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7 **Superwomen? Young sporting women, temporality,**  
8 **and learning not to be perfect**  
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11 [Noora J. Ronkainen<sup>1</sup>](#), [Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson<sup>2</sup>](#), [Kenneth Aggerholm<sup>3</sup>](#), & [Tatiana V. Ryba<sup>1</sup>](#)  
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15 \*Corresponding author. [noora.j.ronkainen@jyu.fi](mailto:noora.j.ronkainen@jyu.fi)

16 **Author affiliations:**

17 <sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology  
18 University of Jyväskylä  
19 Mattilanniemi 6, Kärki PL 35  
20 FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland  
21

22 <sup>2</sup>Health Advancement Research Team (HART)  
23 School of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
24 University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK.  
25

26 <sup>3</sup>Department of Physical Education  
27 Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway  
28

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32 **Superwomen? Young Sporting Women,**  
33 **Temporality, and Learning not to be Perfect**  
34

35 **Abstract**

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

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51 **Keywords:** superwoman, existential phenomenology, lived time, women’s dual-careers,  
52 identity

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## 56 Introduction

57 In addition to the ever-increasing physiological and psychological demands associated with  
58 high-performance sport, today's talented athletes also face increasing societal expectations  
59 not only to complete, but also to excel in education. Some studies have found that adolescent  
60 athletes achieve better results than their non-athlete peers at school (Jonker et al., 2009),  
61 challenging the 'dumb jock' stereotypes still prevalent in the United States (Wininger and  
62 White, 2008). Although in US collegiate sport, 'dual careers' (the combination of sport and  
63 education) have long been established, in the European context, political actions to promote  
64 these careers are relatively recent. After the European Commission published its Dual Career  
65 Guidelines of Athletes (European Commission, 2012), research and policy initiatives have  
66 increased rapidly; for example, the Finnish Olympic Committee states on its website that  
67 'Dual Career is the Finnish sport system's value choice'<sup>1</sup>. This creates additional expectations  
68 for elite athletes to achieve even more within the relatively short duration of their athletic  
69 careers. As a consequence of the 'pressed time' perspective that characterises dual career  
70 athletes' lives (Burlot et al., 2018), research (particularly in sport psychology) has  
71 emphasised the centrality of time-related skills (using time efficiently, career planning, goal  
72 setting) in creating sustainable dual careers (Perez-Rivases et al., 2020).

73 Research indicates a gendered patterning of dual careers, both in the United States  
74 (O'Connor, 2019; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010) and Europe (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2018). It  
75 appears that young sporting women are often more committed to combining sporting *and*  
76 educational goals and identities than are sporting men. Despite the growing  
77 professionalization of women's football (soccer) in Britain, many young players also invest  
78 in academic excellence (Harrison et al., 2020). In this latter study, one female participant  
79 explained: 'I wanted to do really well in uni, I didn't want to go there and just pass, you know

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.olympiakomitea.fi/huippu-urheilu/urheilukaatemiaohjelma/kaksoisura/>).

80 I still want a first. And then again with soccer, I want to do the best that I can' (2020: 16).  
81 Despite the growth of women's sport, however, there remains a staggering structural  
82 inequality of opportunity that limits women's social agency in developing a professional  
83 athletic career. For example, in Finland where we conducted the present study, only 1.6 % of  
84 the country's professional athletes in 2017 were women<sup>2</sup>. These numbers show that very few  
85 women have the privilege initially to construct a single career focused on sport, and dual-  
86 career discourses might be particularly relevant for young women, for whom it is more of a  
87 necessity to channel their development along these two tracks.

