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Well-Being in Elite Sport: Dimensions of Hedonic and Eudaimonic  
Well-Being Among Elite Orienteers

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### **Abstract**

This study examined subjective (SWB), psychological (PWB) and social well-being (Social WB) at a global and sport contextual level among ten elite orienteers (6 women and 4 men, median age = 20.4, range 18 to 30) by employing semi-structured interviews. Athletes described SWB as an interplay of satisfaction with life, sport experiences and perceived health combined with experienced enjoyment and happiness in both ordinary life and sport. SWB and PWB interacted, and important psychological functioning among the elite athletes included, among other things, abilities to adopt value-driven behaviors, be part of functional relationships, and to self-regulate one's autonomy. The ability to organize and combine ordinary life with elite sport, and the use of strategies to protect the self during setbacks was also emphasized. For a comprehensive theoretical understanding of well-being applicable to elite athletes, the need for a holistic view considering both global and sport-specific aspects of WB is discussed.

*Keywords:* elite athletes, mental health, positive psychology, psychological functioning, emotions, affect

## Well-Being in Elite Sport: Dimensions of Hedonic and Eudaimonic

### Well-Being Among Elite Orienteers

Regular participation in physical activity is generally useful for increasing well-being in people who exercise (e.g., Mack, Wilson, Gunnell, Gilchrist, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2012; Wendel-Vos, Schuit, Tijhuis, & Kromhout, 2004). For elite athletes, who dedicate a significant amount of their time to physical training to reach outstanding performance goals in their sport, however, physical training is not necessarily health-promotive. Extensive training and competition, despite various forms of hazardous states such as injury, illness, pain or nutrition restrictions, are commonly viewed as normalized conditions and as inherent components in the culture of elite sport (Theberge, 2008). Elite sport also induces increased psychological challenges, for example internal and external pressures, various transition phases or organizational stressors, and coping with setbacks like injuries and performance plateau (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Mosewich, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2013). In combination with major events that can occur in ordinary life outside sport, these physical and psychological challenges may impose risks to the elite athlete's well-being (Steffen, Soligard, & Engebretsen, 2011). A particular challenge for the elite athlete is therefore to protect and stimulate his or her well-being in the highly demanding and performance-oriented elite context.

In the present paper, well-being among elite participants in the sport of orienteering was studied. Orienteering is a green, outdoor aerobic sport conducted primarily in wild terrain (International Orienteering Federation (IOF), 2013, October 30). At the elite level, orienteering is psychologically and physiologically demanding as the constraints (e.g., terrain, maps, courses and information available prior to competitions; cf. Eccles, Ward, & Woodman, 2009) vary greatly across competitions. The uncertainty of the actual competition conditions necessitates both extensive training loads in various natural environments and

competition-specific preparation. Although the IOF (2013, October 30) has 76 national member federations distributed worldwide and annually arranges a world cup and various international championships, there is presently an absence of studies on elite orienteers' well-being.

Well-being is regarded as a complex and multifaceted construct, but has predominantly been studied from two main perspectives: The hedonic tradition of subjective well-being (SWB; Diener, 2009) and the eudaimonic tradition of psychological well-being (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and social well-being (Social WB; Keyes, 1998). SWB includes life satisfaction (i.e. a long-term cognitive evaluation of satisfaction in diverse domains of the person's life) and happiness (i.e. the perceived balance between positive and negative affect) (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2005). In the eudaimonic tradition, light is shed on psychological facets important for humans in order to grow and develop when encountering challenges during life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Six main dimensions are viewed as central to a person's self-actualization in terms of PWB: The person's self-acceptance, positive relations to others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The social function and perceived flourishing in one's social life is labeled Social WB, and includes a person's perception of social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Lopez, 2005). Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are suggested to constitute distinct but also partly overlapping constellations of well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Hedonia is characterized by fluctuating and immediate emotional states, and involves particularly short-term emotional regulation. Eudaimonia includes both brief and more stable behaviors and cognitive patterns directed towards the experienced quality of the activity, values and personal significant aspects of importance for fulfilling long-term outcomes of personal growth and excellence (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, Wilson, & Crocker, 2012; Huta & Ryan, 2010).

