“’There was a lot of football involved, and I think that’s when my identity was created’”

- A study about retired male football players, early specialization and athletic identity.

Filip Milenkovic

THE SWEDISH SCHOOL OF SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES
Master Degree Project 36:2022
Master in Sport Science 2020-2022
Supervisors: Sanna Nordin-Bates & Charlotte Downing
Examiner: Erik Hemmingsson
Forewords

Firstly, I want to thank every person who has participated in this study! You are the reason for this study even happening. Without you, I couldn’t have done it. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me and the world.

I also want to thank my supervisors, Sanna Nordin-Bates and Charlotte Downing, who have helped me throughout this master thesis. Thank you for being patient with me and assisting me in any way necessary.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family, especially my girlfriend, for being patient with me while going through good and bad days writing this work. The support I’ve got has been outstanding, and I will never forget it.

Stockholm, Sweden, 30-05-2022

Filip Milenkovic
Summary

Aim
The aim of this study was to investigate different experiences of retired football players who went through an early specialization, in which way it affected their athletic identity and retirement, and how they have dealt with it. The research questions were:

- What are Swedish footballers’ experiences of early specialization in relation to athletic identity?
- How do early specialized Swedish footballers reflect on athletic identity after career termination?

Method
To answer the research questions, a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews were used. Six male retired football players were recruited through a convenience sample. The participants were between 20-30 years old and have been retired for more than a year. Within this study, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted.

Results
The interviews and the thematic analysis resulted in four segments, which are part of their football journey. These are: 1) Early specialization- At the start of their career until they reached youth football, 2) Career- from youth football to a senior level, 3) Retirement- Right before and after career termination, 4) Athletic identity- Journey through their careers. Within each segment, there are categorized themes with the participants reflections of their experience throughout football.

Conclusions
The results within this study shows that athletic identity starts growing within the early specialization segment, through the career and gets encountered with complications through retirement within the retired footballer. Early specialized footballers who identify stronger with their athletic-self have a harder time transitioning out of football. Further research should consider studying early specialization's relationship with athletic identity in football since no studies are found investigating the matter.
# Table of contents

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1  

2. Research background .................................................................................................. 2  
   2.1 Early specialization .................................................................................................. 2  
      2.1.1 Early specialization in sport .............................................................................. 3  
      2.1.2 The role of parents in early specialization ....................................................... 5  
   2.2 Athletic identity......................................................................................................... 6  
   2.3 Retirement ............................................................................................................... 9  

3. Aim ............................................................................................................................... 9  
   3.1 Research questions ............................................................................................... 9  

4. Method ......................................................................................................................... 10  
   4.1 Target population ............................................................................................... 10  
   4.2 Protocol ............................................................................................................... 10  
   4.3 Analysis method ................................................................................................... 11  
   4.4 Method discussion .............................................................................................. 13  

5. Results ......................................................................................................................... 14  
   5.1 Early specialization ............................................................................................. 16  
      5.1.1 Nature ........................................................................................................... 17  
         5.1.1.1 Independent training .............................................................................. 17  
         5.1.1.2 Training frequency ............................................................................... 17  
         5.1.1.3 Hierarchy ............................................................................................... 18  
      5.1.2. Experiences ................................................................................................. 18  
         5.1.2.1 Positive experiences ............................................................................ 18  
         5.1.2.2 Neutral experiences ............................................................................. 20  
         5.1.2.3 Negative experiences ......................................................................... 20  
   5.2 Career ................................................................................................................. 23  
      5.2.1 Nature ........................................................................................................... 24  
      5.2.2 Experiences ................................................................................................... 25  
         5.2.2.1 Positive experiences ............................................................................ 25  
         5.2.2.3 Negative experiences ......................................................................... 27  
   5.3 Retirement ............................................................................................................. 30  
      5.3.1 Moving forward ............................................................................................ 30  
         5.3.1.1 Easy ........................................................................................................ 30
1 Introduction

Becoming a professional football player is a dream for many kids growing up worldwide. To one day be playing in big arenas, in front of thousands and thousands of fans, in the best teams, competitions, national teams, and against the best oppositions possible. The love for the sport that increasingly grows while playing day in and out, and the longing for it when you’re away, and one day, that same dream goes away. The feeling of something so deeply imprinted in your heart and soul getting ripped out, and there one stand and wonders, what happens next?

This is certainly not the case for everyone that plays football. Statistics from Riksidrottsförbundet (2020) show that there are 1 190 922 active footballers in Sweden. Many of these people are playing football for fun, perhaps as a hobby, or just trying to have a healthy lifestyle involving physical activity. Physical activity and sport can be very beneficial for young children in the form of increasing well-being, strengthening self-confidence, increasing muscle strength, increasing learning ability and much more (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009). For those with elite aspirations in sport, there are different paths to get to the top within sports. Güllich (2014) investigated the amount of organized practice and training within hockey with three participant groups: Olympic champions, National class and former World-class players. The results showed that the amount of training volume did not differentiate between the Olympic Champions and the National class players. What differentiated the groups were the amounts of organized participation in various sports, not just hockey and later specialization.

To specialize within a sport is a well-known concept within the sport industry for reaching a high level. Eriksson & colleagues would argue that becoming an expert requires 10,000 hours of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). Many people could, or potentially have interpreted this theory to start as early as possible to reach these 10,000 hours to master a skill or become an expert within a sport. On the other hand, Popkin & colleagues (2019) report that research shows there is not enough evidence to specialize early in most sports due to its lack of technical demands and where peak performance is not necessary. When it comes to football, Dendir & colleagues (2016) reported that the peak performance age for an average professional football player is ages 25 and 27. Attackers average age is 25, while defenders
peak later at 27. In a study by Jamil & Kerruish (2020), peak performance in the English Premier League was investigated. The study aimed to see at what age the Premier League players performed at as best. Their results showed that peak performance varies depending on the position. Goalkeepers, defenders and central midfielders show no difference in age when technical performance is examined. An attacking player’s peak performance is before the age of 25 due to its high demands of frequent running in high intensity, dribble rates, and generally performing more actions on the pitch (Jamil & Kerruish, 2020). These results can be interpreted that footballers can play as long as they want because of the technical aspect, but a long career could be difficult to maintain due to the physical aspect.

Peak performance ages are potentially relevant due to the high dropout rate within youth football, which according to Mollerlokken & colleagues (2015), is close to one-fourth of players retiring annually within the ages of 10-18 years. Young football players face many challenges. Many players will drop out before making it to the elite level (Mollerlokken et al., 2015), and others may be deselected and feel psychological distress (Blakelock et al., 2016). Football players may also face motivational issues (Calvo et al., 2010), lack of enjoyment and opportunity to play (Temple & Crane, 2015). Amongst professional players, injuries seem to be the biggest reason for retirement (Koch et al., 2020). By looking at the reported statistics of football peak performance, these findings can be interpreted in a way that early specialization is not required due to football’s late peak performance age. Therefore, further research on the experiences through football development is warranted.

2. Research background

2.1 Early specialization

Early specialization is a familiar concept within youth sport, but it lacks a precise definition, and therefore it is hard to establish any recommendations around the specialization itself (Mosher et al., 2020).

In a recent systematic review, Disanti & Erickson (2019) present results regarding the definition of early specialization, and 40 relevant papers were examined. The data showed that the most common definition is: "intense, year-round training in a single sport at the exclusion of other sports or activities." (Disanti & Erickson, 2019, p. 3). Within this project, early specialization is defined in agreement with Disanti & Erickson's mentioned above.
The time span for early specialization varies since researchers’ reason differently regarding the definition. LaPrade & colleagues (2016) defined the age of early specialization as prepubertal, that is, <12 years. Buhrow & colleagues (2017) defined early specialization as <14 years. In their study, Noble & Chapman (2018) reported that 21.8 years is considered "young" for marathon running. It can become problematic to find common ground across all sports since they can differentiate in many departments. Baker & colleagues (2009) report in their study about the four stages of early specialization, which are: a) specializing in one particular sport, b) starting competing relatively early, c) starting in sport early, d) early high-intensity training and focus within the sport. Within this study, <12 years is considered early in football.

There is an ongoing debate about the risks and benefits of early specialization. This debate concerns whether young athletes should specialize in only one sport or sample multiple sports, before specializing in reaching an elite level. The Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP), created by Côté & colleagues (2007), describes deliberate practice and deliberate play which are in both the specialization and sampling pathways and possible outcomes of these constructs. Deliberate practice is defined as an engagement in a highly structured activity that is explicitly improving in that particular area, that requires concentration and does not need to be fun (Ericsson et al., 1993). Deliberate play is defined as having no clear goal in play activities except having fun (Ericsson et al., 1993). According to the DMSP, the authors reported that early specialization could lead to elite performance, as well as reduced physical health, reduced enjoyment, and dropout. The DMSP model characterizes early specialization as a high deliberate practice, low deliberate play with a focus on one sport.

2.1.1 Early specialization in sport

Ericsson & colleagues (1993) argued that the earlier one starts specializing, with deliberate practice, the higher level of performance an individual will achieve, and those who do not start early will not be able to catch up. This theory would get questioned over the years since more research shows that Ericsson’s theory is not the only way to go. In a study conducted by Fahlström & colleagues (2015), different pathways to the national team level were examined. The pathways are mainly described in two classical ways: the sampling and early specialization way. Questionnaires were handed out, and 328 results came back in. The result showed that overall, these pathways vary and are specifically individual, but the Swedish sports model, to a large degree, is potentially characterized by later specialization and elite
investment. In disagreement with Ericsson’s 10 000-hour theory (1993), football players that have not gone through an early specialization could, according to research, still reach an elite level due to the age of peak performance in football (Jamal & Kerruish, 2020; Dendir, 2016).

