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Travelled by Adolescent Golfers

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From Pre-Elite to Elite: The Pathway Travelled by Adolescent Golfers

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ABSTRACT

This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of eight high performing adolescent golfers who had all successfully travelled the path from novice to elite level status. By means of semi-structured qualitative interviews, participants answered questions centred on four key areas which explored their journey from pre-elite to elite adolescent status: initial involvement and continued participation in golf, the meaning of golf, golf environment and social support. Two super-ordinate themes emerged from participants accounts: Early Pre-Elite Sporting Experiences and Strategic Approaches to Develop Adolescent Golfing Excellence. The study provides key insights into individual, social and environmental factors that enabled pre-elite adolescent golfers to make a successful transition to the elite pathway, and highlights plausible factors that may make a difference whether an athlete becomes elite or not. The findings will help coaches, policy makers and sport psychologists more effectively support emerging talent in golf.

Key words: Deliberate Practice Theory, Developmental Model of Sport Participation, Elite Adolescent Golfers, Self-Determination Theory, Talent Development

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research has examined the developmental pathways travelled by elite and non-elite sports performers. However, limited studies have focused on golf, which is surprising. Golf has a wide ranging appeal in terms of mass participation, sponsorship and media and has become a truly global sport being included in the Olympics for the first time in 2016. Also, golf has unique characteristics in terms of its handicap system, variability in age in elite players (Mean 36 years; range 20-50 years), and the notion that it is played over the course

Reviewer: Karl Erickson (Queen's University, Canada)

of the lifespan [1]. High on the agenda of golf governing bodies around the world is how to best develop the next generation of elite golfers. However, limited information is currently available on the underlying process of: a) what events lead to the decision being made to try and achieve adolescent golfing excellence; and b) how future behaviour patterns are then shaped.

Two theories have been developed to explain development of expertise in sport. Deliberate Practice Theory (DPT) suggests that long-term engagement with specialised, highly effortful activities is fundamental for securing elite status as a senior level sports performer [2]. For example, long term deliberate practice regimes played a key role in the development of exceptional levels of performance in cricket [3], figure skating [4], and soccer [5]. In all cases, more hours of sport-specific deliberate practice were undertaken by experts in comparison to non-experts. A crucial cornerstone of this theory is how training activities must be designed specifically to improve an individual's current level of performance while mere engagement in the activity is not sufficient. Deliberate practice activities are characterised by high levels of physical effort and concentration, are not intended to be enjoyable or lead to immediate social or financial rewards and are performed solely for the purpose of performance enhancement rather than enjoyment [2].

The Developmental Model of Sports Participation (DMSP) suggests maintaining regular long-term involvement within fun, playful, unsupervised athlete-centred learning environments throughout childhood and the early teenage years as this pathway may increase the likelihood of acquiring expert status in the long term [6]. Activities of this nature, while incorporating skill acquisition, are designed to develop empowered, intrinsically motivated, self-regulated learners within a healthy physical, psychological and social development [6, 7].

Little is known about the nature of participation and practice trends that may prove significant for acquiring elite adolescent golfing status. In one of the few studies to examine this topic, Hayman et al. [8] found that participant development more closely resembled DMSP activities. Elite adolescent golfers in this study did not start to undertake golf-specific deliberate practice until approximately 16 years of age and instead encountered a diversified introduction to several sports, which included golf, within a playful, fun, non-competitive, participant-focussed environment. A change in emphasis towards the golfer's day to day sporting involvements occurred around the age of 15-16 years when exposure with golf-specific deliberate practice became increasingly evident once participants had gained initial selection for adolescent county and national representative golf teams.

A shortcoming of the study by Hayman et al. [8] was the reliance on only a quantitative methodology to explore the developments associated with achieving elite adolescent golf performance. As such, the findings may be restricted in terms of the depth and quality of information it provides as this approach is limited in its ability to present detailed insights into the interpretations and meanings participants attribute to their lived experiences of significant events and conditions [9, 10].