In studies of competitive athletes' well-being, most work has been quantitative in nature. In a review of 17 published studies on competitive athletes' well-being between the years 2003 and 2011, Lundqvist (2011) concluded that a majority of the studies did not define or conceptualize the construct of well-being and used labels such as mental well-being, emotional well-being and PWB inconsistently or synonymously. Moreover, the studies applied various assessments but often with weak or no links to any theoretical framework of well-being, which presently prevents clear conclusions from many of the studies. The high reliance on quantitative assessments of well-being provides only broad and general information based on a few fixed items in the specific questionnaires used (Polkninghorn, 2005). The well-being experience of the elite athletes themselves is likely more rich and nuanced, and affected by the specific context surrounding the athlete. As Brady and Shambrook (2003) suggested, the subjective experience of elite athletes on a contextual level needs consideration to reduce the risk of misinterpreting study findings or of relating results to standards relevant in a normal population but not an elite athlete population. To clarify the distinction between the hedonic (SWB) and eudaimonic (PWB and Social WB) perspectives of well-being and to emphasize both global (i.e., general conceptualizations of well-being according to Diener (2009), Keyes (1998) and Ryff and Keyes (1995)) and plausible sport-specific dimensions of well-being (i.e., well-being judgments regarding significant contexts in an athlete's life), Lundqvist (2011) suggested a broad framework as a guide and inspiration for further studies in competitive sport. The model, originally presented in Lundqvist (2011; [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com)), is displayed in Figure 1. It includes the original dimensions of SWB, PWB and Social WB at the global level, and in addition the dimensions were also tentatively adapted to sport. Importantly, the sport-specific dimensions suggested in the model were not empirically based, and Lundqvist (2011, p. 121) stated: "we /.../ do not know much about which factors may constitute contextual sport-related well-being, or how well-being factors

and levels relate to each other. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to elaborate on the model and, based on empirical findings, to search for and identify the most essential dimensions that contextual sport-related well-being is constituted of". To our knowledge, no study has yet used a qualitative research approach to investigate psychosocial factors that elite athletes themselves experience as necessary in order to achieve and maintain sufficient well-being during their career. Thus, building on the ideas proposed by Lundqvist (2011) and established definitions of well-being, the purpose of the present study was to explore factors characterizing and signifying well-being and psychosocial factors on both a global and a contextual level that are experienced as important for an elite orienteer's SWB, PWB and Social WB.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Ten elite orienteers (6 women and 4 men) aged 18 to 30 years (median age = 20.4) took part in the study. Five participants were competing at a senior-elite level and were part of the Swedish national team; all had won at least one medal in the Swedish National Championships, participated in the World Championship (in total three medals) and the European Championship (in total three medals), and attained high positions in other national and international competitions. The remaining five participants were under 21 years old and were thus competing at a junior level. All had won a medal in a national championship, and three were also part of the Swedish junior national team. Additional merits included a total of two medals in the Junior Nordic Championship, participation in the Junior World Championship (in total one medal) and high positions in a number of national competitions.

### **Procedure**

Participant selection was based on a record provided by the Swedish Orienteering Federation (SOF) in which elite athletes who had competed at a top elite level during the previous twelve months were ranked. In addition to their competitive standards, participants were also purposefully selected to represent both genders, various ages and length of elite sport involvement to provide a broad and comprehensive understanding of various aspects of experienced well-being in the elite orienteer context. The orienteers were contacted by phone and approached about their interest in participating in an interview. Detailed information about the study, together with an outline of the interview, was then sent to them by e-mail. All participants were informed of ethical considerations, including voluntariness, confidentiality and the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. All participants gave their audio-taped informed consent. The procedures were approved by the regional ethical board (No. 2010/1660-31/5) in accordance with Swedish national ethical standards. The interviews, conducted within a six-week period in the autumn, lasted 60-100 minutes each and were later transcribed into text.

### **Interview Guide**

Prior to the data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared. The questions were created to overarch the research question, and covered Lundqvist's (2011) broad framework in order to explore hedonic and eudaimonic well-being according to established definitions on both a global and sport-specific level. To gain insight into the orienteers' own experiences of well-being dimensions related to themselves and their impressions of other orienteers, the interview was structured based on the following themes: Demographic questions, views about well-being in general, personal characteristics and social factors of importance for well-being within and outside the sport context, contextual factors of importance for well-being within and outside the elite milieu, dimensions of SWB, PWB, and Social WB, the perceived relationship between well-being and performance, and closure questions. A number of questions

were prepared within each theme, but the order of questions, follow-up questions and probes depended on the respondent's answers. The interview guide in its full version is available from the first author.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was guided by existing definitions of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, but also aimed to explore unique dimensions of well-being in the elite context. In the first step, content analysis was used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During this step, both authors independently read and reread the transcribed interviews and highlighted all passages with information relating to any aspect of hedonic or eudaimonic well-being. The second step was to use an interaction between a deductive and an inductive approach, in which the highlighted text passages that fit into existing definitions and subcategories of well-being on a global or sport-specific level were coded into these categories, whereas other text passages were openly coded (Bryman, 2012). When compared, the majority of the codes were consistent between the researchers. Non-congruent coding and disagreement were discussed until consensus was reached, and appropriate changes were made. In the final step the first author finalized the analysis using an inductive approach, and grouped openly coded concepts into new subcategories. To increase credibility, the second author critically read and reread the interviews and the new subcategories to ensure that relevant and irrelevant data had been appropriately systematically included or excluded.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results are presented based on the definitions of SWB, PWB and Social WB. In the sections, athletes' perceptions of their well-being on a global level are described, followed by descriptions of well-being on a sport-contextual level and a discussion of the results. The dimensions are exemplified using quotes from the athletes.