When it comes down to sampling between different sports, Bridge & Toms (2013) reported that athletes who compete in more than one sport in their youth are more likely to compete at a national level than athletes who only practice one sport. However, in Haugaasen & colleagues (2012) review, football expertise development was investigated. The authors reported that footballers have to stay as close to football-specific training as possible to evolve expertise since it is more important than non-specific play activity. The optimal way of training would be to play and stick to football. If athletes need variation, the training should be conducted relatively close to individual and role-specific variation. Bridge & Toms (2013) essentially report about between-sport sampling, and Haugaasen & colleagues (2012) report about within-sport sampling, which is different. However, the articles are clear in their results that sampling has both benefits and disadvantages depending on the context.

Furthermore, Malina (2010) reports that young athletes who specialize in one sport often drop out. The authors report that there are a few individuals who specialize early that actually make it to an elite level and that its effectiveness is limited since only the successful cases are highlighted. This can be emphasized by Côté & colleagues (2009), who explains the factors of injuries and late maturation being a potential link between early specialization and dropout. Butcher & colleagues (2002) reported that lack of enjoyment was the most important reason for changing sport or dropping out in their retrospective study. Wiersma (2000) also reports that the potential risks outweigh the potential benefits to the case since early specialization is difficult to approve of its methods as high intensity and frequent training, and long-term consequences. The research above points towards the direction that early specialization impacts dropout rates. However, Larson & colleagues (2019) found no evidence linking early specialization and dropout.

The consequences of early specialization in sport could be costly, with a higher risk of injury and developmental issues (Mosher et al., 2022). This can also be emphasized by Read & colleagues (2016), who describe it as a great risk for football players, both physically in the form of injuries and mentally in the form of burnout. Burnout is also found to be correlated
with intense training and different competitive situations within football players (Baker et al., 2009).

In a consensus statement by the American Orthopaedic Society for Sport Medicine (LaPrade et al., 2016), the researchers reported that early specialization could be linked to negative psychological consequences. Young athletes tend to get isolated by the early specialization from their peers, which can lead to athletic identity development, increasing the risk of burnout and stress (LaPrade et al., 2016). Waldron & colleagues (2019) reported similar findings to LaPrade that early specialization affects athletes psychologically and could potentially give maladaptive psychological outcomes such as burnout and physical and emotional exhaustion (Waldron et al., 2019). Waldron & colleagues also report that an early specialization environment could impair the basic needs of an athlete, such as the coach-athlete relationship. However, in a study by Larson & colleagues (2019), no evidence of a direct link between early specialization and burnout was found. Larson's results are exciting but may also have been influenced by the population in his study, which consisted only of Canadian swimmers.

In a study by Patrick & colleagues (1999), the role of peer relationships in talented adolescents within sports and arts was investigated. The results showed that peer relationships played an important role in continuous involvement and commitment to their respective talent (Patrick et al., 1999). Ommundsen & colleagues (2005) studied the peer relationship between adolescent footballers within football. Results showed that the participants reported feeling a strong sense of friendship towards their peers, even though players were both task and ego-oriented.

### 2.1.2 The role of parents in early specialization

One factor that could determine an individual's life choice in youth footballers is the parents. Parents are well known to channel their interests into their children, resulting in a high involvement (Malina, 2010). Malina reports that this could result in burnout among young athletes, not handling pressure and not being able to meet expectations from the parents. Early specialization is not always a choice by the athlete, yet instead could, for example, potentially be forced upon the athlete by their respective parents (Malina, 2010). However, Côté (1999) talks about the influence of the family and their commitment in their children's careers at a young age. The author reports that parents make sacrifices for their children, such as
sacrificing their personal lives, to give their children the best possible opportunities for optimal training and development.

2.2 Athletic identity

At the beginning of a career, individuals create a form of athletic identity that they carry as part of their self-concept (Brewer et al, 1993). Athletic identity is a sport specific concept and is defined as: "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). How strongly one identifies with the athlete role varies and is individual. Researchers argue that the strength of one's athletic identification can be a decisive factor in engaging in physical activities, i.e., those who show a strong athletic identity tend to participate in sports rather than individuals with weaker athletic identities (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletic identity can be conceptualized as including three key components, which are:

- Social identity- the amount of strength an athlete identifies with their athletic role.
- Negative affectivity- when unable to fill the role as an athlete.
- Exclusivity- the absence of other social roles (Ronkainen et al., 2015).

Many athletes invest a lot of time and effort into their sport, leaving them impeding the process of establishing a sense of self-identity as a result of not exploring other options, which is also known as identity foreclosure (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Identity foreclosure was first used in human development studies in 1959 by Erikson (1959) and lacked a precise definition, but was later on described as a concept of not engaging to exploratory behavior and only committing to a life role (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Investing time into only one sport could affect individuals to not involve in exploratory behavior because of time commitment, seeking approval from their respective peers, and external and internal rewards linked to their participation in the social system (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). A similar phenomenon to identity foreclosure is narrow identity, which is, in this case, when a person primarily or exclusively identifies with being an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). When things are going well for football players, e.g., winning games and training well, research shows that a strong athletic identity can be positive (Brewer et al., 1993). Having a broad identity is the opposite, and its benefits are unclear. Currently, no scale measures a broad athletic identity with multiple social roles (Anderson, 2004).
Football can consume an athlete's identity in various ways, such as the influence of family, friends, teachers, and coaches, to the point when it becomes the only thing this person identifies with or defines as, which is being a football player (Mitchell et al., 2014). It becomes an easy choice for many footballers, certainly not all, since athletes tend to choose and specialize in a sport they become good at (Bloom, 1985). Brewer & colleagues (1993) reported that having a strong athletic identity could be both positive and negative, like a double-edged sword. Danish (1983) mentions one benefit of having a strong athletic identity: the positive effect it has on athletic performance. Melendez & colleagues (2009) describe the benefits of having a strong athletic identity as accepting the body, developing life management skills and establishing a social network. In a study by Lamont-Mills & Christensen (2006), athletic identity and its relationship to sports participation levels were studied. The results showed that athletic identity increased with sports participation level and showed a significant difference between the male and female genders, where males had higher self-reported scores for athletic identity (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006).

The drawbacks of having a strong athletic identity are described as being potentially harmful during a career transition, injuries or sports career retirement, and developmental processes such as career maturity and vocational development (Melendez et al., 2009). When things are not going the right way as a football player, the narrow identity could become problematic. From a sociological perspective, the social organization in a high-performing sport can induce burnout in young athletes, who potentially develop a unidimensional identity, narrow identity, and lack of autonomy in relation to training decisions (Coakley, 1992). Harris & Watson (2014) are also consistent with Coakley, reporting a positive association between athletic identity and burnout among young athletes. However, Verkooijen & colleagues (2012) found no association between athletic identity and well-being in their study. They also reported no evidence regarding strong athletic identity and its association with burnout. Brewer & colleagues (1993) also mention that there could be a risk of overtraining when having a strong athletic identity.

Selection is a well-known concept within sports. In Grove & colleagues (2004) study, the relationship between athletic identity and selection was studied. The authors focused on the changes in female basketball, hockey, and volleyball players' athletic identity due to being selected or not before a game. The results showed that the not selected athletes reported significantly lower self-reported scores for athletic identity. In contrast, the selected players'
athletic identity scores did not change. Similarly, Brown & Potrac (2009) studied former elite youth footballers where the authors focused on their development of a strong athletic identity, the influence of deselection and their adaptation to life after retirement. The authors reported that the strength of the athletic identity contributed to psychological and emotional conflicts when deselected, with feelings like depression, anxiety, fear, anger and humiliation (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Hauge & colleagues (2022) aimed to examine youth academy male footballers' experiences of transitions within the football realm in a recently published systematic review. Transitions within this study are from youth teams to first team and retirement. The authors reported that early specialization within football has a determining factor whether how players perceive their transition. It was also said that players have strong athletic identities due to constantly engaging in a football environment from early on in life, with the help and influence of parents preserving their football habits (Hauge et al., 2022). Grove & colleagues (1997) also report that transitions like retirement for athletes with a strong athletic identity could negatively affect them by inducing difficulties.

In a meta-analysis by Ronkainen & colleagues (2015), the researchers investigated the research area of athletic identity. They provided a critical synthesis of the qualitative research that has been conducted in sports psychology. The results from the study showed that the studies of qualitative research into athletic identity are various in methodological and theoretical approaches. This qualitative research has increased our understanding of the construct and has shown us various experiences of the athlete’s identities. This could be interesting in how early specialization potentially is linked to the type of strength in an athlete’s identity.

To summarize, the research on early specialization and athletic identity varies. Studies have generally investigated early specialization through different sports, such as swimming, basketball, and not many studies were related to football. Because many football players are involved in intensive training from a young age, such as those selected into academies prior to age 12, it is essential that this area needs further football-specific studies. Researchers might want to consider more qualitative methods for a more in-depth overview of the area. There are no studies that look at the relationship between early specialization and athletic identity, even though it is a possible risk (LaPrade et al., 2016). There isn’t much qualitative research regarding football and early specialization, and studies on sports that are relatively close to
football have been presented. It is recommended not to condemn early specialization to quickly, since more research is needed on the topic (Baker et al., 2021).

