment': 'It wasn't fun anymore because I always had to exhaust myself', she explains. Similar to Katri, Jaana is an analytic and reflective young woman, who demonstrates self-awareness and is cognisant that she is not always kind to herself. With hindsight, she also reflects on what she has learned about herself, and how the culture (manifest in the reactions of others around her) valorises strong and independent femininities:

During upper-secondary school, I realised that my good qualities are also my challenges or weaknesses. Extreme self-discipline is good, but there is a danger that you overdo everything and hurt yourself because you just don't give up. I understood that and it was painful. . . But others do not think about it as a negative thing, they just think it's great!

After a while, the excessive training regime starts to wear out and exhaust her body and Jaana needs to take several breaks from sport, just to let her body heal. The 'injury time' is a 'time-out' from sport which also forces her to reassess the role of sport in her life: 'for so long, I have been more or less injured. . . I have been forced to break away from sport. It cannot be my whole life'. Her biographical time (Allen-Collinson, 2003) is shaped by negotiations of the meaning of the athletic past and projected athletic future in light of this 'injury time'. In a poignant comment, she explains:

I don't want to be the athlete who was at her peak at the age of 17. . . I don't think my maximum capacity could be measured when I was so young, I want to test my potential further and maybe also restore my self-confidence through that: that I am not a falling star.

Common to many young women's stories are reflections around self-confidence. For both Katri and Jaana, successes in sport are vital for maintaining self-confidence. However, in undergoing 'discontinuous' experiences where Jaana could not live up to the perfect ideal, she has learned important lessons about herself and the potential she has for self-harm in setting such high standards for herself. However, even if she has sought to change her mode of being, she is still on the path of achievement, which is also evident in her studies: 'When I started university, I thought I'm not in any hurry to graduate, that's something I will do slowly. But now I have been doing my studies a lot quicker than others. . .' When asked how she now feels about giving herself a break in sport, she admits:

It's difficult for me. . . If I can't do what I'm very good at, then I feel like I'm not good at anything, even if I am good at many other things. But it [sport] is where I am used to measuring my worth.

### *Ditching the 'perfect' ideal*

The third of our ideal types is represented through Nea, who was a talented judoka at the start of upper-secondary school, and dreamed of competing at the World Championships and also of becoming a doctor. After experiencing considerable difficulties and symptoms of burnout, both in sport and at school (see Sorkkila et al., 2020), she abandoned the perfect leitmotif and fundamentally shifted her expectations for the future. She also sought to reclaim her 'own' time, which she felt had been taken away from her when striving to meet other people's expectations.

Similar to Jaana, Nea experiences a discontinuous event (a major sports injury) that disrupts the temporal order of perfection and becomes a point of reflection for her. However, even prior to that particular temporal point, she has struggled and describes: 'every summer I've been exhausted, I've been just too tired of it'. Describing her emotional response to entering 'injury time', she admits:

In a way, I felt relieved. It might sound strange, but when I got injured in that competition. . . I was so exhausted before that competition, and I just thought that now I will have a break, I don't need to do anything. [But] I will try come back, this is not it [i.e. the end of her sporting career]. I did not decide to quit then.

When asked about her experience of 'injury time' and what replaced sport for her when she was not training, Nea recounts:

Well, I started going out with my boyfriend and I saw my friends a lot more – the friends I didn't have time to see because of training. And I had a lot more of my own time. I also focused on school a bit more, when I had the time to read books.

While Katri describes having time and making time despite being a high-achiever in both sport and school, Nea has felt she does not have time; the sport is 'stealing' time from her, from her schoolwork and from being with friends. While 'the perfect' is in control of her life (see McRobbie, 2015), Nea's life-world is characterised by loss of control. Her experience resonates with Coakley's (1992: 272–273) conceptualisation of sport burnout as a social phenomenon where 'young athletes become disempowered to the point of realizing that sport participation has become a developmental dead-end for them and that they no longer have any meaningful control over important parts of their lives'. It is only after becoming injured that Nea again 'has time' (and importantly, her 'own' time) that she can control and use as she chooses.