**SWB**

**Global level.** From a hedonic perspective, SWB is defined as life satisfaction and happiness or the balance between positive and negative affect (Diener, 2009). In similarity with this definition, athletes described well-being as a sense of satisfaction from within, involving most aspects of the life lived, which included the prominence of positive affective states in relation to negative affective states in various situations encountered. One of the athletes stated:

I think it's liking the life you have or thinking it's inspiring to get up and out of bed every day, and thinking "yes, this is going to be a good day". I think that's well-being for me. Feeling like I have the possibility to do what I want to do, maybe not every day, but that there's space to do it. (female, 21 yrs)

Satisfaction with one's perceived health was part of the experience of total global SWB. This theme was exemplified in statements about feeling good, being in balance, feeling alive both physically and mentally, and being free of injury and sickness. In line with the definitions by Diener (2009), the feeling of happiness was central in many examples. The athletes described happiness as a positive feeling about things happening and an ability to laugh and have fun. Other positive emotional-related states mentioned as signifying SWB were a harmony in life, feeling secure both mentally and physically as well as experiencing vitality, which was expressed as having psychological and physical energy available and exemplified with statements of feeling "alive" and "alert". The possibility to relax and recover physically and mentally in a context without demand or performance attached to it was seen as important for restoring vitality. In previous literature vitality has been suggested as one emotional state that may be related to SWB (e.g., Lundqvist, 2011, Ryan & Frederick, 1997).

The athletes in this study described vitality as rather fragile, as it could easily be debilitated by too much travel and a lack of recovery. Thus, as vitality includes both the psychological and physical energy available (Ryan & Frederick, 1997), the level of vitality may plausibly be a particularly relevant early indicator of variations in SWB in athletic populations.

**SWB in sport.** On a sport-specific level, SWB related to descriptions such as interest and enjoyment in the sport itself, which was also closely related to happiness. Although sport was not enjoyable every day, it needed to be perceived overall as fun in order to motivate the athletes to spend so much time and effort on it and to prioritize it over other interests, as expressed by one athlete:

It's not good for my well-being if I wish I were doing something else when I'm practicing. I spend so much time practicing and I prioritize it over most other things. And of course, that means I must think it's the most fun thing I can do. (male, 29 yrs)

Happiness and enjoyment were described as closely interrelated emotional states, and entailed relatively short-lived but regularly occurring positive experiences during training sessions and performances. Moreover, they could be stimulated by the ability to take the time to enjoy personally significant and successful performances. As described by one athlete:

I had a high goal-setting for the World Championships this summer that I've had for years /.../ and I managed very well. After that I felt like I shouldn't have any goals – instead I'll really enjoy this. (male, 30 yrs)

An ability to quickly recover mentally and not be too self-critical after disappointments and less successful performances helped athletes maintain their sport-related SWB. Sport-related SWB was also described as closely connected to the experience of being free of injury and sickness, allowing the athletes to practice and compete at their full potential. An involuntary

absence from participation in ordinary training and a lack of progress, or slow progress, in rehabilitation after an injury could reduce the regular experience of sport-related enjoyment/happiness and thus sport-related SWB. Moreover, it could impose negative affective states of hopelessness, sadness and depression, exemplified in the following quote:

I can't practice fully yet and it's pretty frustrating because it's something I really think is so fun. And I enjoy so much being able to run and practice. So that's the hardest thing for me right now. That I'm limited in my ability to do my sport. (female, 24 yrs)

In line with the hedonic perspective (e.g., Diener, 2009), SWB at both the global and contextual level related foremost to the affective feedback athletes provided through their cognitive evaluation of the actual situation in comparison to the desired one (e.g., being free of injuries and sickness, having space in life for development and recovery, progressing towards goals in sport). Whereas emotional responses per se could be directly influenced by various day-to-day events, the athletes described well-being as a comprehensive summary of their most dominant affective state over time, with sport-related SWB fluctuating to a higher extent than SWB on the global level.

