

Examining the Experiences of Peer Mentored Athletes Competing in Elite Sport

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The general objective of the current study was to explore the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes during their sporting careers. The primary purpose was to identify the mentoring functions provided by athlete mentors, while the secondary purpose was to examine the outcomes related to peer mentored athletes' (i.e., protégés) mentoring experiences. Individual interviews were conducted with 14 elite peer mentored athletes, and the data were analyzed using a hierarchical content analysis. The results indicated that athlete mentors provided a variety of specific functions that facilitated protégés' progression through sport and development from a personal standpoint. The findings also showed that protégés benefitted in terms of enhanced performance and confidence, and also demonstrated a willingness to provide mentorship to their peers. In sum, the results of the current study may be used to enhance the effectiveness of peer mentoring relationships between athletes.

Keywords: athlete mentoring, group dynamics, athlete relationships, team dynamics

The following quote from then rookie National Hockey League player Alex Chiasson illustrates a young athlete who viewed an experienced teammate as a valued peer mentor:

For me, Pevs (Rich Peverley) was someone I sat next to in the locker room, was someone that took care of me on the road and was the first one to text me to see if I wanted to go to dinner. For the young guys, it's always hard to open up and ask questions and he was the guy I leaned on for that type of thing throughout the year. (Heika, 2014, para. 10).

Despite anecdotal evidence emphasizing the importance of mentoring relationships between athletes (see quote above), empirical research investigating peer athlete mentoring is limited (Loughead, Munroe-Chandler, Hoffmann, & Duguay, 2014). Recent studies in this area have indicated there are benefits to being peer mentored (Hoffmann & Loughead, 2016a, 2016b), however little is known regarding what transpires in these athlete mentoring relationships. The present study sought to expand

upon our understanding of peer athlete mentoring by examining the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes during their sporting careers.

Mentoring is generally defined in organizational contexts as a process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person (the mentor) supports a developing individual (the protégé), serves as a role model to that individual, and guides him/her in their development (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). Mentoring relationships can emerge informally and spontaneously or be formal in nature where the mentor and protégé are assigned to each other (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Regardless as to how mentors and protégés are paired, research by Kram (1980) showed that mentors in organizational contexts provided both instrumental (also referred to as career or vocational in the literature) and psychosocial mentoring functions to their protégés. Mentors provided instrumental mentoring by supporting a protégé's development, advancement, and goal attainment within an organization (Kram, 1980). In contrast, mentors used psychosocial mentoring to enhance a protégé's personal growth and perception of competence, and to clarify his/her identity within and outside of the organizational setting (Kram, 1980). Not surprisingly, mentors' use of these functions has been found to benefit protégés. For instance, the results of an interdisciplinary meta-analysis revealed that both instrumental and

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psychosocial mentoring were positively associated with numerous correlates including but not limited to protégé performance, motivation, satisfaction, sense of affiliation, and socialization (Eby et al., 2013). In sum, it is well-established that the study of mentoring has its roots in organizational and industrial psychology. However, mentoring relationships have been investigated in other areas such as education, medicine, and sport (see Bloom, 2013 for a review).

Compared with other disciplines, there is relatively little research explicitly examining mentoring in sport (e.g., Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Miller, Salmela, & Kerr, 2002; Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bocknek, 1996). Bloom et al. (1998) were among the first to investigate mentoring in sport when they interviewed current and former expert coaches regarding their mentoring experiences. The results showed that coaches believed they were mentored by other coaches throughout their careers, first as athletes, and then in the earlier stages of their coaching tenures. In particular, coaches noted they were taught technical and tactical skills, along with their mentors' philosophies and values regarding the coaching profession. In a similar manner, Miller et al. (2002) queried intercollegiate coaches about their perceived role in mentoring athletes. The results indicated that coaches mentored athletes in many aspects of their lives, with a particular emphasis on developing them from both an academic and personal standpoint. Finally, Perna et al. (1996) investigated male intercollegiate athletes who were mentored by various individuals including professors, coaches, and academic advisors. Findings showed that athletes who received greater instrumental and psychosocial mentoring, regardless from whom, also reported more comfort expressing emotions and committing to relationships.

Recently, Hoffmann and Loughhead (2016a, 2016b) examined another type of sport mentoring relationship by focusing on peer-to-peer mentoring between athletes—a relationship considered beneficial for effective team functioning (Cope, Eys, Beauchamp, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2011). Given the similarity of peers in terms of age, appearance, and life circumstances (Petosa & Smith, 2014), it is not surprising that experienced athletes are particularly well-suited to serve as mentors to their less experienced counterparts. Hoffmann and Loughhead (2016a) sampled intercollegiate athletes who reflected on their experiences being mentored by their best-ever peer athlete mentor. The results showed that the majority of athletes were informally mentored, younger than their mentors and were the same sex as their mentors. Further, the findings demonstrated that protégé receipt of psychosocial mentoring was positively related to protégé satisfaction with respect to personal dedication and individual performance. Building on these results, Hoffmann and Loughhead (2016b) compared the satisfaction levels of athletes in high quality mentoring relationships with those who were not peer mentored. The results indicated that those athletes in high quality mentoring relationships were significantly more satisfied than their nonpeer

mentored counterparts in terms of personal satisfaction, satisfaction with their team, and satisfaction with their coach's leadership.