2.3 Retirement

Retirement is viewed as a transition between different phases and is defined as: "an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). The degree of the retirement phase can vary depending on the athlete's sports identity (Torregrosa et al., 2004). Torregrosa & colleagues (2004) reported that preparation before retirement could benefit the athletes since the retirement itself is planned and does not come as a surprising event. In a study by Beamon (2012), the author investigated identity foreclosure among former athletes. The results showed that the athletes had exclusive athletic identities, which is the absence of other social roles (Ronkainen et al., 2015). Their identities are negatively affected after the athlete's transition out of the sport and the struggle of redefining their identities (Beamon, 2012).

Problems could arise when players get released from their respective football clubs, and their transition out of the environment could potentially encounter challenges against their well-formed football identity (Hickey & Roderick, 2017).

3. Aim

The overall aim of this study was to investigate different experiences of retired football players who went through an early specialization, in which way it affected their athletic identity and retirement, and how they have dealt with it. More specifically, this study investigates players who have retired from football and have experienced early specialization, their athletic identity, and retirement from the sport.

3.1 Research questions

- What are Swedish footballers’ experiences of early specialization in relation to athletic identity?
- How do early specialized Swedish footballers reflect on athletic identity after career termination?
4. Method

4.1 Target population

For this study, the targeted players fulfil:

- Male retired football players, aged 18-30.
- The definition of early specialization: "intense, year-round training in a single sport at the exclusion of other sports or activities." (Disanti & Erickson, 2019, p. 3).
- Have specialized in a prepubertal age, that is <12 years.
- Played or selected into an academy prior <12 years.

The targeted academies are top clubs from Stockholm, and their first team plays in Allsvenskan, the highest-ranked league in Sweden. These participants must have retired from their professional careers and are no longer actively playing to become a professional. They are allowed to play for fun when this study is conducted. The retirement itself has to have been from this year (2022) going back one year, minimum.

4.2 Protocol

The recruitment of the participants was done by an invitation from the author via convenience sampling, which is a more convenient and economical way to recruit participants (Denscombe, 2018). The author has a background in football, early specialization within a top club academy, and has a vast connection within the industry. The chosen participants do not have a personal relationship with the author. The participants were contacted through a direct message on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram, and later on with a phone call through these social platforms to get further information about the interviews that would take place. They got chosen because of the author's knowledge of the participant's football history, that they played in different academies in Stockholm, and that they are retired.

The data collection took the following aspects into account: reliability, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Each of these aspects has also been taken into account by the European Research Integrity Code (All European Academies, 2018). All participants were informed before the start that participation in this study was voluntary and that they did not need to answer questions if they did not want to. All participants were informed regarding the handling of their personal data. Interviews and recordings are anonymous in order not to get identified. Talking about training history is common within sports and not usually considered sensitive information.
The participants received information about all data that the researcher collected: interviews, recordings, notes, and everything associated with the participants got used by the researcher and for research purposes only. The used data was kept for research purposes but would still be anonymous. The interviews were conducted professionally, without any problematic or disturbing questions. A consent form was handed out to the participants to sign that they were giving consent to this study. The participants were also informed that participation in this study is voluntary.

This study used semi-structured interviews to gather data, which is often used in sports and exercise sciences (Smith & Sparks, 2016). With the help of a semi-structured interview guide, which got pilot tested and refined, the questions were asked to the participants. The pilot test helped with the formatting of the questions. The preference was that the interviews take place in person, but five out of six were conducted on the digital platform Zoom, and one was conducted at GIH (Gymnastik- och Idrottshögskolan) campus. The interviews were conducted in a calm environment, and lasted approximately one hour per interview. Cameras were used in the digitally performed interviews, and almost all interviews had a stable internet connection, and all interviews were recorded. Six males were asked to participate in the study, and all of them accepted. All of the participants fulfilled the criteria. Three out of six participants have tried other sports but chose football as the primary and only sport early on before the age of 12 and therefore fulfil the criteria for early specialization.

4.3 Analysis method

In this study, inductive thematic analysis was elected and implemented. The method was suitable for the study because the author was interested in identifying patterns of meaning within the data (Braun et al., 2016). Braun & colleagues (2016) described this method as flexible since it is not tied to a specific theoretical framework and does not come with terms regarding data collection alongside other factors. The thematic analysis was conducted with Braun & Clarke’s (2012) six steps as a guiding tool, which are:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data.
2. Generating initial codes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.
When the interviews were done, a process of familiarization with the data began, which meant transcribing the data, reading it multiple times and making notes throughout the transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Every interview was transcribed into Microsoft Office Word documents, which were later saved on the author’s computer, inaccessible to anyone except the author. All interviews were recorded and translated into Verbatim in text, which is an advantage as the interviewer can return to the interview sound file or the Microsoft Office Word document to listen or read about what was said to create a clear and distinct picture of the answers (Bryman, 2002). The participants were given pseudonyms, to keep their identities anonymous throughout the study. After the transcriptions and familiarization with the data were done, the initiation of generating codes began. In this step, the coding of all the data was conducted systematically. The coding was done in a column on the right side of the transcription within the document, so it was easy to track and see which code belonged to which part. On the right side of the codes was a column used to note initial ideas and comments. After the coding, the search for themes began.

This part of the analysis was done using the same program as previously. All of the codes were gathered and collated within one document, and a pattern within the interviews and the different codes were searched for to create themes, trying to combine similar codes. Within this study, the author understood early on that coloring the codes within the Microsoft Office Word documents and combining them into separate categories was necessary to make it easier for the eye to comprehend the data since there were initially over 30 codes per interview. The author used that and categorized the codes within a document. Later on, after cleaning the data set and the author felt that the data content was sufficient, the search for themes was over. Subsequently, the author started reviewing and making sure the themes worked with the codes, creating a large map with the help of post-it notes instead of Microsoft Office Word documents, with different colors to systemize the themes. The reason for changing to post-it notes was that it became easier to spread the notes on a whiteboard to see the data as a map. After the review, defining and naming the themes was next. Here, the naming and creation of the themes were done in a separate document where the author aimed to generate concise names for each theme. Last but not least, the finalization of the analysis was conducted by picking relevant quotes for each theme and translating them into English. Within the analysis, a latent style was taken by the author, which is a style that tries to capture the ideas and assumptions underneath what is explicitly being said by the participant (Braun
Choosing an inductive analysis could be beneficial when explaining a phenomenon and also works well if interest can be found in understanding why something happens with an interpretive approach. (Gratton & Jones, 2014). Interpretivism also allows the researcher to discover different explanations, for instance, interpreting a relationship between A and B through descriptions, explanations and different views of it, rather than just recognizing that there is a relationship between the two factors like a positivist would (Gratton & Jones, 2014).

Within qualitative studies, trustworthiness is a familiar concept. It can be established by four criteria, being: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Hassmén & Hassmén, 2008, pp. 155). To make this study trustworthy, the author made sure to show relevant quotes from the data collection. The quotes were taken from all participants, not only one, which shows one step toward trustworthiness. To ensure the transferability of the study, a thick and clear description is given of the data collection and the analysis process. To ensure rigor within a study in sport and exercise psychology, there are three standard methods within qualitative research: member checking, inter-rater reliability, and universal criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Member checking is commonly used within sport and exercise and psychology and is based on the researcher involving the participants by returning the data (e.g., the transcripts or themes) to the participants for them to give input on whether the data is correct or not (Smith & McGannon, 2017). This method was not fulfilled within this study because the author did not find it necessary for the participants to be apart of the analysis. Inter-rater reliability is a well-known concept of researchers consulting with other researchers regarding the interpretation of the results (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Within this study, inter-rater reliability was not discussed with other researchers, except for supervisors of the study, since the author was writing this essay alone and had no one to consult with. A meeting was conducted with both supervisors, where thoughts were shared regarding the methods. Universal criteria, the last concept of rigor, is known as being an indicator of research quality and rigorous work (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Within this study, a criteriological approach was used to prove the quality of the research, which is mentioned above.

4.4 Method discussion

This study was done with an inductive thematic analysis with semi-structured interviews. Braun & colleagues (2016) reported that thematic analysis is an open analytic technique,
making it easier for beginners within the qualitative field. The author classifies as a beginner since interest was only found in quantitative work, which is the only type of work produced by the author. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and after the analysis, relevant quotes got translated into English. These quotes are not Verbatim, which is a disadvantage because some words are adapted to better fit in with the English language.

This particular study captured the author's interest in doing it in a qualitative matter due to the research questions. Thematic analysis as a method has both strengths and weaknesses. This method lacks literature compared to other analysis methods, e.g., phenomenology, and may cause beginner researchers to feel unsure of how to report a rigorous thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell & colleagues (2017) also mention the method's flexibility that could lead to a lack of coherence or other inconsistencies throughout the development of themes from the data collection. Within this study, developing themes was tricky, but it could have been an effect of the author's inexperience with qualitative work.

Five out of six interviews held place via Zoom, and one was conducted on campus at GIH. One advantage of having a semi-structured interview face to face can be better communication, both verbal and non-verbal since the participant can see the interviewer (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). On the other hand, having interviews through Zoom is considered convenient, time-saving, easily accessible, and could lead to an improved personal interface (Gray et al., 2020). There was only one instance through Zoom where the internet connection got cut off and interrupted the flow of the interview, which is seen as a clear disadvantage and could have affected the data.

Since the author is a football player, there is a risk of being biased during this analysis. Seeing and recognizing the career and the story told by the participants could potentially harm the analysis. There is a chance of only seeing and recognizing what the author wants to see, or what he has been through as a footballer. The participants were asked to describe and talk during the interviews like they did not know that the author was a football player. This was a precaution taken not to endanger the study and to give clear answers.