## **PWB**

### **Self-acceptance.**

From the eudaimonic perspective of well-being, which emphasizes the importance of a person's psychological functioning in contrast to affective states per se, self-acceptance has been defined as an internal ability to acknowledge both good and bad qualities and maintain a positive view of the self as well as one's past life (Ryff & Keyes, 1994). In close similarity to this definition, athletes expressed self-esteem in combination with personally relevant life values as important for their global well-being. In the athletes' descriptions, self-esteem was

characterized by being pleased with oneself and having a positive self-image independent of any performances: “That I’m satisfied with me as a person. That’s the foundation for everything. Even if I weren’t an athlete, I’d still be satisfied with myself” (male, 29 yrs). This global level of self-esteem was perceived as having developed independent of sport participation: “I think I have a positive self-image and that’s because of my family” (male, 20 yrs). Self-esteem as a personality construct has been regarded in some previous work as highly indicative of well-being (e.g., Aide, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008; Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, & Cooper, 2009). Whereas the athletes’ descriptions support that general self-esteem may help provide a basis for well-being, they additionally described that clearly formulated and personally relevant life values helped them obtain a valued and self-accepted direction of acts and efforts in life. The following quote exemplifies this: “I have many principles about what I stand for. I know myself as a person (...). Everything with me feels like it’s me, and I can always motivate for myself the things I do” (male, 20 yrs).

***Self-acceptance as an athlete.*** The athletes’ self-acceptance as an athlete referred to three subthemes: (a) Sport confidence, including a positive self-image and a self-awareness of one’s own athletic strengths as well as the ability to primarily focus on strengths and advancements in contrast to any defects or failures. One athlete expressed this as follows:

When I evaluate this season, I can choose to see it as a really good season, I can find a lot of positive things I’ve done better this year than before and that I’ve developed and progressed. But if I want to I can also present it as if it were a minor disaster. So it depends on what you choose. (male, 29 yrs)

(b) Realistic personal sport performance standards based on one’s own and others’ expectations, which referred to an acceptance of the prerequisites at the present moment and of the individualized long-term goal for development. This dimension seemed particularly

important when athletes confronted situations of comparison with other athletes with various possibilities of preparation, age and elite experience. As expressed by one of the athletes:

It can be at a competition that you think “she ran so well, she always runs so well” and then think “I’m so bad, why do I always run so unevenly?” It’s bad thinking and you don’t think about the fact that the person is older than you and the prerequisites she had compared to you. (female, 17 yrs)

(c) An acceptance of a discrepancy between one’s own person and the athletic person, which was seen as a means to protect one’s self-value and keep less successful performances from decreasing one’s self-esteem and general well-being. As stated by one athlete:

Somehow I have to separate that, okay, athletically I had a bad result today, a bad performance, but personally there’s no difference. I’m still the same person I was yesterday and I’m not worse in any way. (male, 20 yrs)

A relationship between a single-minded athletic identity and negative emotional responses and adaptation to, for example, injuries and career transitions has previously been reported (e.g., Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Brewer, 1993). The athletes in the present study described that a multidimensional identity provided a broader base in life and perceived it as helpful both in the person-performance distinction and for coping with stressful situations (e.g., competitive pressure, illness and injuries, performance failures). Moreover, the possibility to shift over to other parts of the self than the athletic self could provide pauses from elite sport, which was viewed as advantageous for the athletes’ mental and physical recovery.

### **Positive relations to others.**

Positive relations to others from a PWB perspective is defined as the capability to build relationships and understand the interplay related to issues such as trust, satisfaction and

concerns about welfare among people involved in the relationship. Moreover, it includes the ability to show and perceive empathy, affection and intimacy (Ryff & Keyes, 1994). The presence of functional interpersonal relationships on a global level was highly valued by the athletes in terms of well-being experiences. Three types of relationships were mentioned as particularly important: Members of one's childhood family, love relationships and friends. The athletes described that parents and siblings could provide them with trust, perceived stability and a perception of closeness in life. They could also provide a distance to the sport, as the athlete was allowed to be not primarily an athlete but instead a family member. An important aspect of these relationships' function for well-being was that they were perceived as unconditional, stable, interpersonally close and supportive, expressed by one athlete as follows:

My relationship with my family is much more, it's the great source of security and the base. If I encounter major problems or if everything's wrong, they're always there. So I can always count on them. (female, 24 yrs)

Important characteristics of love relationships for well-being were that they were harmonious, that the partners liked to spend time together and trusted each other, and that one's partner showed engagement, understanding and acceptance of the effort the elite career demanded. As explained by one athlete:

If I'm training and feel like I have an enormously good run, the one I foremost want to show and tell about it is xx [his wife; author's correction]. She wasn't there watching me at the World Championships, but somehow I want her to follow what happens and influence me. When everything's going well I want her to be engaged in some way. (male, 30 yrs)