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method was identified as the most relevant approach for exploring individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon. The semi-structured interviews schedules were designed according to IPA methodology and generated in-depth, rich and unique information regarding their experiences of becoming an elite performer. When individuals are involved with an experience of something major in their lives (e.g., the transition from promising child to elite adolescent golfer), they start to reflect on the significance of their chosen pathway. The IPA interviews were designed to help participants to immerse themselves within these reflections [11]. This method also enables

researchers to explore and interpret how individuals make sense of important life decisions they made.

This approach has become a popular investigative technique across several domains over the past decade including health [10, 12] and sport. For example, Nicholls et al. [13] used IPA to examine the experiences of 18 international adolescent golfers when they coped both effectively and ineffectively with performance related stressors during competition, whereas Cotterill et al. [14] explored the nature of pre-performance routines used by six male international golfers using IPA.

The primary aim of the study was to examine what it means for pre-elite adolescent golfers to successfully travel the path to elite adolescent golfer status. In addition, the study also intended to explore which framework, DPT or DMSP, best explained success in golf. Ultimately, findings of this study intend to provide coaches, sport psychologists and policy makers who work within golf talent development systems with stronger evidence to nurture exceptional levels of adolescent golf performance in the future.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were eight male adolescent amateur golfers (M age = 18.8, SD = 2.1) with a handicap between +2 and +4 (M handicap = +2.6, SD = 1.3). This scoring system means the participants must add between two to four shots onto their final round scores each time they play 18 holes of golf. Participants were affiliated with international representative teams run by the English Golf Union (EGU) and played golf competitions for county, regional, national and international teams. Two participants were England Under-18 internationals, four England Senior A Team Development Squad members and two current England Senior Men's A Squad members. Competitive playing experience ranged between six and 12 years. The study was approved by a local University Ethics Committee and the EGU and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

PROCEDURE

Golfers affiliated with EGU Under-16 and Under-21 development and Senior Men's A team squads were approached via email and telephone about participating in the study. Consenting participants were informed how they would be asked questions upon the nature of their golf development to date and the interview duration would be dependent on how much they had to say. All participants were offered the choice of interview location in an effort to make them feel as comfortable as possible [15], which in all cases was their home golf course. Prior to interview, participants were provided with verbal and written information which further clarified the interview process.

When undertaking IPA research, it is important that the interviewer builds rapport and trust with the interviewee [9]. As the lead researcher was previously an ex-elite adolescent athlete himself, he possessed contextual knowledge concerned with the demands and terminology used in elite sport, which he used to aid the process of establishing a bond with the participants [16]. To make the participants feel at ease, each interview started with an informal discussion that revolved around how they first became involved in golf [17].

Following this rapport-building exercise, data was collected using semi-structured interviews capturing how the participants viewed their world as elite adolescent golfers. To elicit more detailed responses when necessary [9], the questions were supplemented by probes. This format allowed the direction of the interview to be guided by the participant rather than dictated by the schedule [18], and made it possible to follow up on issues brought

up by the participants in the conversation [19]. The interview questions were centred on four key topics: 1) participation in golf, 2) the meaning of golf, 3) golf environment. and 4) social support. The structure of the interview schedule intended to ease the participants into the interview and began with the question “reflecting back over your childhood and adolescence, can you tell me in as much detail as possible how you first became involved in golf?”

Examples of probes used during the interviews included “please provide more detail”, “why did you think that”, “what did that mean to you”, “how did that make you feel” and “how did that influence your decision”. Every attempt was made to follow the participants and understand their unique stories rather than following a standardized list of questions [9]. Interviews lasted approximately 70 minutes ($M = 72$ minutes) and were terminated once the lead researcher was satisfied theoretical saturation to all questions posed was achieved.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to the unique processes and strategies of IPA analysis by the first and second author [9]. As opposed to other qualitative approaches, each transcript was read several times and notes placed in the margins to reflect interesting and significant comments and meanings in relation to the development of elite adolescent golf performance. The thoughts and interpretations of the researchers towards the data were also annotated on the transcripts which is another unique process of IPA.

As this process advanced, sections of text were categorised and initial theme titles reflecting the experiences of the participants were created. Researchers’ notes were then transformed into emergent themes by making associations between actual participant statements and researchers’ interpretations [9]. A catalogue of emergent themes reflecting the richness of the participants’ experiences and responses was formulated once all eight transcripts were subjected to IPA.