Although Nea welcomes the disruption of her sporting life project, it initially 'stands outside' of her biographical time, which is shaped by a projected elite athletic career. When attempting to return to sport, however, she feels that her body refuses to be a willing instrument of achievement. Similar to Jaana, she has lost her lived sense of enjoyment and 'positive embodiment' (Allen-Collinson and Owton, 2015) in and through sport:

I won a competition and the coach sent me a message to ask how I felt. I just replied that [I felt] pretty bad. I'm just not interested in this anymore. I just feel bad, I don't like this anymore. After winning, you would think you'd feel great, but I just felt done. I cannot do this anymore.

Nea keeps going for a little longer, but her dual-career is falling apart. She reflects on the time around matriculation exams a year before the interview: 'it feels foggy, I don't remember much about it. I had so much stress about school and the exams and I didn't enjoy judo. So stressful!' She decides to withdraw from elite sport and considers having a gap year from education. She terminates *all* involvement in sport and exercise, admitting: 'I just really had enough!' Nea refuses to engage with any future-oriented, new athletic goals, body projects or ideals, explaining that this being-in-the-moment, rather than planning the future, feels right for her:

I'm feeling okay, I didn't experience any guilt. If I start feeling like I would like to go for a walk or to the gym, I will, but I don't have any plans to do this or that. I don't want to plan at all.

She is reconfiguring her life plan and temporal order of her life, has found a part-time job, and enjoys time with her boyfriend. Her dream of medical school has shifted to an

interest in studying psychology, but she has decided to defer studying for the entrance exam: 'I just didn't have the energy to put effort into it. I had so many things and studied for so long. I felt I wanted to have a break. I'm tired of constant (pressure of) achievement.' She is no longer projecting towards achievements, but instead towards moving away from home to live with her boyfriend.

After decisively rejecting the perfect leitmotif, and choosing to take time for herself, Nea's life has shifted to a slower, more self-accepting rhythm. She also starts reflecting on how her views towards other people – previously shaped by the sport ethic (Hughes and Coakley, 1991) – have changed. While the perfect leitmotif coincides with the sport ethic in that both construct quitting as weakness, from her new-found perspective of emphasising the present self and its needs, quitting is reconfigured as a way of redirecting life-energies for the better:

*Nea:* Maybe I have now started to understand the people who quit [sports].

*Interviewer:* And what did you think before?

*Nea:* I thought they are weak. But it's not weak if you quit. You should quit doing things that you're not interested in because it's just a waste of time. And it also drains your mind and energy, if you keep doing something that you don't really like.

Finally, despite the choice to withdraw from sport and take a break from the educational pathway, Nea recognises the value of pursuing projects that require long-term commitment. She does not consider her life in sport as 'wasted time', but portrays perseverance and patience as valuable things she learned in sport. Although she has argued with her mother about quitting sport, she also values her mother for pushing her to go training when she did not feel like it. In that way, 'you also learn to do things that you don't like', indicating that her ideal life is not just about relaxing and having a good time. It might be that, as time passes, she will find new life project(s) that provide her with new futures to strive towards.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our research into talented young Finnish women's experiences of striving to excel, both in sport and in education, investigated how the culturally powerful 'perfect' leitmotif and 'lived time' interact in these young women's experiences. This particular nexus is currently under-examined in the sociology of sport. Although the study was based in a Finnish socio-cultural context, our data resonate with findings in the wider research literature, including studies revealing that contemporary female subjectivities are influenced by post-feminist discourses that promise young women that it is indeed possible to 'have it all' (Duffy and Hund, 2015). While the young women we studied face multiple expectations (from parents, coaches, teachers and significant others) when pursuing their achievement projects, they also want to exercise social agency in having control over time, and to take ownership of their projects. Importantly, from a temporal perspective, they want to enjoy what they do *now* in-the-present-lived-moment, while also aspiring to become successful in the future. Their experiences of accelerating and pressured time

also reflects findings from recent sport sociological research on elite athletes (Burlot et al., 2018).

The ambitious sporting women we studied selectively engage with the past, present and future, to make meaning of their lives, including their successes and failures. While being perfect *every* day becomes unattainable and a potentially dangerous ideal, for a few participants (at least at the time of the research) taking a longer-term perspective on ‘becoming’ allows them to engage constructively with elements from their biographical past in order to bring meaning to the present, and also to anticipate a bright, positive future. As highlighted earlier, however, the majority of the participants were unable to keep their achievement projects in both sport and school ‘going’ while also enjoying an active social life. Interestingly, they claimed social agency and restored a sense of control over time by choosing to take ‘time-out’ and reconsidering the projects they actually wanted to pursue.