The importance of support closely matched to the needs of the person has previously been reported in studies of well-being and stress (Wolff, Schmiedek, Brose, & Lindenberg, 2013). Thus, it seems likely that functional, stable and close relationships generally provide increased possibilities to communicate and also detect implied needs for support and caring. In contrast, relational problems and dysfunction in relationships were said to risk negative well-being effects, sometimes also with a negative effects on sport, causing sleeping and concentration problems, lower motivation to execute the sport and worse performances. One athlete explained his experiences of this scenario: “When I broke up with my girlfriend I performed really badly for six months. We broke up in the autumn and it affected me until the spring. So it’s connected, definitely” (male, 26 yrs). Some of the athletes were also engaged with a partner within orienteering, which could impact both global and sport-related well-being both positively and negatively, depending on how well the relationship was functioning.

Many of the athletes had most of their friends within sport. The friends outside sport, or sport-related friends with whom they could also engage in non-sport-related matters, were regarded as positive as they provided an opportunity to have a break from sports, get new energy and just be able to have fun together, as described by the following athlete: “Just to go out and do something and get out of this daily pattern. To do some fun things that feel important to me. To have a network of contacts with whom you can socialize and just have fun” (female, 19 yrs). Close friends were seen as a source of stable and available support when needed, and the quality and functionality of the friendship were deemed important. In close similarity to love relationships, problems and break-ups in friendship relationships could also impact well-being negatively.

***Positive relations within sport.*** Some of the interviewed athletes were their own coaches. Of those who had a coach, perceived important characteristics for the relationship were engagement, trust, security, and confidence in the coach. Security was related to the

feeling that the coach was available to support the athlete and offer options and possibilities for physical and psychological development. Engagement in the athletic development was described as tangible assistance with training planning on an individual basis and feedback with clear instructions for how to develop further. Moreover, engagement related to the athlete's development as a whole person, his or her self-image, and the possibility to share thoughts and ideas with the coach: "...[I] can discuss training and also other things. Like in the beginning, when I started here I thought it was rather tough, and then I could sit and talk to him" (female, 18 yrs). This also included the perceived ability to be oneself with the coach, as well as the coach's sensitivity to and acceptance of the athlete's own personality, values and choices. These findings are in line with previous research, in which social support from the coach has been perceived as particularly important for athletes' well-being (Clement & Shannon, 2011). Whereas the athletes described characteristics about the coach, satisfaction with the relationship will also be a result of a complex process including both various dimensions of actual support provided as well as the athlete's perception of the support received (Udry, 1997, Wolff et al., 2013). Thus, both the coach's and the athlete's social skills and ability to build a trusting, close and functional relationship will likely impact both the satisfaction with the support and the cooperation in the relationship.

The athletes agreed that the sport had helped them develop their social network, as they had met many of their friends in the sport context. It was important for the athletes' well-being that these relationships were well-functioning, because many of their friends within the sport were also their best friends privately: "All my friends are in the sport context, so of course the sport has made it so that I have many positive relationships. I enjoy them, I travel and compete and practice with them" (male, 29 yrs). In a previous study, MacDonald, Côté, Eyes, and Deakin (2011) found sport peer affiliation among youth to be the strongest predictor for a positive sport experience and the development of personal and social skills, but

their study only investigated factors in the sport context. Other research indicates that an athlete's nature and security of attachment to his or her parents is also related to positive and secure sport friendships (Carr, 2009; Carr & Fitzpatrick, 2011). Thus, personal and social skills needed to form functional relationships seem likely to interact and generalize across various contexts.

### **Autonomy.**

The eudaimonic definition of autonomy includes a person's ability to resist social pressure of views and actions, to be independent and regulate behaviors based on his or her own standards in a self-determined manner (Ryff & Keyes, 1994). High perceived global autonomy was reflected in the athletes' descriptions of a general ability to make conscious decisions based on self-knowledge and an internal locus of control, and to judge the consequences of their own behavior. Moreover, athletes described a perception of being able to manage problems and a curiosity and courage to try new things as positive for their well-being. This perceived autonomy and independence also increased the need for daily self-reflection in order to accept the situation and find ways to deal with problems. One athlete stated:

I think I've always been an independent person more or less. But I try to develop to be able to decide more myself, and I've developed this a lot. To get to know myself more so that I can make the decisions more easily.