Connections between themes based on similarities were made resulting in a pool of subordinate and super-ordinate themes. Once these categories of themes were finalized, extracts from the interviews which represented each theme were selected. The final stage of the data analysis process involved developing a written account from these themes [9]. This account was then reviewed and rewritten several times by the lead researcher. At this stage, all participants were contacted via phone to discuss the accuracy of the researchers’ data interpretations. This involved the participants answering a sample of verification and clarification questions in a member checking procedure which aimed to provide further depth to the data that was already created [20].

All participants were sent a brief overview of their own lived experience through e-mail and contacted by the lead researcher via telephone seven days later to undertake a short discussion (<15 minutes) about the nature of the findings. This process also enabled the lead researcher to pose questions to verify that the participants had indeed discussed their experiences of travelling the path to adolescent golfing excellence throughout the interview.

As our experiences as individuals may affect our interpretations and intentions [21], the lead researcher also maintained a reflexive journal before and during the data collection and analysis stages that represented his thought processes, reasoning and actions throughout the duration of the study. The intention of this self-reflective procedure was to minimize researcher bias in terms of imposing personal views onto participants’ accounts and interpreting their words within the context of the researcher’s personal experience of being a high-level adolescent sports performer [9, 22].

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis yielded 16 sub-ordinate themes that were subsequently grouped into the following two super-ordinate themes: Early Pre-Elite Sporting Experiences and Strategic Approaches to Develop Adolescent Golfing Excellence.

EARLY PRE-ELITE SPORTING EXPERIENCES

The Importance of Fathers in Developing Excellence

In all cases, the fathers were both the primary initiators and long-term motivators of their sons' involvement in golf. Participant five stated how his father “*has never let him down*” throughout his golf career. They provided continuous guidance to them, especially during the early stages of their sports involvement. It was conspicuous how participants had a limited interest and passion for the game of golf until their fathers' took interest and encouraged their golfing activities. Five out of eight participants reported that they were happy and motivated to play golf from a young age to please or make their father proud of them. Participant four stated how he was “*happy at trying to make it as an elite golfer because that is what my dad would like and he would be proud of me.*” However, the participants equally recognised and were appreciative for the wide ranging pastoral and financial support provided by both parents, including their mothers throughout their golf careers to date. Participant one described his parents as “*just brilliant people who want the best for all of their kids*”.

As the golfer's career developed, their fathers took an increasingly peripheral role in their sons' development, especially at the latter transition stage when they were selected for country or international squads. At this point of pre-elite to elite transition, there was enough recognition for their talent that they now had the opportunity to work with well qualified golf coaches on a regular basis to work on their specific skills. Even after the introduction of this specialised programme of coaching enrichment (e.g., deliberate practice), the participants still valued their fathers' input and critical appraisals on their performances in competition and practice:

“I would just go to the range with my dad and he was really supportive and acted like a mentor as he has played golf to a decent standard (ten handicap) and won competitions at the club but now he doesn't play as much but he has always encouraged me and told me to enjoy it.” (P1)

Participants were appreciative of the sacrifices their families made to help their careers, especially when they secured international selection. This comprised of fathers taking time off from work to attend competitions, training sessions and to caddy. Participant five discussed how he considered his father had “*been the best mentor and dad I could ever have wanted*” throughout his golf career, which he found hugely rewarding.

Pleasurable Diversified Sporting Skill Training

Participants experienced an enjoyable and positive sporting up-bringing as young children and adolescents. Although participants reported to have always enjoying playing golf and experimenting with the activity at their own free will, they also reported a diverse sporting involvement between the ages of 11 and 14 in other activities and team sports:

“I played any sport I wanted as a kid, things like golf and football and running round the quarry with my dad. I just loved being free to do whatever I liked and when I wanted to do it.” (P3)

“I pretended I was Michael Owen in my granddad’s garden just kicking the ball everywhere and trying now skills out as a young kid because I initially wanted to be a footballer.”(P1)