88 Recent scholarship also raises the question of whether we are witnessing a  
89 'feminization' of dual-career discourses (Ryba, 2018). This links to broader discussions  
90 surrounding the 'feminization' of education (Leathwood and Read, 2008). As Skelton (2002)  
91 emphasized, however, simply having a greater number of women in education settings (e.g.,  
92 in the role of teachers) does not necessarily make these environments 'feminized'.  
93 Furthermore, linking masculinity and femininity firmly and unproblematically to male and  
94 female bodies neglects how women can also 'do' masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987).  
95 Sportswomen often construct identities emphasizing toughness and independence, thus  
96 positioning themselves as oppositional to constructions of 'emphasized femininity' (Connell  
97 and Messerschmidt, 2005). The 'ideal' student-athlete is often constituted through  
98 masculinized discourses: she is constructed as highly autonomous, self-confident, manages  
99 time efficiently, and is in control of her fate (Burlot et al., 2018).

100 The emerging literature on female dual-career athletes indicates that many might  
101 embody 'the perfect' leitmotif of contemporary femininity that captures 'a heightened form  
102 of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the "good life"' (McRobbie 2015:  
103 9). Forms of new (white, middle-class) femininities constructed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have also

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<sup>2</sup> <https://kihu.fi/arviointi-ja-seuranta/ammattiurheilijoiden-maara-tasaisessa-kasvussa/>

104 been coined by US scholars as, respectively: the ‘Future Girl’ (Harris 2004), ‘Alpha Girl’  
105 (Kindlon 2007) and ‘Successful Girl’ (Ringrose 2007). These new individualistic femininities  
106 are compatible with many key elements of what Hughes and Coakley (1991) coined ‘the  
107 sport ethic’, such as high ambition, striving for distinction, risk-taking, and refusing to accept  
108 external limits. Indeed, athletic achievement (something that is devalued in those forms of  
109 ‘ideal’ femininity where bodily worth is tied to how the body *looks*, as opposed to what it can  
110 *do*) can occupy a central role in these ‘new’ girls’/women’s self-construction. As Azzarito  
111 (2010: 266) noted, ‘both the Alpha and the Future Girl emblematically represent *new*  
112 femininities, self-made, ambitious and independent girls, to whom sport and career paths are  
113 the most important areas of self-definition and of success in society’. Interestingly, scholars  
114 have noted that some versions of the ideal – such as the myth of a Finnish superwoman –  
115 have existed in cultural imaginations for many centuries (Lietzén, Lätti, and Heikkinen  
116 2015). As Lietzén and colleagues (2015) noted, the Finnish superwoman myth has been tied  
117 to what they describe as ‘the mythical Finnish model’ where equality is achieved by  
118 economic independence through education.

119         Although Alpha and Future girls might claim agency, resist victimization, and refuse  
120 categorization as ‘the second sex’ (De Beauvoir, 1972), attempts to live up to these new  
121 ambitious femininities can also come at great personal costs. As McRobbie (2015: 4) noted,  
122 ‘the idea of the perfect is both part of female “common sense” (...) and also something  
123 potentially dangerous, a mechanism unleashing new waves of self-harm’. Research indicates  
124 that endorsing the ‘superwoman’ ideal can constitute a risk factor for disordered eating  
125 (Mensing et al., 2007), with increasing numbers of young women experiencing intensified  
126 body-anxiety and even body-disdain (McRobbie, 2015). Whether and how aspiring young  
127 women can match their lived experience to these ideals in the world of elite sport is  
128 problematic, for: ‘despite strong dedication, perfection is unobtainable and failure inevitable’

129 (Roderick, 2014: 143), and pressures to give a ‘perfect’ performance, both frontstage and  
130 backstage, are intense (Roderick and Allen-Collinson, 2020).

131 Despite the literature on the new femininities and their manifestations in popular  
132 culture, there is a paucity of research on how these femininities are actually ‘lived and felt’  
133 and made meaningful in aspiring sporting women’s life-worlds. Building on McRobbie’s  
134 (2015) notion of ‘the perfect’, we focus here on pre-elite student-athletes, to explore what it is  
135 like to pursue excellence in both sport and education, and what happens if young women’s  
136 experiences fail to align with the idea of perfection. Drawing on existential  
137 phenomenological insights, including temporality as a fundamental component of human  
138 experience, we explore the nature of lived time in young women’s dual careers when they  
139 ‘live up to’, struggle to live up to, or abandon the cultural ideal of the perfect. The article  
140 contributes to sociological understandings of young sporting women’s subjectivities in an era  
141 of high-achieving young ‘superwomen’, and the salient role of lived time in structuring the  
142 life-worlds of achievement (and ‘failure’).