(female, 19 yrs)

An important skill for their autonomy in general was the ability to identify personally important goals and use effective goal-setting strategies and planning to finalize goals in line with their own decisions and values. This also included a general persistence and an attitude

to continue striving for the desirable goals, even if the way towards reaching them was sometimes experienced as hard or boring. One athlete expressed the following:

It's never a good thing to give up if you know you can do more. Afterwards, if you've done something good, it's this attribute of persistence that's helped me do this thing. So afterwards it always feels good and then I feel good about it. (female, 17 yrs)

***Autonomy in sport.*** Autonomy in sport was reflected in a described ability for self-reflection on what is best for you and your athletic development based on your own wishes and needs. Moreover, it included the ability to make your own decisions and to arrange training and competition plans in order to achieve your own goals. Previous research in sport psychology on well-being has commonly adopted a basic psychological need perspective, and has focused on how the context, particularly the coach, can support autonomous motivation and thus well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Sheldon & Watson, 2011). Whereas research does support the importance of autonomy support from the environment (e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012), athletes in this study also described the importance of an inner ability to self-regulate autonomy in situations and environments which were not necessary autonomy supportive. This included the ability to reflect and judge whether situations and conditions provided in the elite context were acceptable for them, and to adjust to situations or demands requested of them as elite athletes even if these were not fully in line with their personal goals or their desired path for attaining an optimal performance:

The elite milieu offers some things and the elite milieu demands some things. But at the same time I have a choice of how much I want to engage in that milieu. It's my responsibility. Is it okay to be in this milieu and do I accept the conditions defined for this milieu? (female, 24 yrs)

Autonomy was also related to the athletes' own values concerning how to act and behave like an elite athlete. Unspoken group norms or unquestioned "truths" generally accepted in the specific elite context (e.g., ideal body weight, various views on training planning and general ideas about "musts" to succeed as an elite athlete) put demands on their own ability to rely on their own judgments, performance standards and values, and to resist social pressure. As one of the athletes explained in relation to participating in the camps and competitions with the national team:

You enter the milieu or the group, it's often a group in this milieu. You think you have to be like this to be an elite athlete in this milieu. It's implicit and there are common selected perceptions about how things should be that you interpret. You think it's valid for the whole group and you allow it to affect you very strongly. (female, 24 yrs)

Moreover, the ability to consciously and acceptingly choose, in contrast to being forced, to sacrifice certain things in life, for example spending time with friends and conflicting interests, in order to achieve the most personally relevant athletic long-term goals, was emphasized.

### **Environmental mastery.**

Ryff and Keyes (1994) described environmental mastery as the competence to manage the environment effectively in order to control and use it and its opportunities, or to form surroundings that help one to fulfill personal needs and values. The athletes in this study explained that the elite career generally had to be combined with work or studies. Thus, at the global level, environmental mastery was foremost tied to the ability to structure life in order to have sufficient personal finances to handle daily life, as expressed in the following quote:

“Economy and things like that can disturb me a lot, because I think quite a lot about how to make ends meet because I don’t have time to work. It can be pretty heavy” (female, 19 yrs).

***Sport environmental mastery.*** Sport environmental mastery was foremost related to the ability to notice and use available resources in the sport milieu, for example relinquishing control and trusting the club to arrange trips or other practical things. Moreover, sport environmental mastery included the ability to effectively utilize environmental resources when injured: “When injured /.../, I quickly make a plan and a strategy about people who can help me and who in my environment is accessible to help me” (female, 24 yrs).

**Purpose in life.**

Purpose in life involves the psychological functioning of creating goals in life, to perceive life as meaningful and directed towards personally purposeful aims (Ryff & Keyes, 1994). On the global level, the athletes stressed the importance of perceiving the most significant parts of life, for example family and friend relationships, sport execution and work, as meaningful and as providing a personal coherence for the person. A quote that exemplifies this is as follows:

Having a good social life and enjoying the people around you, feeling like you belong to a context and that your life in general is meaningful. Sport is an important part of my life and if it’s working well it’s part of my well-being”. (female, 24 yrs)

***Purpose in sport.*** At a sport contextual level, purpose was described as high dedication and perceived meaningfulness of the sport execution, involving the possibility sport offered to achieve dreams and personally significant goals. Sport participation was also viewed as enabling new experiences that were not possible in other settings. One athlete stated:

I'll live a period here on the Earth and during this period I want to experience the things I dream about. I really have the possibility to do that.

I've really been provided with support to reach my athletic dreams in this sports context". (male, 30 yrs)

Purpose in sport was also closely related to the ability to set meaningful and personally significant training and competition goals for sport participation, and to perceive the goals as both purposeful and inspiring. A quote from one athlete is as follows:

[I am] careful to ask myself why I do this, why have I decided to do these things in my planning? Why should I run this interval session this evening or why should I weight train? What's the purpose of this, and to have a plan for it. (male, 29 yrs)

### **Personal growth as a person and an athlete.**

Based on the definition by Ryff and Keyes (1994), personal growth includes perceived development and growth as a person, including improving one's self and self-knowledge over time, an openness to new experiences and the perception of approaching one's individual potential. Athletes described personal growth as interchangeably stimulated by factors at both the global and the contextual level. Acquiring a formal education through public school and university studies was viewed as developing on a personal level. Furthermore, experiences from sport-related courses and sport psychology counseling provided as part of the athletes' sport participation were described as having positive spill-over effects on their personal growth outside sport. As one athlete explained:

I've really developed a lot when I've participated in these courses. And I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to participate if I hadn't been an elite athlete. Then I never would've noticed or stumbled onto that path.