5. Results
The purpose of the study was to investigate different experiences of retired football players who went through an early specialization, in which way it affected their athletic identity and retirement, and how they have dealt with it. The interviews and the thematic analysis resulted in four segments, which are part of their football journey. These are the following:

- Early specialization- At the start of their career until they reached youth football.
- Career- from youth football to a senior level.
- Retirement- Right before and after career termination.
- Athletic identity- Journey through their careers.

Within each segment, there are categorized themes with the results.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics of the participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Start age</th>
<th>Age at interview</th>
<th>Selection into academy age</th>
<th>Peak level</th>
<th>Retirement age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Division 1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Allsvenskan</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Division 2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Division 1</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Division 2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table demonstrates each participant's starting age of playing football, how old they were during the interviewing phase, at which age they got selected into their respective academy, peak level, and retirement age. The Allsvenskan is the highest division in football for club teams in Sweden.
5.1 Early specialization

This first segment relates to the early specialization stage. Within this stage participants spoke about the nature of football, and their various experiences around the start of their journey until they have reached youth football. These figures presented in this chapter are the themes, and they are not related to each other.

Figure 1. Hierarchical tree with the results from the early specialization segment.
5.1.1 Nature

In this section, the players described the nature of their early specialized training. The key findings within this were their reflections on independent training, training frequency and the hierarchy within the sport.

5.1.1.1 Independent training

Independent training from a young age is a factor mentioned by several participants, which also remains consistent throughout the whole early specialization segment. The participants talked about starting to train football in their spare time, without the team, and what kind of training that was conducted. Participant 6 talked about ‘in the days when you did not train with a team, you did something, maybe it was that you trained on technique, fast feet or something like that at home, or with dad or a friend...’ in which he, later on, described that he began training independently from the age of 7.

One of the participants mentioned that he, from a young age, trained independently ‘...Even when I came home from training, I could call a friend and ask if we should continue as well.’ (Participant 4)

5.1.1.2 Training frequency

The participants described football being a significant commitment, with many training sessions per week. For example, participant 1 said:

‘‘It was in relation with me changing teams to [football academy], then everything really changed in football. It was more serious, more training, even more playing football yourself. Came up to football every day. When you did not have training with the team, you went and played football yourself. Every break at school, I played football. Then maybe we trained 3-4 times a week, even then. Every break in school, after school, went home and then went out and played football again. So yes, pretty much I keep going every day.’’ (Participant 1)

Football could be encountered in school as well, and the participants often got to play football in the physical education class and on their break between classes. Participant number 5 describes the amount of training done when he was between 10-12 years old, where he said:

‘‘With the team, we trained maybe 4 times a week, plus a match or tournament. As I said before that almost our whole team went to the same school, then we had football in school as well. We always got football in
sports, our coach wanted us to play as much football as possible. So say 6-7 times a week, when it was still organized, plus a match.’’ (Participant 5)

5.1.1.3 Hierarchy

The participants often talked about the hierarchy of the game and that ‘’...it was a bit like you somehow knew your place. One knew that these are the best, these don’t get much playtime and the feeling was that people accepted it that way.’’ (Participant 6). The players quickly found out who the better players were and who were less good and had some acceptance of it because it was normalized within football.

Some participants found it hard to encounter the hierarchy within a team. Here, participant 3 talks about the feeling of pushing away other players to have more space within a team, and is described as a hard but necessary thing to do to achieve something in football.

‘’When I came to a new team ..I have a little hard to take a place...I was not shy but I had a hard time taking a place and pushing others away, which I actually think you have to do to get far in football.’’ (Participant 3)

5.1.2. Experiences

In this section, the players described their experiences in their early specialization. The key findings within this were their reflections on positive, neutral and negative experiences in football.

5.1.2.1 Positive experiences

5.1.2.1.1 Relationship to others

One of the positive experiences that the participants spoke about during the early specialization stage was their relationship with their coaches. Some of the participants spoke positive and thankfully about their coaches, where they described them having a personal relationship outside of football as well. While talking about his experiences, participant number 6 was in a good mood and had a happy tone. He described their relationship being very good both on and off the pitch.

‘’It was [coach],... he was the one who took me under his wings, he was the coach who also let me float freely. I got to do what I wanted in the last third of the pitch. He saw my qualities and he is also a part of me becoming as good as I became. Then we also had a private relationship in the way that he was friends with my family, it
became a lot that he was at home with us, we could sit and play yatzy, and things like that. So, it became more than just this coach-player relationship.’’ (Participant 6)

The relationship with their peers during the early specialization was described as good by most of the participants. A few of the participants also developed personal relationships with their peers off the pitch. Participant 2 also described him feeling part of his team after hanging out with his teammate in private, where he said:

‘‘And then I also noticed, there was a guy named [with a football friend], who, I started hanging out off the field. He said come home to me, come to my country place... and then I felt -eyy- okay, I'm part of the team....’’
(Participant 2)

5.1.2.1.3 Intrinsic motivation

All participants talked about football in the early specialization segment as fun and described themselves as happy playing it. It is described as a much simpler time where football was not about performing, but rather just having fun. When asked about the period between the ages 10-12, participant 2 answered:

‘‘I felt good * laughs *.. at the time, it was about going out to play games, go and train... It wasn’t about becoming better, or it wasn’t about performance or that I have to deliver... really... yes had no problems. I felt good. It was simple... Those were simple times... ‘’ (Participant 2)

Intrinsic motivation appeared to drive continued training, even in suboptimal playing conditions. For example, participant 6 said that ‘‘it does not matter if it was minus 23 degrees outside or 42 degrees hot, you went out and had an incredible time. It was just fun...’’

5.1.2.1.4 Supportive parents

Parents were always around to help out if needed during early specialization of participant 1’s journey, where he said ‘‘Then when you get up in age, at 11-12, you notice that parents get along to tournaments in Sweden and abroad, so there were always adults to turn to.’’ He described them as a safe spot, whom they could turn to even on tournaments outside of Sweden.

He also mentioned his supportive coach, who had to handle around 30 kids during the practices without any structure or help but just the goal of getting the kids to be active. Participant 1 said:

‘‘In [football club] it was a bit chaotic. There was my dad who was a coach, ehh, they did their best but they were only 2 people with 30 children.
5.1.2.2 Neutral experiences

5.1.2.2.1 Expectations from others and self

Having expectations set from a young age in early specialized footballers is something participant 4 talked about. The expectations from within were that he had to be a footballer because his father and grandfather were both elite players. The participant talked about this with an emotionless expression and a neutral tone while describing the pressure from within.

“Above all, there are expectations from myself. Since my father and grandfather were elite football players, I have felt almost obliged to be, and it has been quite tough at times. On the other hand, I have not felt that my father and grandfather had demands on me, that I should be. They must have wanted it, they have been there and helped and so on... I think they would have accepted it if I did not become it but most expectations have been from myself.” (Participant 4)

Participant 3 talked about the expectations that were set with his first team and that he liked it a lot. After switching to an academy, these expectations were no longer the same due to the quality of the players being leveled.

“I had extremely high expectations of myself when I played in [football club], both from teammates and coaches. But there I liked it, very, very much. And that was what I was then... the expectations I had when I switched to [football academy] were not in the same way because there all the guys were good, all were good, so it was like that.” (Participant 3)

5.1.2.3 Negative experiences

5.1.2.3.1 High pressure

Football is an environment containing high pressure, which is described below. While all participants generally spoke positively about parental support, there were examples of pressure in relation to parental financial support. Participant 5 talked in a sad tone, watching down on the table, saying:

“For me, it's just this that I was always reminded of how expensive my sport is, that it costs a lot. "We cannot afford this", or "You cannot get new shoes". For me, there was always a lot of pressure, no matter how things turn around, it was always a cost issue. Sometimes I was not allowed to go abroad, or to the [football tournament] because we could not afford it. I
was like that from an early stage, I was there and wanted to win, I did not have many choices. I needed to succeed.” (Participant 5)

The problem of being far ahead of everyone else affected participant 6 and his surroundings, because they couldn’t find a way to cope with it. He described feeling lonely and having performance anxiety as a result of high pressure.

“It was high pressure, absolutely. Above all, I think I got so much pressure on me because I was so far ahead early... when I had my first setback, I had a hard time dealing with it, and I had no one ... when they have talked about me ... I was so far ahead, they had not been involved in something like that before in that way, they did not know how to handle it. They did not know how to handle me that way. So, for me it was very, very performance anxiety like...” (Participant 6)

5.1.2.3.2 Ill-being

Participant 3 talked about not being able to cope with the pressure, which gave him trouble and ill-being. He says that "it was this mental struggle that came with the pressure that made me unfortunately get my self-esteem, self-respect, a little depressed...I think that has a lot to do with the elite part...yes, the mental part." (Participant 3). He mentioned that it was not being intentionally done by anyone; instead more like a consequence of the elite aspired environment. Talking about his negative experience, participant 3 had a sad tone in his voice and took a long time explain his emotions. Within this theme, he was the only participant mentioning depression and self-esteem being a consequence of the elite environment during early specialization.

5.1.2.3.3 Relationship to coach

Some relationships were good, and some were less good between the participants and their respective coaches. Participant 4 described his coaches as crass, tough and a bit senseless. Physical training could lead to players vomiting during pre-seasons, even from a young age.

‘‘They were pretty crass, when you did wrong they told you what to do better, and they were pretty tough, especially in the physical sessions when we had really tough running sessions and stuff, and physique ... So that you would run until you almost vomited, during the pre-seasons especially then...they were quite tough...’’ (Participant 4)
Being a young kid and having adults shouting and having high demands on could be harsh and scary sometimes. Participant 5 talked about this and players maturing early from it as a consequence.