Although no commitment to specialised golf specific training occurred throughout childhood, all participants picked the game up quickly and showed promise during the early teenage years in comparison to peers which was important for developing intrinsic motivation and perceptions of competence:

“I was just pretty good at all these sports and got into every team at school without actually doing any real practice so I guess I was a bit of a natural and it made me a bit of a star sports man in school and the sports teachers loved me I was labelled the all rounder who was great at all sports by my mates which made me feel on top of the world and just reinforced my love for all things sport.” (P8)

Annual improvements in golf performance were fuelled by regular involvement with non-competitive enjoyable golf activities and competitions with fathers and peers on challenging local courses and facilities. This tended to be junior golf competitions and fun-based training activities delivered by members of the professional coaching staff at their home clubs.

Participants perceived themselves to be physically late developers in golfing terms and four considered themselves to be late physical developers in comparison to peers. Once participants started to physically mature and reached approximately 14-15 years, immediate performance improvements as evidenced in handicap reductions were apparent. As one participant said:

“This sudden improvement made me think hang on I could actually be quite good at this game if I want to be.” (P6)

Participants much preferred competing as opposed to practicing from an early age and across all sports. This was illustrated by the low level of engagement with any forms of sport specific deliberate practice throughout their childhood and early teen years. Instead, participants persisted to undertake regular competition across a wide range of sports as evidenced by one participant:

“There was nothing better than getting up in the holidays and going down the club with your mates and playing rounds of golf all day.”(P6)

Early Nurturing of Self-Regulated Behaviours

Participants took on board the advice of significant others, but ultimately they took full responsibility over when and where they wanted to compete and practice:

“I have always took control more than anything and when I formulated my development plan last year it was pretty much what I wanted to do and obviously I got their (family and coach) opinions and tried to blend them together but I like to and always have liked to manage my own game.” (P2)

Participants consistently recounted experiences of becoming increasingly self-regulated

golfers as they travelled the pathway from pre-elite to elite:

“I know I was really reliant on my dad as a kid for everything but now I have realised how I need to start to do things for myself because he cannot come and play my shots for me on the course.”(P4)

Winning Mentality

Participants enjoyed the challenge and preferred to compete against elder and advanced players throughout all stages of their early sporting development. They were highly competitive, committed to winning and had overwhelming desire from a young age to become successful in all walks of life:

“I just love winning at everything and anything and it makes me feel good just really good about myself. I just love getting better at things all the time.”

Participant four stated how *“winning at golf was like a drug and you need it all the time as it makes you feel unbelievable”*, whilst participant two stated *“I just loved smashing the course up on a weekend as a kid with my dad and his mates to just win.”*

Influence of Environment Upon Developmental Opportunities

Participants were aware of both the benefits and opportunities for development that were presented to them while living their entire childhood in rural, lowly populated settings located in close proximity to first-rate and underused golf facilities:

“I was brought up in an environment where I could practice golf easily really, we have a large garden which I could practice putting and chipping. Also I live in a little town which has lots of open fields which I could practice on.” (P1)
“I have always lived across the road from the golf course so I just crossed the road jumped a ditch and I would be on the 17th green which was very handy.” (P7)

Family Adaptation to Elite Transition

Golf had become central to the lives of the immediate family unit by the time the participants were competing nationally. By this stage, five participants' siblings had also started to compete in club standard golf competitions. Participant eight commented that *“golf was now a way of life in my family, it is who we are and everyone on our road knows us as the golf family”* whilst Participant four stated *“golf is the topic of every chat in our house and everyone seems to just have golf on the mind all the time and this goes crazy when I am playing my competitions and especially for England abroad.”*

Participants also liked how golf has a family sub-culture, which afforded opportunities to spend greater amounts of time together whilst they practiced and competed. Participant six believed how his blossoming golf career had *“brought the family so much more together”*. A main reason why parents were happy to develop a family game culture was because they perceived golf as relatively safe, non-contact activity in comparison to other sports.

Emergent Role of Mothers in Last Stage of Transition Period

Mothers' supportive roles emerged at a late stage in the developmental pathway, around the time their sons started to gain national and international recognition as elite-adolescent

golfers. Participant six stated “*Having mum being involved was just the right thing at the right time for my golf*”. Participants came to appreciate what their mothers had to offer in terms organisational, practical and social support. The emergent motherly influence was related to planning of future travel and accommodation arrangements for competitions within the United Kingdom and overseas.