But if I had, I probably would've had the same development even though I wasn't an elite athlete. (male, 20 yrs)

Another important source of personal growth was the possibility provided by elite sport participation to travel and see a great deal of countries and places, and have new experiences. Moreover, the need for some of the athletes to move away from their hometown at rather young ages for better training possibilities had forced them to learn to take care of themselves and assume responsibility. Overall, most challenges provided in work, sports and life were viewed as helping them develop on a personal level in general. Moreover, the athletes agreed that sport involvement required a number of abilities in order for them to grow as an athlete, which also helped them develop on a personal level. One was the ability to identify and dedicate oneself to goals, and dare to try harder challenges to push one's own limits. Successful experiences also provided an inner sense of being able to handle challenges. The ability to analyze performances and outcomes was seen as important for identifying strengths and personal developments to boost one's self-confidence as well as identify areas for further improvement. Other abilities athletes linked to athletic growth included, for example, finding motivation, independence, leadership skills, creativity and the ability to cope with stressful situations: "[The elite sport] puts everything on the edge. You have to handle things you wouldn't otherwise have exposed yourself to. The situation of competing and practicing, I think it develops overall" (female, 21 yrs).

### **Social WB**

Social WB has been defined by Keyes (1998, p. 122) as the "appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society". Social WB was not very prominent in the athletes' descriptions, plausibly because it likely increases with age (Keyes, 1998) and the athletes in this study were relatively young. Descriptions related to social well-being among the athletes included the

importance of being part of a coherence in which people accept you unconditionally and you can exchange experiences with each other: “If they feel good then I feel good. Then I can feel some kind of security in that I know they’re there for me and I’m there for them” (female, 17 yrs). At a sport contextual level, coherence was referred to as being part of an athletic and team coherence. It involved the inner perception of being liked by other athletes on the team and that others accept you for who you are: “I think we respect each other and that there’s a climate of acceptance. Each of us can say what we think and it’s okay to bring up ideas or say and think things. I think it’s really good” (male, 20 yrs). Some athletes described their teammates as family who shared their interests and provided support and motivation. Friends within sport also shared the experiences of the demands involved in being an elite athlete, and provided the opportunity to have fun during travels, practice and competition. This was expressed by one athlete as follows:

You have a lot of friends and never feel alone. And there’s also the possibility to practice. Maybe it’s more a physical thing, but mentally I can feel like if you’re tired one day you’re not the only one. That now I’m going to practice and there are others besides me who also feel like this and we’ll practice together. (female, 17 yrs)

Social well-being also included seeing others’ positive characteristics, rejoicing in others’ successes, offering consolation in adversity, and offering unconditional support regardless of performance: “When things are going well they’re happy and when things are going bad, you don’t want them to be sad but instead to comfort you. At the same time we can socialize well regardless of performance and that’s positive” (male, 26 yrs).

### **General Discussion**

The athletes' descriptions stressed the importance of a holistic view of both sport- and non-sport-related factors influencing well-being. The context and function outside sport were regarded as important, and this global well-being was described as more stable compared to sport-related well-being. The comprehensive interplay between psychosocial factors in the sport context and experiences gained through various life contexts outside sport has received relatively little attention in sport psychology. Nevertheless, the athlete is surrounded by various non-sport settings throughout life, both prior to and during the elite sport career. The results in the present study revealed that global well-being was viewed in many instances as a general foundation for sport-related well-being and as a protective factor when obstacles arose within sport. From the cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) literature, it is known that both desirable and undesirable cognitions, emotions and behaviors are learned over time in the interaction with the various environments one encounters (e.g., Beck, 1995; Puig & Pummel, 2012), and subsequently affect future experiences and reactions. The athlete's individual learning history of behaviors, cognitions and emotions, as well as cognitive self-schemas, life rules and social skills adopted throughout life, will likely impact the individual well-being evaluations even in the sport environment, as well as the explicitness with which needs are expressed. Future qualitative research and well-documented single-case studies and experiments with continuous assessments over time (Kazdin, 2010) would enable a more holistic view of the athlete's complete situation within and outside sport. Moreover, this would provide a valuable body of knowledge of well-being interventions applicable in applied work with athletes displaying various needs, learning histories and experiences. Previous well-being studies of elite athletes have adopted a variety of general assessments, but with weak theoretical rationale for the choice or appropriateness of the selected measures based on the population being studied (Lundqvist, 2011). The present absence of valid and reliable measurements for assessing the contextual level of athletes' well-being is unfortunate. Thus,

researchers may also need to consider athlete generated descriptions of well-being to develop elite-sport specific measures with established content validity.