## 143 **Phenomenological perspectives and lived time**

144 There are many, complex strands of phenomenology, some of which we have charted in our work  
145 on sporting embodiment (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2009, 2011a). In addressing what he perceived as  
146 the inadequacies of scientific, ‘objective’ studies of human existence, Husserl (1983), the founder  
147 of modern phenomenology, sought to question everyday ‘common-sense’ as well as scientific  
148 habits of thought that left unquestioned extant assumptions and presuppositions regarding  
149 phenomena. To identify and reveal the essence or *eidos* of a phenomenon, Husserl (1983: 6)  
150 advocated the adoption of the phenomenological attitude, engaging in the *epochē* (a form of  
151 bracketing), temporarily to step back from the phenomenon of interest, and challenge the everyday  
152 thinking of the ‘natural attitude’. Whilst diverging from ‘pure’ philosophical phenomenology,

153 forms of more ‘sociologized’ phenomenology acknowledge and subject to analytic attention the  
154 wide-ranging and fundamental effects on lived experience of social-structural position and other  
155 sociological variables (see Allen-Collinson, 2011b). Phenomenology informed by sociological  
156 and/or feminist critiques is thus well-placed to provide a powerful lens on sporting women’s lived  
157 experiences as situated within a particular historical social structure (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2011b;  
158 Chisholm, 2008).

159 In phenomenological thought, time is not an object or container, but intrinsic to human  
160 existence and the very condition for it to be meaningful at all. Gallagher and Zahavi (2008)  
161 clarified Husserl’s account of temporality where any conscious act is structured by retention and  
162 protention, which make it possible for us to recollect past experiences and build expectations for  
163 the future. Central to many phenomenological accounts of experience are the specific ways we  
164 experience time subjectively, as what has been termed *durée*, the present moment of subjective  
165 experience (Schütz, 1967). We might experience time as ‘extending’, for example, particularly  
166 during painful, difficult, or challenging sporting experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2003). Such  
167 experiences, particularly during periods of pain, suffering or injury (and rehabilitation), have been  
168 sociologically analyzed from an emotion-work and interactional perspective by Allen-Collinson  
169 (2003) in relation to distance running and ‘lived time’/*durée*. As she highlights (2003: 341), during  
170 more enjoyable or pleasurable sporting experiences, where the body is performing with relative  
171 ease and we feel ‘on top of our game’, we may experience what Leder (1990) has termed ‘temporal  
172 constriction’ when time seems to pass swiftly and effortlessly. Between these two temporal poles or  
173 ‘speeds’ lies what we might think of as ‘objective’ time, where our experience largely coheres with  
174 clock-time or calendar time.

175 Schütz (1967: 57) reminded us that the present contains the future, as ‘every action is a  
176 spontaneous activity oriented toward the future’. In our everyday existence, our activities show up

177 as tacitly meaningful because we anticipate they lead to something; studying for exams leads to  
178 graduation, and sports training leads to a refined skill, improved endurance, and so forth. In  
179 Heidegger's (1962) thought, all our experiences are structured as possibilities: we constantly leap  
180 ahead of ourselves to what is 'not yet'. Human lives are made meaningful through choosing  
181 projects and committing to them (Adams, 2006), with a life project in elite sport as one specifically  
182 oriented towards perfection (Breivik, 2010).