The majority of the participants felt “*assured*” and “*comfortable*” with how their mothers started showed a greater interest and involvement in the day-to-day demands of their emerging golfing careers post 16. For Participant two, this enabled him to “*spend more time practicing and getting ready and planning for competitions*”. He also discussed how his mother has started to play an increasingly important role within his golf career when he was about to achieve elite status:

“Since about the age of 17, my mum has become a bit like my manager. She will sit down with me and work out all the expenses, entry fees and complete the entry forms, flights and hotels. She even does the same for my mate who always comes with me when I play competitions, so we share the cost out more, so she books all the accommodation.”

STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO DEVELOP ADOLESCENT GOLFING EXCELLENCE

Golf Identified as an Opportunity to Become an Elite Adolescent Sportsman

At the time of deciding to pursue adolescent golfing excellence, the participants went through a focused change process consisting of the need for self-driven, golf-specific deliberate practice and critically analysing all aspects of their game. This occurred because they now realised through self-referencing their abilities with peers and associates within that they had potential to become an elite adolescent golfer:

“I never really tried before at golf and was ok so I worked on the philosophy that I should become pretty good when I put some real effort into it.” (P3)

As such, the nature of their daily golf activities changed from an emphasis on competing against peers with the sole intention of winning towards an increasingly deliberate, inward-focussed practice regime that would facilitate skill improvement.

The Importance of Deliberate Practice Post 16

In terms of golf, a clear change in practice behaviour occurred aged approximately 16. At this stage of their pathway through the EGU they were advised to work with high performance coaches and peers within the EGU developmental squads. This made them recognise how engaging in regular golf specific deliberate practice needed to become a feature of their everyday lives. It was at this time when they began to realise that they would need to take their approach to golf much more seriously if they were to successfully travel the pre-elite to elite pathway to achieve the senior level success:

“Hanging out with the England boys and watching them practice made me see how far I am away from what I need to be doing if I want to make it. I just need to practice so much more and so much more harder really especially on my short game as this is all the England boys do for hours on end.” (P6)

The importance of golf-specific deliberate practice to continued golf performance progression was realised by all during the latter teenage years. Participant four described how through the guidance of both his own personal coaches and those affiliated with the EGU, he adopted a “*practice to improve and not for fun anymore*” approach.

Participants also felt the need to start working much more intensely on all aspects of their golf post 16, with a heavy focus on short game instead of high volumes of competitive events and practice rounds. By the latter teenage years, the nature of their practice has completely been transformed. Participant five stated how he “*realised straight away after spending time with the England coaches for the first time that lots of work was needed on [his] short game as it was so important at this level*”. For the first time, all participants were proactive in altering the nature of their daily routine towards a specialised and very skill focused training, because they realised that all practice sessions now had to be purposeful:

“I look at it like a ladder and I am half way up and to get higher I have to put the practice in and not just any practice you know but that practice that makes you tired and sleep at night if you get what I mean.” (P2)

Considered Choice of Coaches

At this latter intensive transition period, the participants’ personal coaches tended to focus upon the refinement of technical aspects of their game and forging links with EGU coaching staff, tour players and golf representatives:

“My coach knows lots of the tour players in the area and has coached them all for a bit of time and he gets them to practice with me and give me tips on my short game but that is about it really. He is more of a helping hand really and I try and make all the decisions about what I need to do in training to improve.” (P8)

In this study, a very strategic approach to golf was only taken around 16 years of age, and many of the golfers had limited experience of technical golf lessons up to then. However, they started to undertake sessions of this nature post 16 which focussed on examining every aspects of their golfing skill and game. Players with their supporters and coaches identified specific aspects they wished to improve on, like refining swing and postural problems, because inability to improve in these aspects could inhibit their on-going development to become an elite performer:

“I used to swing the club quite flat so he (coach) just used to work on getting me to hit the ball on a better plane of the club and getting the basics right really, just getting everything better, grip, posture, erm then I continued to see him up until today really and I still see him now on a regular basis.” (P3)