The present study aimed to provide deeper insight into the well-being experiences of ten elite orienteers, but it should be remembered that mood states, memory failures, access to one's own thoughts and emotions, and the ability to reflectively communicate one's experiences are examples of issues that may have affected the athletes' descriptions (Polkinghorne, 2005). Moreover, diverse sports with their various demands, prerequisites and cultural or organizational differences might impose an effect on parameters experienced as particularly important for the involved athletes' well-being. Thus, whereas the present study adds a piece of knowledge of some elite athletes' experiences, caution is called for in generalizing the results until various elite athlete populations in various conditions have been explored and plausible common and unique dimensions that may impact elite athletes' well-being have been further scrutinized.

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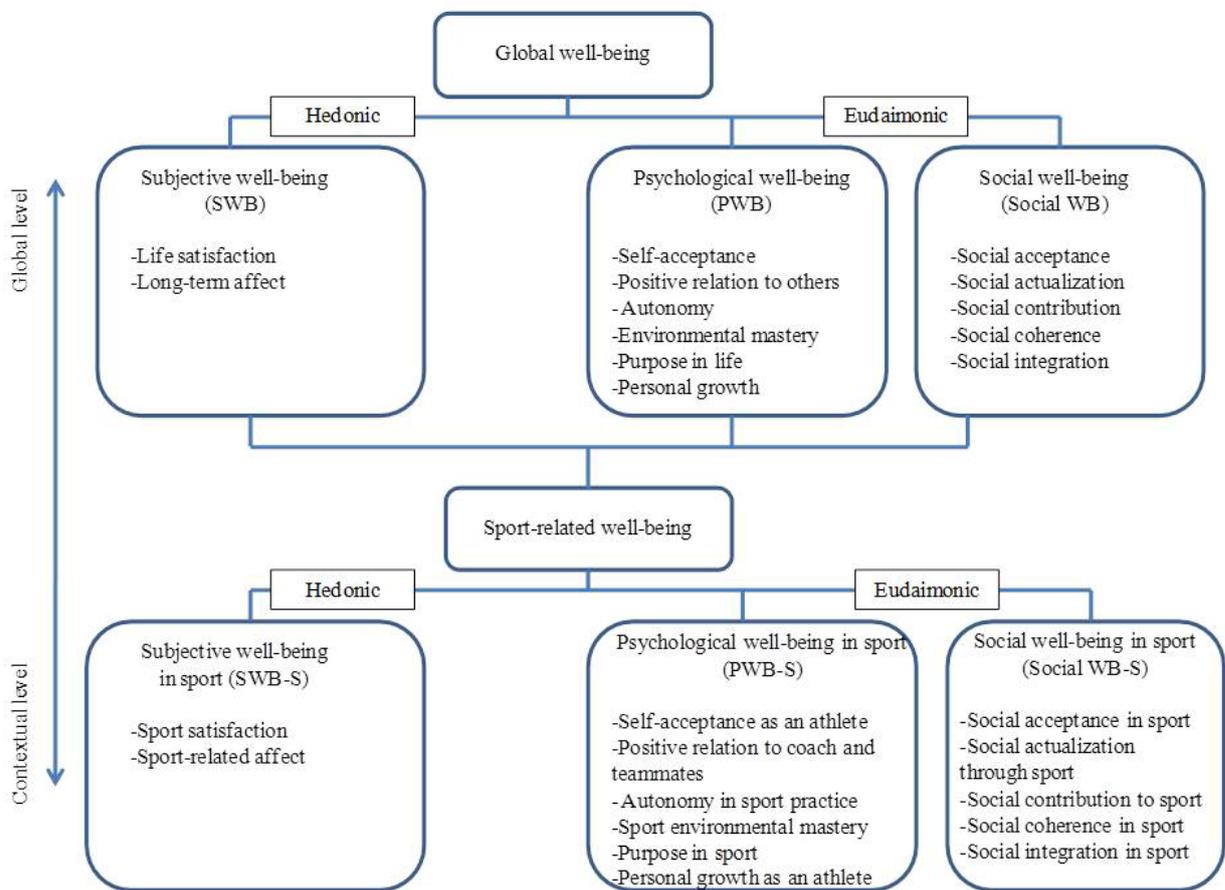


Figure 1. Lundqvist's (2011) integrated model of global well-being and context-specific well-being related to sport. Re-printed with permission ([www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com)).