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

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

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

## 195 **Methods**

196 This research builds upon longitudinal qualitative data, gathered for the Finnish Longitudinal  
197 Dual Career Study (Ryba et al., 2016), which has followed the life course and stories of 18  
198 promising Finnish youth athletes (10 women) participating in the national talent development  
199 program. The study commenced at the start of participants' journeys in upper-secondary sport

200 schools (age at baseline: 15-16) and focused on exploring subjective meanings of turning  
201 points and life transitions in these young people's developmental trajectories. The  
202 longitudinal data were used to gain a deep understanding of participants' life-worlds, and to  
203 design the current study in which Author 1 conducted a sixth round of interviews (T6).  
204 Analysis of the earlier data-sets identified 'the superwoman' as one constitutive discursive  
205 resource that shaped participants' sense-making of their lives (Ryba et al., in press). In the  
206 current article, we focus purely on the young women's stories, with results based solely on  
207 T6.

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

220         Phenomenologically-inspired research requires participants to describe in rich detail  
221 their experience (McNarry et al., 2020a). Since young people sometimes struggle to express  
222 complicated understandings, we used creative non-fiction vignettes as a data collection  
223 method to aid reflection (see Barter and Renold, 2000). These portrayed two athletes'  
224 journeys (women's stories for women/men's stories for men) through an upper-secondary

225 sport school, to encourage the interviewees to reflect on their journeys, attitudes, and  
226 experiences of being a talented student-athlete. These vignettes portrayed a collection of  
227 discontinuous experiences identified from data generated by the previous interviews  
228 undertaken in the longitudinal research. These experiences covered: the transition to upper-  
229 secondary school, a conflict between school and sport, a break-up with a girlfriend/boyfriend,  
230 performing over expectations, conflict with parents, being abandoned by a coach,  
231 transitioning to the senior sport, serious injury, and disengagement from sport. Through the  
232 use of vignettes as an additional tool to invite reflection, we sought to learn more about how  
233 participants were attuned to and navigated through the multiple demands of their life-worlds  
234 (including in education, sport, and relationships). The interviews were conducted in Finnish  
235 and lasted between 73 and 90 minutes (mean 84 minutes). Seven participants were  
236 interviewed face-to-face and, given the geographical dispersion of participants, three were  
237 interviewed via Skype™.

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

245         In our data analysis, we identified three 'ideal types' of young sporting women: those  
246 who were 'living up to the perfect', 'struggling to be perfect' and 'ditching the perfect ideal'.  
247 As with other scholars who have drawn on the notion of 'ideal types' (e.g., Owton and Allen-  
248 Collinson, 2016), we acknowledge that all 10 participants' accounts do not neatly fit into one

249 category or pattern. All personal stories have their nuances and complexities; however, all  
250 accounts had a dominant pattern that fell within one of these three types.

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

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

### 259 **Living up to the perfect ideal**

260 The first of our ideal types is represented through Katri, who, at the beginning of the  
261 longitudinal research, had expressed her ambition to become a collegiate swimmer, to  
262 compete in the Olympics, and become a lawyer. She remarks: 'my mum just said that in the  
263 7<sup>th</sup> grade I was sitting in the car and saying that I will go and study in the USA'. At the end of  
264 upper-secondary school, Katri appears to be 'on track' with her life plan: she has graduated  
265 with excellent grades and received an athletic scholarship to the USA. However, not  
266 everything has followed a neat, linear progression: last season's performance was difficult,  
267 and she was disappointed with some of her matriculation exam results. Recalling a  
268 disappointing performance in the national swimming championships, Katri reflects:

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

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

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

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

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

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

293 When asked to elaborate on why and how she has been able to succeed, Katri cites  
294 possessing several time-related skills often promoted in contemporary dual-career discourses.  
295 She expresses being skillful in time 'management' as well as planning and goal-setting,

296 seeking to demonstrate that she is in control of time, has time, and also makes time. She  
297 continues:

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

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

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

313 Katri's comments above resonate strongly with research by McNarry and colleagues  
314 (2020a, 2020b) that similarly demonstrates the 'embracing' and normalization of sustained  
315 'hard training' in performance swimming, as part of the 'endurance work' (Allen-Collinson  
316 et al., 2018; McNarry et al., 2020a) that characterizes many sports requiring a level of  
317 endurance and toleration of heavy training loads. Katri admits that there are some days when  
318 she is feeling fatigued, but then she reminds herself that 'in the end, you are doing this for  
319 yourself'. Her 'normal' days are 'good' days when she goes to the swimming pool 'for a

320 couple of hours, to do your own thing'. Therefore, swimming is framed agentially as being  
321 part of her 'own' time, something she *wants* to do, and not what she *has* to do.

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

### 333 **Struggling to be perfect**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

364 **Jaana:** well, for example, perfectionism. You're never satisfied with anything. With  
365 running, I always had to run faster or longer... Even if I knew I wasn't supposed to do  
366 that, but I just wanted to do it perfectly and better than last time... I did know what

367 kind of training loads are reasonable, but I still didn't follow them. And also in other  
368 things in life, it's difficult to be satisfied with normal performance... You feel you  
369 could have done it better.

370 Jaana's account illustrates how her life-world becomes shaped by the sport ethic (Hughes and  
371 Coakley 2011: 310, italics original) where '*being an athlete involves refusing to accept limits*  
372 *in the pursuit of possibilities*'. Although a 'perfect' training session could provide some  
373 momentary satisfaction post-session, for Jaana the bodily movement has lost the sensory  
374 satisfaction of 'feeling good now-in-the-moment': 'It wasn't fun anymore because I always  
375 had to exhaust myself', she explains. Similar to Katri, Jaana is an analytic and reflective  
376 young woman, who demonstrates self-awareness and is cognizant that she is not always kind  
377 to herself. With hindsight, she also reflects on what she has learned about herself, and how  
378 the culture (manifest in the reactions of others around her) valorizes strong and independent  
379 femininities:

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

385 After a while, the excessive training regime starts to wear out and exhaust her body  
386 and Jaana needs to take several breaks from sport, just to let her body heal. The 'injury time'  
387 is a 'time-out' from sport, which also forces her to reassess the role of sport in her life: 'for so  
388 long, I have been more or less injured... I have been forced to break away from sport. It  
389 cannot be my whole life...' Her biographical time (Allen Collinson, 2003) is shaped by

390 negotiations of the meaning of the athletic past and projected athletic future in light of this  
391 ‘injury time’. In a poignant comment, she explains:

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

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

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

#### 408 **Ditching the ‘perfect’ ideal**

409 The third of our ideal types is represented through Nea, who was a talented judoka at the start  
410 of upper-secondary school, and dreamed of competing at the World Championships and also  
411 of becoming a doctor. After experiencing considerable difficulties and symptoms of burnout,  
412 both in sport and at school (see Sorkkila et al., 2020), she abandoned the perfect leitmotif and  
413 fundamentally shifted her expectations for the future. She also sought to reclaim her ‘own’

414 time, which she felt had been taken away from her when striving to meet other people's  
415 expectations.

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

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

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

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

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

438 becoming injured that Nea again ‘has time’ (and importantly, her ‘own’ time) that she can  
439 control and use as she chooses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

475         Interviewer: And what did you think before?

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

479 Finally, despite the choice to withdraw from sport and take a break from the educational  
480 pathway, Nea recognises the value of pursuing projects that require long-term commitment.  
481 She does not consider her life in sport as ‘wasted time’, but portrays perseverance and  
482 patience as valuable things she learned in sport. Although she has argued with her mother  
483 about quitting sport, she also values her mother for pushing her to go training when she did  
484 not feel like it. In that way, ‘you also learn to do things that you don’t like’, indicating that

485 her ideal life is not just about relaxing and having a good time. It might be that, as time  
486 passes, she will find new life project(s) that provide her with new futures to strive towards.