Participants valued highly the role that the county and EGU coaches provided once they had been identified as close to being an elite golfer. Both objective and subjective performance improvements were noticeable after a matter of weeks that were very important for the participants’ motivation and continued decisions to commitment fully to golf and pursue a career in the sport:

“When I first got into the county set up it was great because it was the first time

I had ever got any proper professional coaching and we hit it off straight away and we well more me really decided I wanted to work on my swing and that is what we did and I kept at it for days on end then suddenly bang and my performances just moved up another level. It was so good and gave me so much confidence as it was the first time I had really tried properly in golf and here I was making such big improvement in no time at all.” (P3)

Non-Linear Developmental Pathway

Once specialised, rates of golf progression were not always linear with participants encountering many peaks and troughs along the way. This was a period in which they realised they had to practice deliberately for the first time, which meant a much focussed, deliberate approach to skill learning which initially led to some inconsistent performances, which is understandable, as they had to be able to apply the new skills/practices to their game:

”Every golfer in the world has a bad patch in their time and you just have to take it on the chin, learn from it and get your head down and turn things around. I have had quite a few issues over my swing which has set me back.” (P5)

Additional factors attributed to these slumps in performance included the effect of growth spurts, swing changes, parents divorcing, and the pressures of studying for A-level qualifications while trying to combine sport and academic commitments (i.e., experiencing role strain). These slumps were recounted as “wake up calls”.

Learning from “Wake Up Calls”

In the critical transition stage, significant events influenced and shaped the majority of participants’ future golfing aspirations. These episodes were predominantly negative in nature, such as encountering a humiliating performance within national or international golf competitions or periods of poor form that attracted criticism from peers. Many participants used these “wake up calls” in a positive manner to “bounce back” and reassess their long-term developmental goals. The following quote demonstrates this way of thinking:

“Well the main learning point for me was...when I first won [a major national amateur age-group competition] and it gave me a real wakeup call regards what I need to do to get to where I needed to be and I can remember looking at the putting green where all the England Boys were and thinking wow I wish one day I hope I can get into that and then after winning it really made me focus and achieve my aim of getting into the England set up.” (P8)

Sacrifices Made to Pursue Adolescent Excellence

Many self-determined sacrifices were made by participants during the latter teenage years during their transition to elite adolescent performers, which assisted them in achieving their golf ambitions. Examples included exiting mainstream education aged 13, restricted social lives and declining the offer of a university sports scholarship in America:

“It is really difficult in golf because I feel that I have lived a different life compared to my friends. It is just not the same because I always have a

tournament around the corner and it is very intense, a sport that everyone knows if you go out the night before you cannot turn up the next morning and play quality golf. I find that I have never had a massive social side really especially in the summer as the focus was to just play and practice.” (P4)

Optimising Resources

Participants had a tendency in their latter teenage years to dispose of things they perceived may impede their quest for elite adolescent golfer status. For example, all participants between the ages of 16-18 stopped participating in any other sports except for ones they thought may benefit their golf performance in some capacity (e.g., to maintain general cardiovascular fitness levels) and transferred their membership from their primary golf club to a prestigious club that had both high-quality short game training facilities and greater affiliation with county and EGU representatives.

Changing clubs also exposed the participants to a wider pool of support for their game. Golf is an expensive sport and in these clubs wealthy members, who paid particular attention to their development offered help. As participant three said:

“These supporters could be approached to see if they can offer any help as they like to see the young ones having a real go at making it.”