‘But when you are 10-12 years old, you have two coaches who are 30, 40, 50. And when you are a child, an adult is much bigger than you so you can be scared. Especially when the coach is screaming, or making too high demands... There will always be this confrontation with an adult, and that particular confrontation will be a bit .. He may be a bit harsh in tone, so you are still a bit scared in a way, sometimes.’ (Participant 5)
5.2 Career

This second segment presents results from their careers. In this study, “career” is defined from when they’ve started playing on a senior level. Within this stage, participants spoke about the nature of football and their various experiences from a senior level. These figures presented in this chapter are the themes, and they are not related to each other.

Figure 2. Hierarchical tree with the results of the career segment.
5.2.1 Nature

In this section, the players described the nature of their career. The key findings within this were their reflections and on the hierarchy within the sport, the high expectations and the training frequency.

5.2.1.1 Hierarchy

Similarly to the early specialization, players still described a hierarchy within their team during their career segment. However, the hierarchy was described as more extreme at this stage. For instance, participant 2 said:

‘‘When I came to A-team football, no one cares that you play youth national team, it means jack, here they are like: ‘‘now we play in [highest division]!’’ So it was like, when you did not perform, you got to hear it, and it was hard .. Because what should I say? You guys should be quiet? Then they say: " what quiet? You should be quiet? You have not played a minute, and I have won the [football tournament], what have you done? Have you done anything? " Because it is a lot like that. ‘‘What have you done? Aha, you have not done anything, then you have no substance, shut up and sit down...’’ (Participant 2)

With performance being the key in a hierarchy, participant 2 described that ‘‘It is a lot of hierarchy. So, if you deliver on the field ... you are respected by your teammates depending on your performances.’’ (Participant 2) and he talked about it aggressively. He mentions that one only gets respect depending on his latest performance.

5.2.1.2 High expectations

During the career segment, players reflected on increasingly high expectations in comparison to the early specialization stage of their football journey. Participant 5 mentions that high expectations are somewhat accepted depending on the amount of time a player puts into football. He said:

‘‘It would be scary if I put all this time and then be bad, because more was expected of me .. I would say that it is important of course to be good if you spend a lot of time on it. It's just tragic to be bad after all the time you put in.’’ (Participant 5)

There are high expectations on football players, not just on the pitch but off as well. Participant 2 talks about the expected behaviors and how a player should act.
‘‘There are always expectations when you play in the first teams... you should be disciplined. After the workout, go home, sleep, then go work out the next day. That is what is expected of us all at this time. You should act professionally, how do you talk to people, how are you out, etcetera. It was a lot of things that they taught us...Football players must behave in a certain way.’’ (Participant 2)

5.2.1.3 Training frequency

Equally to the early specialization segment, players also described the training frequency during their career segment, where he said, ‘‘I had no problem with going and training like ... four times a week with the team, getting up early and training myself too, so I was maybe on eight sessions a week...’’ (Participant 2). The difference was that in this segment, the training frequency was described as higher. Participant 2 earlier described him just training 2-3 times a week in his early specialization segment. Many participants talked about the high training frequency, especially ‘‘When I went to the football high school for [football club], when played in [football club], so we trained 9 times a week.’’ (Participant 3) in their respective high school with a unique football program, where football training is being held as part of lectures.

5.2.2 Experiences

In this section, the players described their experiences of their career. The key findings within this were their reflections on positive and negative experiences in football.

5.2.2.1 Positive experiences

5.2.2.1.1 Confidence

With regards to positive experiences, confidence is one of them. Some participants described being confident due to how football made them feel. Participant 3 felt football was his calling and that he was better than everyone else.

‘‘I felt I was the best and I will live of this. I will always play football. I'm better than everyone else and I like how it made me feel, and I still do today... I like how it made me feel and how good I was at it. It made me think I'll be doing this forever, this is my calling. So, yes, my confidence was sky high quite simply...’’ (Participant 3)

This self-confidence originates from his high perceived competence in football. When asked about how he felt about football during his career, participant 5 said:
“The thing is, football always made me feel good. I felt that I stood out from the others, and because I was so good, I got a really good self-confidence too… It could come days where nothing could disturb me, neither mentally nor physically, because I had such good self-confidence.”

(Participant 5)

5.2.2.1.2 Intrinsic motivation

Even though demands are high during the career stage, participant 4 still found football really fun. While winning was always highly regarded by the players, ultimately, enjoyment was key. He said:

“I always had fun training there, at that age. Then there was a bit of demands, of course. It could be that you were told when you made a mistake… so then you had to step up. But the atmosphere overall, we had a lot of fun together. Then it was that since we played in [football club] right then, we won most of the matches we played, I think a lot of atmosphere comes from that for free.” (Participant 4)

Some days were hard, but overall, football meant a lot during this period to participant 5. He describes the moment when he began truly investing in his elite aspirations as being a vital part of what made him more interested in the sport…

“Football now meant even more than it did at the beginning of my career, because the elite aspirations, among other things, made the whole thing more interesting. I built up even more joy and love for the sport. Of course, there were days when it was hard, but if you look at it in general, football is the best thing in life for me at that time.” (Participant 5)

5.2.2.1.3 Being selected

A few of the participants did not have any issues with selection. Participant 5 mentioned that “I have very few times sat on the bench. I am always the one who trains, starts and gets to play my minutes in a match.” (Participant 5) and participant 6 said that “During that period, I do not think there was any time I was not selected…” (Participant 6). They were almost always selected. Participant 5 describes it as being satisfied with the good role that he had in his career. Both participants talked about selection with a calm voice, knowing they had a good time during their careers.
5.2.2.1.4 Status in society

Participant 3 talks about the confirmation he got from playing football, and he describes ‘‘Ehhh... Partly the general thing about it has made me feel good... like a status, a stamp in some way. ‘‘He is a football player, he is good at football.’’ It represented something I was proud of.’’ (Participant 3). The outcome of being good made him feel good, and he enjoyed that people spoke well about him. Having a status was important due to its benefits, as gaining respect and being popular. Participant 1 talks about the status and that it made him relevant, which he enjoyed.

‘‘Yes, I thought that was important. It was my way of earning or gaining respect, and when I was little, I wanted to be the cool one ... Everyone wanted to play football with one ... So yes, it was important to me that others saw me as a good player ... You got a form of status which now in retrospect made me relevant’’ (Participant 1)

5.2.2.3 Negative experiences

5.2.2.3.1 Ill-being

Similarly to the early specialization, players still described ill-being within this stage of their career. However, the ill-being was described as more extreme at this stage. Participant 6 spoke about negative emotions following underperforming. He said:

‘‘It was like that if you had a bad training or a bad match, then you wanted take out the shovel and dig down, but when it went really well then you flew on clouds. So that was the period when things went badly, then it was difficult to recover. And there you can get almost a feeling of depression... So, I got depressed quite simply...’’(Participant 6)

Similarly to player 6, player 3 spoke about his negative emotions, as he did in the early specialization segment. He said:

‘‘Then you could be sleepless many nights when you realized that you distrusted yourself...I myself really knew, but I know I am much better than this... It made me feel really bad...it made me feel worse than I would have felt otherwise.’’ (Participant 3)

5.2.2.3.2 Expectations from others

Participant 1 spoke about the high expectations in his career segment from others, giving him a different way of thinking regarding the results from his games. He said:
“Say I win and play a bad match, I will not see it as a win, but I will be annoyed and angry anyway. While if yes play well and win, then that is the best there is. But if I lose, that’s the worst I know... It's been like this since I was little. I have such high expectations on me from outside, and from myself that it becomes natural to think so…”  (Participant 1)

External expectations could create pressure on football players, as participant 2 describes the feeling of going under when not delivering good performances leading to him feeling bad. For instance, he said:

“'When I was in [football club], people suddenly expect; but you are in [football club], you are the next big star! And I did not deliver, so there was even more pressure. I also felt terrible because this was my chance to succeed and I'm not taking it right now, so I went under.'”  (Participant 2)

5.2.2.3.3 High pressure to perform well

Playing in a highly successful team at the top of the league comes with pressure. Participant number 2 talks about it being the worst period of his journey, with not taking the chance he was waiting for his whole life. The pressure got to him when he did not perform; he had to take the chances he got.

“I felt extremely much pressure, I have never felt so much pressure in my whole life. It affected me mentally...I need to prove myself, and once I got the chance, I did not take the chance, I did not perform. It became a vicious circle. At the same time for me, I have so much to lose because I do not get so many chances... So for me, they was pressure. And when I did not deliver, it was chaos. Mentally, I did not feel well in [football club], that was the worst period of my life.’”  (Participant 2)

Without playing at the highest level, participant number 4 talks about the pressure he got from all directions, from home and work. He describes it as being pressured to perform well at all times.