## 487 **Discussion and Conclusion**

488 Our research into talented young Finnish women's experiences of striving to excel, both in  
489 sport and in education, investigated how the culturally powerful 'perfect' leitmotif and 'lived  
490 time' interact in these young women's experiences. This particular nexus is currently under-  
491 examined in the sociology of sport. Although the study was based in a Finnish socio-cultural  
492 context, our data resonate with findings in the wider research literature, including studies  
493 revealing that contemporary female subjectivities are influenced by post-feminist discourses  
494 that promise young women that it is indeed possible to 'have it all' (Duffy and Hund, 2015).  
495 While the young women we studied face multiple expectations (from parents, coaches,  
496 teachers, and significant others) when pursuing their achievement projects, they also want to  
497 exercise social agency in having control over time, and to take ownership of their projects.  
498 Importantly, from a temporal perspective, they want to enjoy what they do *now* in-the-  
499 present-lived-moment, while also aspiring to become successful in the future. Their  
500 experiences of accelerating and pressured time also reflects findings from recent sport  
501 sociological research on elite athletes (Burlot et al., 2018).

502 The ambitious sporting women we studied selectively engage with the past, present  
503 and future, to make meaning of their lives, including their successes and failures. While being  
504 perfect *every* day becomes unattainable and a potentially dangerous ideal, for a few  
505 participants (at least at the time of the research) taking a longer-term perspective on  
506 'becoming' allows them to engage constructively with elements from their biographical past  
507 in order to bring meaning to the present, and also to anticipate a bright, positive future. As  
508 highlighted earlier, however, the majority of the participants were unable to keep their  
509 achievement projects in both sport and school 'going' while also enjoying an active social

510 life. Interestingly, they claimed social agency and restored a sense of control over time by  
511 choosing to take ‘time-out’ and reconsidering the projects they actually wanted to pursue.

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

534           The participant accounts were clearly shaped by discourses surrounding ‘life’ or  
535 ‘core’ skills, which are prevalent in education and sport (Ronkainen et al., 2020). Many  
536 young women also appeared to possess excellent skills developed to optimize their studying,  
537 sports training and life in general. These skills, including time-management, emotional  
538 control, planning, and goal-setting, can be useful in the pursuit of the excellence manifest in  
539 the perfect leitmotif, reinforcing the autonomous, rational subjectivity of the new  
540 femininities. However, as the above findings demonstrate, the same skills could also be  
541 detrimental to young women’s well-being, when used to endlessly manage life projects and  
542 the female ‘body project’ (Shilling, 2012). When there is little time allowed for fun, play, and  
543 spontaneity, in the name of neoliberal constructions of efficiency, precision and never-ending  
544 improvement, then subjective, lived time becomes squeezed, constrained and experienced as  
545 always lacking. All the young women, whether living up to the perfect leitmotif or not,  
546 expressed the need to ‘manage’ and ‘make’ time. Writing about contemporary elite athletes,  
547 Burlot et al., (2018: 242) identify how they ‘may organize their schedules with ideal  
548 millimeter accuracy contours, yet this approach no longer leaves room for any timeout’.

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

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

556           Dual-career policies and political actions, while based on good intentions of safeguarding  
557 talented athletes’ futures beyond their sport life projects, may well be inadvertently

558 contributing to a pressed time perspective that demands constant ‘doing’ at the expense of  
559 ‘being’, as a phenomenological perspective emphasizes. Although a few young  
560 ‘superwomen’ might be able to ‘have it all’, the form of contemporary ideal femininity  
561 embodied in the dual-career discourses all too often results in these young women’s  
562 subjective experience of time as lacking and pressed. Sports training becomes yet another  
563 duty or labor to be completed as part of a project that seems no longer to be one’s own. To  
564 remedy this situation, continued analytic attention to, and critical examination of, the  
565 implications of dual-career political actions on youth athletes’ lives are therefore warranted,  
566 together with the exposure of young athletes to a much greater diversity of narratives of  
567 ‘becoming’ in sport, without always being perfect.

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