Once participants secured international recognition, they started to socialise with fellow elite sports performers such as older professional golfers. They also restricted their involvements with non-elite golf players and non-playing peers and school colleagues who they used to socialise with regularly during childhood and early adolescence:

“They will always be my mates like but we have nothing in common now like we did at school and I want to be a professional golfer so bad they think I am mad and cannot see why I make the sacrifices I do like not going out in town. I still see them from time to time but they do not really like golf and are at college with their new mates and prefer going out with them and doing other sports so that is fine and I am ok with it.” (P3)

Deliberate Focus on Networking

Once the decision to specialise in golf was made, participants displayed proactive, strategic, and forward thinking behaviours to identify people whom they considered may be able to help facilitate their golf development:

“I try to make as many connections as I can because you never know who may be able to help you out and where and it could be the local person at the golf club who plays once per week but gives you that valuable piece of information that could help you in the future you just do not know.” (P8)

When the decision to specialise in golf occurred, participants knew what they needed to do to secure selection for EGU squads. Examples of this strategic approach included the recruitment and long-term association with county coaches involved in the EGU infrastructure and selection committee and seeking out potential financial benefactors such as club members, local businesses and current and ex-tour professionals/coaches for coaching and lifestyle advice and practice partners:

“The people at the club are really good and they all know what I am doing and always chatting to me asking me about what have I been doing and where have I been and I feel that helps just talking to other members to give me confidence in my game and they always encourage me to keep going at it and that means a lot as well. Sometimes you cannot have a great game of golf and you come back in and you are a bit down and they help me.” (P4)

The Final Transformation: Ability to Constructively Self-Reflect to Improve Performance

Since the decision to specialise in golf was made, participants became increasingly self-reflective upon their performance levels and focussed their training towards addressing areas of their game that they wanted to improve:

“I did very well in the events but not good enough to get into the Walker Cup squad. I need to get stronger and fitter so I can hit the ball further. I mean pretty much I do not want to stand still in any area as I can always do better in everything and I will do the same thing at the end of the season like I did last winter where I sat down and looked at every area of my game and work out what I need to do to improve like there are little technical, physical and mental things that I can increase by a few levels as well.” (P8)

All participants at the time of data collection were dedicated and single mindedly focused on becoming an elite golfer. Once specialised in golf, participants were meticulous in their professional standards, preparation for training and competitions and post-practice and competition reflections, even if they found the activity boring at first. To illustrate, participant one discussed how undertaking reflection was *“boring and hard at first and the England coaches drill it into us all the time and my own coach does also but I think it is good as all the best players with England do it”*.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the lived experience of elite adolescent golfers who successfully negotiated the pathway from pre-elite to elite and contextualised it in current talent development theories. A number of key issues emerged from this study. Principally, the lived experience of elite adolescent golfers travelling the talent development pathway was like a systematic, strategic and deliberate process of living that was fully supported by their families and their other supporters and coaches. They maximised and sought to build an environment where they could pursue their life goals. The results of this research proposes key factors that all had to come together to enable them to achieve elite status.

It was notable that participants in the very last transition stage in this talent development process undertook unique, highly specialised deliberate practice sessions and the nature of the support that they received were very strategic to this stage of their development. Their families adapted to change by giving more intensive support and involvement and they acquired additional, highly specialised coaches through the gaining selection for EGU representative teams.

In the first instance and expanding on previous elite adolescent golf development research [8], the findings from this study supports the multiple sports and late specialisation theory [23-25]. Participants were found to have encountered a diversified, enjoyable and fun early sporting career. They spoke of being confident sportsmen and all-rounders in the early years

of their career. They were involved in various competitive and non-competitive teams at a range of levels, and had ample opportunities to improve their physical, mental and social skills associated with sport participation in early childhood [26]. A clear change in the meaning of golf for the participants took place during mid-teenage years when they realised through self-referencing their skills alongside peers and associates how they had the potential to become an elite adolescent golfer. Golf now became much more than a just a fun activity to undertake with friends and family to something to be constantly worked at and taken seriously for the first time. A strong focus towards an increasingly deliberate, inward-focussed practice regime that would facilitate skill improvement was now adopted for the very first time in the participants' lives.

Furthermore, the realisation of having a chance to become an elite athlete helped them to make more informed choices about how and what to focus on during the adoption of deliberate practice strategies when the decision to specialise was made. At this stage they were able to critically reflect upon their skill set, examine their weaknesses, and had the support to break down then build up their skills again to support their overall game. They had also sufficient maturity and skill to turn a boring deliberate practice session into a fun activity, providing support for the DMSP theory [6, 7]. In line with previous research, it was also noticeable how the pathways travelled by participants once they decided to specialise were characterised as non-linear and idiosyncratic [27].