“I have not been at the very highest level, where I think there is extremely hard pressure. But you feel pressure from all sides, because that is the football you are doing. I feel that even today, or a year ago, when I came back to work, the first thing they ask is how it went at the match this weekend, you cannot answer .. And not just at a match level, but every time I meet my relatives, ‘hey how are you football, do you still play there ‘‘? There is a pressure to perform and to be good, all the time.’”  (Participant 4)
5.2.2.3.4 Performance before person

During the career stage, the majority of the participants spoke about often only being treated like football players and nothing else except that. Performance was an important factor, which often resulted in their feelings or well-being not mattering as much. When asked about this, participant 1 said ‘‘We have had some coaches who focused more on football than seeing the person themselves. They focused more on us winning every game than on us feeling good. It was really about life and death.’’ (Participant 1). Similarly to participant 1, participant 6 spoke about his well-being getting overlooked. He said:

‘‘I think it’s a common thing, that you often ask, it might be a classic but:”
How did it [the game] go? “They ask about the performance itself before they ask about the person himself, how he is. I also think it became a common thing, which meant that you were naturally identified as a football player. So, they asked about the performance before they asked how I am...’’ (Participant 6)

5.2.2.3.5 Not being selected

Selection is a big part of football. Players can either be selected into teams, clubs and academies or selected to starting roasters within games. Participant 3 talks about being discombobulated due to not getting selected for a game. He said:

‘‘I started to play a little worse when I was there in [football club], and then this pressure started to come... now I will not be selected anymore, now it's someone else... oh shit, I might sit on the bench, damn, what happened? It started a bit with me feeling that I did not get it, because before that, I have always had it my whole life, it has always been like, [Participant's name] will play!’’ (Participant 3)

Even though players get used to playtime on the field, it can always be changed to a coach selecting his team before a game. Participant 4 describes his negative emotions regarding not getting selected:

‘‘And even when you've been in a team, when you're not allowed to play, for example, can be really frustrating. You can dig really deep into a hole. If you do not have the right people around you, it can be really tough.’’ (Participant 4)
5.3 Retirement

This third segment presents results from the right before and immediately after the footballer’s retirement. Within this stage, participants spoke about moving forward in life, the easy and hard parts of career termination, their reasoning behind the decisions and their feelings regarding it. These figures presented in this chapter are the themes, and they are not related to each other.

![Hierarchical tree with the results of the retirement segment.](image)

5.3.1 Moving forward

In this section, the players described their experiences of their retirement. The key findings within this were their reflections on moving forward after football.

5.3.1.1 Easy

Two of the participants found it easy to move on in life. Participant number 5 described his transition out of football, and he said:
“Im the one I’ve always been. I’ve always been myself. My identity is the same. The transition was quite easy from football. You learn at an early age, things like being on time, being disciplined. You take that with you to your new career” (Participant 5)

Similarly to participant 5, participant 3 talks about the transition out of football, and out of a football programmed high school. He said:

“It was a pretty easy transition, because it's actually the case that I went through a football high school in the first year of high school...so then I even switched from high school back to [high school], ehm to find myself in something other than just football.” (Participant 3)

5.3.1.2 Struggle

Some participants spoke about having people around them that could not accept that the player wanted to move on and gave them a hard time. Participant 5 talks about the struggle before retirement and how external opinions affected him:

“I was 20 and people were already expecting me to become a professional. Many of these people do not understand that in Sweden the average age in the Allsvenskan [highest division in football for club teams in Sweden] is around 27 years old. It is usually the case that you start in lower divisions and build your way up. But these people who said "How can you not be a professional? You're 20 years old, you might as well quit", those thoughts eventually started to play a role in one.” (Participant 5)

Participant 2 talks about the reaction from his surroundings regarding his decision to retire from football. He said:

“There were many who were angry with me, who asked: ‘‘what are you doing?!’’ because the talent is there, everyone sees my talent and it is the sick thing everyone sees my talent, everyone has seen it, it's just that my talent has been in the wrong arena.’’ (Participant 2)

5.3.1.3 Lessons learned

Throughout a football career, a lot can be learnt. Participant 6 spoke about his learnings after retirement and the difficulties coping with learning at the time. He said:

“I can say that personally in recent years I have learned a lot, and it has come after I played football. And what I mean by that is that I have been a lot in such a mindset world, personal development... “Either you succeed
with something, or you learn something" and even if you have heard it, it is not something you could properly apply, I thought. I may have had it in the back of my mind, but it was more difficult to apply in practice.’’

(Primary 6)

5.3.2 Reasons

In this section, the players described their experiences of their retirement. The key findings within this were their reflections on their reasons for retirement.

5.3.2.1 Injury

A few of the participants had to retire due to injury. Participant 4 talks about his emotions and how injuries have affected his career. He describes the emotional damage dealt by injuries and that being some of the worst things he knows about.

‘I’ve been really hurt in my career and it’s been awful, actually. For each new injury you get more used to it, how to handle it and so on. But it’s incredibly hard when your thinking is all the time about how I should perform better, and then you get injured and cannot do anything about it...when I won [football tournament], [football tournament], and [football tournament], after that I got my most serious injury, a knee injury. Then you feel how everything just collapses all of a sudden. But it was just fighting back, and then you were back at the same level again .. But .. Injuries are what emotionally destroy the most. Much more than losing, I would say because then you cannot even participate, and then I cannot develop when I do not even practice what I am doing... it’s among the worst things I know. It is so constantly recurring and there are always consequential injuries for me.’’ (Participant 4)

The combination of injuries and having emotional issues is described as negative. Participant 6 spoke about his will to get back to being on the pitch, the rehabilitation process and the recurrent injuries.

‘So, it was shitty ...the combination of being injured and a lot with this performance anxiety, it was built on the more I was injured. I also think it was a thing that I was eager, I tried to come back faster than I was ready, which made me get setbacks, after setbacks, after setbacks and it just got heavier, heavier and heavier with rehab and injuries. So it could be that I rehab for six weeks, we say, come back and get a setback, and then you are back and have to do six new weeks, and so it could roll on like that.’’

(Primary 6)
5.3.2.2 Active decision

Most participants made an active decision to retire in football, as participant 2 describes it as a necessary move. He described it as that he aspired to move on due to time being a factor, and that he needed to proceed in life.

‘Ehh yeah, it was a decision I felt was time to make because I felt ... I loved football but I did not want it as much, to become a professional anymore. And I felt like I was getting older and I started noticing that I was standing still in the same place for a long time. And I'm behind...I felt that I was behind right now. I'm 26 years old, I still live at home, I had zero education... I felt, eyy, I'm not going anywhere with football and time is ticking, I have to make a decision now. And I was definitely not ready to try another turn... I wasn’t tempted.’ (Participant 2)

External factors like a good job offer were one of the reasons for participant 5’s retirement. He spoke about the feeling of having a different view on football in comparison with others. Similarly, to participant 2, time was a factor. He said:

‘It was a decision I had planned a little before. I couldn’t continue like this. I noticed that no one felt or thought, or watched football the same way I did. I was there to win. I played in a series that got a lot of attention, and I refused to see people joking around and playing matches. It did not work for me. I also got older, and external factors influenced me. I was offered a good salary at my job and yes I thought that the time I spend on football was not worth it. Over time, a change was needed and I chose to quit.’

(Participant 5)

5.3.3 Feelings

In this section, the players described their experiences of their retirement. The key findings within this were their reflections on positive and negative feelings around the retirement.

5.3.3.1 Negative

Retirement affects players in different ways. Here, participant 4 spoke about his negative feelings regarding his retirement. He said:

‘I'm a little anxious right now. As I have mentioned, I have already considered making this decision three, four years earlier than that on several occasions as well. But always decided to give it another chance. So, it's a relief in a way, to let go of that, the anxiety. But at the same time there is even more anxiety because now I know it's over, it will never happen as I had planned all my life would happen.’ (Participant 4)
Participant 6 describes the complexity of retiring on an official note. He describes it as a hard thing to do, so he let his football career peter out, even though he has not played for a couple of years. He stands out from the other participants because of his inability to do so. He said:

‘‘So I’ll make it clear that I do not really play...I have been afraid of that, that ziiippppp [sound of something breaking] break...For me, it has been the case that I do not dare to do it, it has been too hard. That's why I’m letting it go away slowly, because I cannot let go completely.’’ (Participant 6)

5.3.3.2 Positive

Participant 1 found positive feelings regarding his career termination. He spoke about having more time which he used to spend on training and playing games. When he spoke about this, participant 1 had a positive tone and seemed genuinely happy. He said:

‘‘I noticed that I got a leisure time on a completely different level that I had never had before. I could meet my friends, I could attend the family party on my cousin’s birthday, I could do everything I could not do before. I could go on vacation with my family because I did not have football. This in itself made me still feel good even though I left something lovely behind me.’’ (Participant 1)

Participant 2 talks about his religious connection to God and being able to find a way out, and realizing that he has more to himself than just football. He expressed a thankful look on his face during the interview when he said:

‘‘But my help, luckily, I had the relationship with God, and it helped me a lot to understand that I am more than just [participants name] the football player, life is so much more than just football. Before, football was my whole world...Today I feel good...’’ (Participant 2)

5.4 Athletic Identity

This last segment relates to all three previous (early specialization, career and retirement) segments of the footballers’ journeys. Athletic identity is a coherent concept that starts from the early specialization through their careers and gets challenged at the footballer’s retirement. Within this segment, collected data will be presented to demonstrate the development of athletic identity and its continuum through time.
Athletic identity is a concept to which degree an individual identifies with the athlete role, and the strength of the identification can vary from person to person (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletic identity can be conceptualized as including three key components, which are the social identity- the amount of strength an athlete identifies with the role, negative affectivity- emotional response to incapability to fill the role as an athlete and exclusivity- the absence of other social roles (Ronkainen et al., 2015).

Throughout a football career, players naturally develop a strong athletic identity. This study found that an athletic identity gets stronger over time for various reasons. All of the participants in this study described having a strong and narrow athletic identity. They all only identified as footballers. They also reported having negative feelings when unable to fill the role as an athlete and subsequently having no other role than a footballer. Their strength differed within each person. For instance, participant 5 reported a strong social identity but also reported having less strong negative affectivity and less strong exclusivity. This could potentially answer why he did not have trouble moving on after retirement, even though he strongly identified as a footballer.