Our study also resonates with wider sociological concerns regarding social agency and the self; in an era of heightened reflexivity, these young women’s self-stories portray rich reflections and awareness of the self and ‘body projects’ (Shilling, 2012). The notion of the perfect, that is, a self-disciplining, self-managing, autonomous subject in control of her own life (McRobbie, 2015), gave form to the young women’s stories as shared in the research. Their social agency also emerged clearly, for rather than merely being subjected to, and compliant with, the perfect leitmotif, these young women also discussed their concerns about others’ high expectations, the dangers of perfectionism and the possibility of certain skills (of self-discipline, time-management, etc.) becoming tools for self-harm. Often, these reflections arose in connection with sports injuries that disrupted not only the disciplined sporting body-self, but also the project of perfection, and the previously taken-for-granted temporality of the athletic life-world (Allen-Collinson, 2003), in that for athletes, there is often a tacit acceptance of a strong temporal structure to their daily lives, which revolve around schedules for eating, training, sleeping and so on. Furthermore, and with regard to both the present and the longer-term future, phenomenological insights highlight that time is not merely cognitive, but that our intentionality, which projects us to the future, is fundamentally *embodied*. As Fisher (2011: 101) asserts, ‘we can think of disturbances or breakdowns in motility as thereby connected to a breakdown in intentionality, or at least as impaired intentionality – in this case, the “I can” compromised, “gone limp” in an “I cannot”’. This is a salient insight, for these moments of disruption, disturbance or breakdown, although painful, helped the young women in becoming aware of how they were attuned to the world, and in many cases triggered a search for meaning.

The participant accounts were clearly shaped by discourses surrounding ‘life’ or ‘core’ skills, which are prevalent in education and sport (Ronkainen et al., 2020). Many young women also appeared to possess excellent skills developed to optimise their studying, sports training and life in general. These skills, including time-management, emotional control, planning and goal-setting, can be useful in the pursuit of the excellence manifest in the perfect leitmotif, reinforcing the autonomous, rational subjectivity of the new femininities. However, as the above findings demonstrate, the same skills could also be detrimental to young women’s well-being, when used to endlessly manage life projects and the female ‘body project’ (Shilling, 2012). When there is little time allowed for

fun, play and spontaneity, in the name of neoliberal constructions of efficiency, precision and never-ending improvement, then subjective, lived time becomes squeezed, constrained and experienced as always lacking. All the young women, whether living up to the perfect leitmotif or not, expressed the need to ‘manage’ and ‘make’ time. Writing about contemporary elite athletes, Burlot et al. (2018: 242) identify how they ‘may organize their schedules with ideal millimeter accuracy contours, yet this approach no longer leaves room for any timeout’.

In our previous research drawing on data from the same longitudinal project, we raised concerns about the limited time these young Finnish athletes have for dreaming and imaginatively exploring possibilities of ‘becoming’ (Ronkainen and Ryba, 2018). Such ‘dreamtime’ is crucial, for as Schües (2011: 76) notes:

Reflective thinking (with its necessary leisure time) is necessary as one source for finding ‘our’ paths in the world and in the future. . . Without thinking we are lost in experience; we are lost in time without having our own time.

Dual-career policies and political actions, while based on good intentions of safeguarding talented athletes’ futures beyond their sport life projects, may well be inadvertently contributing to a pressed time perspective that demands constant ‘doing’ at the expense of ‘being’, as a phenomenological perspective emphasises. Although a few young ‘superwomen’ might be able to ‘have it all’, the form of contemporary ideal femininity embodied in the dual-career discourses all too often results in these young women’s subjective experience of time as lacking and pressed. Sports training becomes yet another duty or labour to be completed as part of a project that seems no longer to be one’s own. To remedy this situation, continued analytic attention to, and critical examination of, the implications of dual-career political actions on youth athletes’ lives are therefore warranted, together with the exposure of young athletes to a much greater diversity of narratives of ‘becoming’ in sport, without always being perfect.

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