Previous research has shown the importance of family support for aspiring athletes [28, 29]. In this study, we were able to highlight some specific issues that had not been previously reported in the literature in relation to the transition from pre-elite to elite. It appears that the timing of involvement of various family members and the nature and type of support they offer are crucial to the development of an elite athlete. Many have reported that elite adolescent athletes like in this study are initially socialised into sport through their fathers or had siblings who pursued that sport [23, 30]. It was found that the role of the fathers has changed and was matched to the needs of the participants. They increasingly let expert coaches take over initial guidance and volunteer coaching, but got more and more involved in the practical and financial support for their sons.

In this study, a whole family driven, continuous and deliberate strategic decision making took place. However, this was guided by the wishes of the aspiring athlete. The athlete was given the responsibility to draw upon or reject these support systems. Mothers typically got involved at the final stages of transition and almost dedicated full time involvement to support the practicalities and context of playing golf, even organising room sharing and travel for their competition mates so that they could save money and to secure peer support for the athlete. This strategic approach by the family resulted in keeping the participants immersed within golf yet enabled them more time and opportunity for undertaking deliberate practice regimes once they had specialised. As golf became increasingly embedded into the day-to-day culture of the family unit once participants were competing nationally and internationally, it enabled them to spend considerable amounts of time together while able to remaining heavily involved in practice and competition duties.

In addition to the family involvement, as previously reported, the significance and attributes of physical rural setting along the pre-elite to elite pathway in this study were also highlighted [31]. In early childhood, the participants were all raised and lived in a rural area, with ample opportunity to practice golf and other sports socially, for fun and competitively at different levels in the early stages of their development. This ensured that they had plenty of support and interest in their development as a golfer from all sections of the club, which continued and intensified throughout the participants' developmental journey. Integration of

the choice of the physical environment with the resulting social context created productive developmental opportunities and openings for these aspiring golfers.

Once they reached the national/international level, the environmental opportunities were exponentially raised. The involvement of the EGU and the opportunity to tap into its resources and high performance support was a crucial factor in the final transition period. Access to specialist coaches, overseas warm weather training camps and high-level competitions with financial sponsorship may have made the difference but future research will have to establish the role of national governing bodies and the effectiveness of support they provide at this stage of the talent athlete's career. It was also apparent how participants' pre-elite golf experiences may have contributed to the development of self-regulatory skills in that they were used to experiencing participant led, experimental learning environments. Participants were also eager to learn, receptive to guidance from significant others from a young age and took full responsibility over when and where they wanted to compete and practice across a range of sports and physical activities.

There is evidence within the extant literature that not all promising pre-elite athletes make the transition to elite [32]. This study found that the personal development and the psychological skills acquired through this nurturing environment were also crucial to make it to elite status. Participants reported being both high on ego and task orientation [33]. That is, they were highly task focused, but really enjoyed winning and achieving excellent performance at competitions. Since early childhood they were taught to make their own decisions, while considering expert and supportive advice from a range of individuals throughout their talent development journey. They were also taught to cope with setbacks and refocus towards their final goals. Their opinions were respected and taken into consideration before decisions were made about their careers. By the time they were making the transition to elite, they had the necessary psychological skills and maturity to deal with challenges (e.g., wake up calls, optimising performance). These findings support existing literature which emphasises the positive short and long term effects of autonomously regulated participation as defined by Self-Determination Theory [34].

The initial diversification also exposed them to learn these skills within different sporting context, which they could draw upon when they were making choices about their careers. In particular the golfers demonstrated the ability to reflect on their performances, a self-regulatory skill previously related to success in sport [35]. The role of psychological development longitudinally in pre-elite adolescent athletes should also be investigated. Statistically, the sample pool is small, but such investigations should be possible by pooling results of various studies and using mixed-method approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study identified key factors influencing the journey from pre- to elite adolescent golfing status. This study highlighted the complexity of the talent development pathway, but identified three factors that were present in all participants' narratives: 1) moving from diversified training to an increasingly focused one; 2) the role of family and sporting environments; and 3) importance of acquiring psychological skills in a supportive and considerate environment in early adulthood.

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