In the early specialization segment, footballers described the nature of football, involving factors like independent training and training frequency. These affect the athletic identity
through the number of time footballers spend training, both independently and with an organization, giving them a stronger feeling of being a footballer and identifying as one. Here, participant 1 spoke about his period between 10-12 years old, where he said, ‘‘On the other hand, there was a lot of football involved, and I think that’s when my identity was created, or I got that identity in relation to that age.’’ (Participant 1).

In the career segment, players spoke about their positive experiences with football and its nature. These affect the athletic identity positively, gaining confidence from playing well, getting status within the sport, being selected and having intrinsic motivation. Similarly to the early specialization segment, their nature was described as having a high training frequency, which ultimately affects the athletic identity because of the amount of time spent on just training.

The high expectations involving expectations from external and internal factors regarding how a player should be and act in a professional matter affected the player’s athletic identity. In the last part of their journey, the retirement segment, players described that their athletic identity got challenged. Many of the players expressed having an identity crisis after their retirement. For instance, participant 2 expressed himself having trouble accommodating society after his retirement. He said:

‘‘So, it was only a period after football, maybe 2-3 years where I was lost ... Very lost... identity crisis... Who am I in society? Before, I was [name of participant], the football player in the community, now I am NOBODY in the community... Now, that I have quit football, I have no education, I have nothing... Then I felt, oh, I'm nothing... I noticed, identity crisis. It was chaos.’’ (Participant 2)

In this study, the development of athletic identity is a result of the experiences and the nature of football itself. Athletic identity, as a concept, follows over each segment of the footballers’ journeys and gets affected on the way through early specialization, their career and retirement. Some players might face different challenges on the way, resulting in different outcomes. All of the interviewed players in this study have had a similar pattern of their journey.
6 Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to investigate different experiences of retired football players who went through an early specialization, in which way it affected their athletic identity and retirement, and how they have dealt with it. The research questions were:

- What are Swedish footballers’ experiences of early specialization in relation to athletic identity?
- How do early specialized Swedish footballers reflect on athletic identity after career termination?

6.1 Results discussion

Early specialization segment

The reflections of the retired football players experiences were overall mixed. The participants spoke about positive, neutral, and negative experiences within the early specialization segment. The participants perceived that they invested much time in their training during early specialization; however, they reflected on this relatively neutrally. The participants' relationship with their coaches was reported to be good, e.g., supportive and encouraging and less good, e.g., insensitive, pressurizing and frightening. Due to the high pressure and competitive nature of early specialization in football, a less good relationship could potentially be developed between the coach and athlete. These results mirror Waldron
& colleagues (2019) findings of the environment within early specialization which can potentially impair the basic needs of an athlete and affect the coach-athlete relationship. All of the participants reported good relationships with their peers, which mirrors the findings of footballers having a good relationship with peers despite environmental factors (Ommundsen et al., 2005).

Given the results of the relationships, it feels utterly reasonable that players can develop a negatively charged environment within enormous performance- and competition-oriented academies. In this study, this did not happen to often, and it may be due to the homogeneous population where all have been involved and selected during the early years in their early phase of specialization. The majority of the coaches were described in a positive way, which may be affected by the fact that the academies in Stockholm train their coaches to lead in the same way. It might have looked different if academies outside Stockholm had been investigated.

Parental support was talked about by the participants as a positive experience. Participants reflected positively on the support they received from parents, including those who had a parent as a coach. The parental influence is consistent with Malina's (2010) findings, who reported about the parental involvement and having their interest being channeled into their children. Overall, the importance of support from coaches, peers and parents played an important role in shaping positive experiences throughout early specialization. Athletic identity started to form during the early specialization, with participants reflecting on their training a lot, e.g., after organized training with independent training. This amount of training fed their exclusive identities as footballers, being the absence of other social roles (Roinkanen et al., 2015). These results within this study also mirrors Brewer & Petitpas (2017) findings of identity foreclosure, which is not engaging into exploratory behavior because of the commitment to football. That the participants have built a strong identity is not strange to me, as the system is built in such a way that they must build a strong athletic identity to continue playing. The high training frequency in relation to the football environment can be the two decisive factors beyond the player's characteristics, will, and motivation. The players are different in personality, and their results may have varied despite the homogeneous group.

Earlier studies reported that burnout was associated with early specialization (Read et al., 2016). Larson & colleagues (2019) found no direct links between early specialization and
burnout, which is consistent with this study, even though this study did not aim to investigate that matter, proposing burnout was not mentioned throughout the interviews. Mosher & colleagues (2022) reported that developmental issues and a higher risk of injury are a consequence of early specialization. Within this study, injury was not found or reported by the participants in the early specialization segment. Two out of the six participants struggled with injuries later on in their careers, which could be a consequence of overtraining in their early days.

**Career segment**

Within the career segment, the participants spoke about the nature of football, the high expectations, the hierarchy and the training frequency. They reported positive experiences within this segment, e.g., getting selected, and gaining confidence which they also spoke about having a status in society due to their football career. This is consistent with Ronkainen & colleagues (2015) findings, having the participants express their social identity that gets fed by the surroundings and by the immense training. Participants spoke about the confidence they gained within this segment, which also was a big factor for them gaining even a stronger social identity and gaining even further intrinsic motivation, which subsequently mirrors Riksidrottsförbundet’s (2009) findings of self-confidence being improved upon physical activity and sport. Participants 6 and 3 subsequently spoke about their negative experiences, mentioning ill-being from playing bad and losing games. These negative results fed negative affectivity, which Ronkainen & colleagues (2015) described as the incapability to fill the role of an athlete. Some of the participants had negative experiences during this segment due to de-selection, which is consistent with Brown & Potrac’s (2009) study, with the participants feeling emotional conflicts, such as frustration upon de-selection. Grove & colleagues (2004) reported the relationships between athletic identity and selection in their study. His results showed that the deselected players reported significantly lower self-reported scores for athletic identity. The lower ratings could potentially be the consequence of de-selection, which shows a weaker athletic identity within the athletes. Expectations were seen as a neutral experience during early specialization and later seen as a negative experience in the career segment. A possible explanation could be the fact that the nature of football gets tougher, with higher expectations within the sport itself, the hierarchy within teams and the amount of time put into it. Interestingly, these participants could not have continued to play football without forming a strong athletic identity. Wherever they
turned, there was football, where the school also contributed to organized football during class time in various high schools, which increased the training frequency immensely.

**Retirement segment**

In the retirement segment, participants experienced different degrees of the length of their retirement. Two of them experienced an easy retirement out of football, and the rest found it complicated to retire, which also is consistent with Torregrosa & colleagues (2004), that reported that the length could be influenced by the strength of the athlete’s identity, depending on factors like preparation before retirement. Lamont-Mills & Christensen (2006) reported that athletic identity increased with the level of sports participation and that athletic identity was stronger within males. Only two out of six participants within this study reached an elite level. Malina (2010) reported that only a few athletes that specialize early within sport actually make it to an elite level. Participant 6 was the one footballer playing at the highest level among the participants (see table 1). He described being afraid of retiring on an official note, while the other participants had already retired officially. His solution was to let the retirement peter out with him not having to deal with the decision.

All of the participants in this study are males, which is consistent with Lamont-Mills & Christensen's (2006) findings regarding the gender difference in self-report athletic identity scores. Other participants expressed having psychological issues like anxiety when retiring, caused by watching something he dreamt of not going according to plan. These participant's athletic identities became more exclusive throughout their journey, which is the absence of other life roles (Ronkainen, 2015). The exclusivity of their identities made it harder through retirement, which mirrors Grove & colleagues (1997) research about the difficulties athletes face going through retirement and its effect on athletic identity. The results could potentially have looked different if the players had played at a lower level, leaving them to a choice where they potentially wouldn't identity as strongly as a footballer like the participants within this study did.

**Conclusions and further research**

The conclusions from this study are mainly that footballers who identify strongly with their sport have a harder transition and adapting to life once their career is over. This could potentially be an effect of early specialization. Suppose the players had not undergone an early specialization, where many hours were put in to be as good as possible and possibly
tested on other sports. In that case, the participants' fate could have looked different today. The DMSP model shows how elite performance can be achieved by spending time on play and games, a little planned training, and testing on other sports during the early years (Côté et al., 2007). Had Stockholm's football academies followed this model, there is also a chance that dropout rates would have decreased. Peak performance age was explained earlier in the background, focusing on age of footballers hitting their peak. This is only to draw the parallel that players do not need to specialize early and participate in too much training, as there is plenty of time to achieve elite performance. This study also goes to show that it doesn’t require 10,000 hours to become an expert or to master a skill, as Ericson (1993) reported, because of the research area regarding early specialization being divided.

The participants in this study acknowledged evolving an athletic identity in their youth as a potential result of early specialization, which is an important finding. There is an association between early specialization and athletic identity, which is described within this study, and further research should consider studying early specialization's relationship with athletic identity within football. Further research could also consider investigating football academies outside of Stockholm, because it might differentiate between the main capital and the remaining of Sweden.
Reference list


43


https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410500127975

https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021643718575

https://doi.org/10.5435/JAAOS-D-18-00187


49


I’m a footballer!... Or, I was one.

En studie om pensionerade fotbollsspelare, tidig specialisering och atletisk identitet.

Informationbrev om ny studie

Hej idrottare!

I detta brev beskriver jag en ny studie om tidig specialisering (tidig, intensiv träning) inom fotboll som ska börja snart. Anledningen till att du får brevet är för att du har sagt muntligt att du hade kunnat tänka dig delta i studien. Jag kontaktar dig därför nu för att berätta mer om studien, och för att fråga ifall du vill delta.


Vad handlar studien om?

Somliga påbörjar fotbollsträning mycket tidigt, medan andra börjar senare i livet. Jag är intresserad av vilka erfarenheter fotbollsspelare som började träna tidigt och intensivt har, från de allra första träningsspassen fram till deras pensionering inom fotboll. Jag vill särskilt undersöka:

- Vilka är svenska fotbollsspelares erfarenheter av identitet i relation till tidig specialisering?
- Hur reflekterar tidiga specialiserade svenska fotbollsspelare över atletisk identitet efter karriäravbrott?
- Hur påverkade deras fotbollskarriär deras pensionering?

Det finns inte mycket forskning kring dessa aspekter, och därför tror jag att med en bättre förståelse av dem så kan man bidra till mer kunskap inom fotbollen. Studien stöds av ansvariga handledare och jag som författare ser värdet i att veta mer om tidig specialisering och atletisk identitet hos pensionerade fotbollsspelare utifrån deras egna synvinklar. Det finns dock inget som helst tvång att vara med, utan deltagande är frivilligt.

Vad innebär det att delta i studien?
Att delta i studien innebär att du blir intervjuad och får svara på frågor om dina erfarenheter av och reflektioner kring ditt idrottande. Intervjun tar cirka 60-90 minuter. Om du vill delta i studien så behöver du först fylla i en samtyckesblankett för att bekräfta att du vet vad studien handlar om och att du är villig att delta. Därefter bestämmer vi tillsammans tid och plats för intervjun. Den kan ske på plats eller via Zoom. Om du vill göra intervjun på plats så kan du föreslå en lämplig plats; alternativt så kan vi ordna en sådan.

**Att vara med är frivilligt och innebär inga särskilda risker**

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt. Att delta medför inga särskilda risker för dig, men att reflektera kring din träningshistorik kan komma att påminna dig om händelser eller ämnen som du anser känsliga eller personliga. Därför är följande viktigt att veta:

- Du behöver inte besvara alla frågor som ställs under intervjun.
- Du kan välja att avsluta ditt deltagande när som helst utan att behöva ange någon orsak.

Att inte delta, eller att avsluta ditt deltagande, har inga konsekvenser. Du behöver bara berätta för någon av oss forskare att du avstår.

**Inga obehöriga kommer att kunna se vad just du har svarat**

Intervjuerna kommer att utföras av Filip Milenkovic, masterstudent inom idrottstvetenskap vid Gymnastik- och idrottsföreningen. Jag tar hand om din data och förvarar den på en plats som inga obehöriga kommer åt. Alla eventuella namn och liknande uppgifter kommer att pseudonymiseras, vilket innebär att när resultat från studien presenteras så kommer det inte vara möjligt att härleda svaren till någon enskild person.

**Vad händer med mina uppgifter?**

Gymnastik- och Idrottsföreningen är ansvarig för dina personliga data. I enlighet med EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR) samlar vi in informationen utifrån (1) att vi har fått samtycke från dig, och (2) att forskningen kan ge värdefull information av allmänt intresse. Enligt denna dataskyddsförordning har du även rätt att kostnadsfritt få ta del av de uppgifter om dig som hanteras i projektet, och vid behov få eventuella fel rättade. Du kan också begära att uppgifter om dig raderas samt att behandlingen av dina personuppgifter begränsas. Om du vill ta del av uppgifterna ska du kontakta ansvarig forskare, Filip Milenkovic. Dataskyddsombud vid Gymnastik och Idrottsföreningen Om du är missnöjd med hur dina personuppgifter behandlas har du rätt att ge in klagomål till Datainspektionen, som är tillsynsmyndighet.

**Hur får jag mera information?**

Du är alltid välkommen att kontakta mig om du har frågor, vill ta del av uppgifterna vi samlat in om dig, eller om du vill ta del av resultatet av hela projektet.

Med vänliga hälsningar,

**Filip Milenkovic:** Hälsopedagog och Masterstudent
Appendix 2- Consent form

I’m a footballer!... Or, I was one.
A study about retired football players, early specialization and athletic identity.

Consent form for participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I have received oral and written information about the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I agree to participate in the study “I’m a footballer!... Or, I was one. “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I agree that information about me will be processed in the manner described in the information letter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

______________________________    ______________________________
Signature                        Location and date

Name

Appendix 3 – Interview guide
Appendix 3- Interview guide

1. Beskriv kort vem du är?
   - Vad betyder fotboll för dig?
   - Kan du berätta för mig om något positivt tillfälle eller något positivt du uppnått inom fotbollen under din karriär?
   - Om du tänker tillbaka, vad var det bästa med att vara en fotbollsspelare?
   - Och vad var det värsta med att vara en fotbollsspelare?

Sporthistorik
1. Berätta om hur du först blev involverad inom fotbollen?
   - Berätta vilka klubbar du har spelat för?
   - Hur länge spelade du för dessa klubbar?
   - Kommer du ihåg varför du började spela fotboll? Vems beslut var det?

2. Vid vilket tillfälle tog din karriär slut?
   - Hur gammal var du?
   - Vart spelade du då?

Tidig specialisering
1. Berätta kring din erfarenhet inom fotboll från perioden 0–6 år?
   - Hur ofta tränade du, både med laget och individuellt?
   - Hur många vilodagar hade du under en träningsvecka?
   - Hur mådde du under denna perioden?

2. Berätta kring din erfarenhet inom fotboll från perioden 7–9 år?
   - Hur ofta tränade du, både med laget och individuellt?
   - Hur många vilodagar hade du under en träningsvecka?
   - andra aktiviteter?
   - Hur mådde du under denna perioden?

3. Berätta kring din erfarenhet inom fotboll från perioden 10–12 år?
   - Hur ofta tränade du, både med laget och individuellt?
   - Hur många vilodagar hade du under en träningsvecka?
   - andra aktiviteter?
   - Hur mådde du under denna perioden?

2. Hur upplever du att atmosfären runtom din träning va på den här tiden?
   - Vad för relation hade du till din/dina tränare?
   - Berätta lite om relationen till dina lagkamrater?
   - Hur upplever du att trännarna var och agerade jämtetom dig och dina lagkamrarer?

3. Hur upplever du att strukturen har varit i diverse föreningar du spelat för?
   - Vad för typ av träningar hade ni?
   - Vad var det bästa med träningarna?
4. Inom fotbollen så behöver tränaren alltid selektera de bästa spelarna inför en match. Vad har du för erfarenhet av selektion?
   - Blev du ofta selekterad inför matcherna?
   - Hur påverkade selektionen dig?
   - Hur påverkade selektionen dina lagkamrater?

5. Fotboll beskrivs ofta som en högt pressad miljö. Vad har du för erfarenhet kring det?
   - Några känner ofta en hög press inom fotbollen medans andra inte känner någon press alls. Hur var det för dig?
   - Kände du någon press från föräldrarna/vänner/familj?
   - Hade du höga förväntningar på dig från tränare och lagkamrater?

6. När började du känna att du är en del utav ett lag?
7. Vid vilken tidpunkt i livet började du känna att fotbollen var ditt största fokus?
8. Berättar kring stunden då du började elitsatsa. Hur var det för dig?
9. Utövade du några andra aktiviteter eller idrotter?
10. Inom fotbollen brukar spelare byta miljöer ganska ofta, medan andra inte gör det. Några kan se det som en jobbig process, medan andra inte tycker att det är jobbigt. Hur var det för dig?

**Idrottslig identitet**

1. Vad tycker du att det innebär att vara en fotbollsspelare?
   - Fanns det några förväntningar på dig från att ha den rollen?
   - Vad är det bästa med rollen?
   - Vad är det sämsta med rollen?

2. Människor som spelar fotboll brukar ofta känna sig och identifiera sig som en fotbollsspelare, medans andra inte alls gör det. Hur var det för dig?
   - Till vilken grad kände du att det var din identitet?
   - Hur starkt associerade du dig som en fotbollsspelare?

3. Vad hade människorna i din krets för uppfattning om dig?
   - Vad tyckte familjen om dig?
   - Vänner/skola?

4. Var det viktigt för dig att andra människor såg dig som en bra fotbollsspelare?
   - Hur mådde du när andra inte såg dig som en bra fotbollsspelare?
   - Hur reflekterar du kring vad människor ansåg om dig när det gick bra i fotbollen?
   - Hur reflekterar du kring vad människor ansåg om dig när det gick mindre bra?

5. Inom idrott är det vanligt att man vinner och förlorar, eller får oönskade resultat. En del kan uppleva negativa känslor kring dessa resultat, och andra upplever positiva, eller båda. Hur reflekterar du kring detta?
   - Följdfrågor

Pension
1. Kan du berätta mer om när du slutade spela fotboll?
   - Hur reflekterar du kring den perioden?
   - Vad tänkte och tyckte människorna i din närhet om det beslutet?

2. Vilka faktorer anser du påverkade din pensionering från fotbollen?

3. Hur påverkades du av pensionering vid den punkten, och hur reflekterar du kring det idag?

4. Om du kunde gå tillbaka, skulle du göra om detta igen?
   - Vad och varför hade du ändrat på ifall du kunde?

5. Alla påverkas olika av att sluta spela fotboll: för somliga mindre och för andra mer. För vissa kan det kännas som att deras identitet påverkas. Hur var det för dig?
   - Följdfrågor

6. Skulle du låta dina barn gå igenom detta?