Although research has highlighted the benefits of peer-to-peer mentoring between athletes (Cope et al., 2011; Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2016a, 2016b), our understanding of what is provided by a peer athlete mentor to his/her protégé in sport is limited, and has primarily relied on mentoring research in organizational domains. As noted earlier, Kram's (1980) research in a business setting showed that mentors used instrumental and psychosocial mentoring functions. In particular, Kram identified that mentors provided *specific* instrumental functions that included nominating the protégé for advancement (i.e., sponsor), tutoring the protégé (i.e., coaching), exposing the protégé to senior group members (i.e., exposure), shielding the protégé from harmful group members/situations (i.e., protect), and appointing challenging tasks to the protégé (i.e., challenging assignments). Similarly, mentors were found to exhibit *specific* psychosocial functions, including serving as a role model (i.e., role modeling), displaying unconditional acceptance (i.e., acceptance and confirmation), acting as a trusted counselor (i.e., counseling), and having work and nonwork related social exchanges with the protégé (i.e., friendship). However, an examination of these specific mentoring functions from a business context raises questions as to their relevancy with an athlete population. For instance, it may be inappropriate to assume that an athlete mentor's role would encompass assigning challenging tasks to his/her protégé. Conversely, it is not surprising that a mentor in an organizational context would assign difficult work to his/her protégé, since many protégés in this domain reported their supervisors as their mentors (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Scandura & Williams, 2004).

Beyond the suggestion that Kram's (1980) specific functions from a business setting may not be relevant to an athlete population, there is empirical research highlighting the need for further investigation of these functions in sport. Specifically, Hoffmann and Loughhead (2016a) explored the factor structure of Ragins and McFarlin's (1990) Mentor Role Instrument (an inventory that assesses Kram's specific mentoring functions in an organizational setting) with a sample of peer mentored athletes. While the results of their analysis did not support the factor structure involving the specific functions proposed by Kram, the results did support a higher-order factor structure representing the two global dimensions of instrumental and psychosocial mentoring. Taken together, the results provided initial validation for Kram's general categorization of instrumental and psychosocial mentoring with a sample of athletes. At the same time, the findings underscored the importance of (re)examining the *specific* instrumental and psychosocial functions used by peer athlete mentors in sport.

To this end, the general objective of the current study was to explore the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes during their sporting careers. Using Kram's (1980) classification

of mentoring functions as a guiding theoretical framework, the primary purpose was to identify *what* mentoring functions are provided by athlete mentors. The secondary purpose was to examine the outcomes related to protégés' mentoring experiences. The overall objective of the current study was accomplished via interviews with protégés (i.e., peer mentored athletes), the results of which may be used to enhance the effectiveness of peer mentoring relationships between athletes.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 14 (7 male, 7 female) Canadian elite mentored athletes ranging from 20 to 34 years of age ($M = 26.36$, $SD = 3.43$). These protégés competed in either independent or interdependent sports and participated in their respective sports for, on average, 16.36 years ($SD = 5.57$). All protégés were currently competing at elite levels of sport that included the Olympics ($n = 7$), professional ($n = 3$), Commonwealth Games ($n = 2$), National U-20 team ($n = 1$), and Major Junior Hockey ($n = 1$). All protégés competed in the same sports and at the same levels of competition as their mentors. Further, all protégés indicated they were involved in mentoring relationships that emerged informally. Additional descriptive

information concerning the protégés and their mentoring relationships is presented in Table 1.

Procedure and Data Collection

Before data collection, ethical clearance to conduct the current study was obtained from the lead author's institution. Purposive maximum variation sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) was used to recruit current elite level male and female athletes who competed in a variety of sports. A convenience sample of athletes who trained in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec (Canada) and the state of Michigan (USA) were identified through the research team's professional network of contacts. Participants were emailed a recruitment script outlining the nature of the study and invited to participate. Based on a criterion sampling approach (Patton, 2002), athletes who considered another athlete as a peer mentor at some point in their athletic career and were currently competing at an elite level (e.g., National team, professional) were eligible to participate. To assist participants in determining whether they had been or were being mentored by another athlete, a definition of a peer athlete mentor similar to the one used by Hoffmann and Loughhead (2016a) was provided in the recruitment e-mail that read: "A more experienced and knowledgeable athlete who acts as a role model for you, provides guidance and support to you, and assists

Table 1 Characteristics of Protégés and their Mentoring Relationships

Protégé	Protégé's Age Range	Sport	Mentor-Protégé Age Gap	Mentor Sex	Protégé Sex	Protégé's Highest Level of Competition
P1	20–24	Ice Hockey	3 Years ^a Same Age ^b	M ^a M ^b	M	Major Junior Hockey
P2	20–24	Ice Hockey	9 Years	M	M	Professional
P3	25–29	Basketball	9 Years	M	M	Professional
P4	25–29	Track and Field	4 Years	M	F	Olympics
P5	25–29	Track and Field	4 Years	M	F	Commonwealth Games
P6	25–29	Ice Hockey	7 Years	F	F	Olympics
P7	30–34	Ice Hockey	4 Years	F	F	Olympics
P8	25–29	Speed Skating	17 Years ^a 13 Years ^b	F ^a F ^b	F	Olympics
P9	25–29	Basketball	8 Years	F	F	Professional
P10	20–24	Track and Field	5 Years	M	M	Olympics
P11	25–29	Wrestling	12 Years ^a 4 Years ^b	M ^a M ^b	M	Commonwealth Games
P12	30–34	Cross-Country	1 Year	M	M	Olympics
P13	20–24	Rugby	1 Year	F	F	National U-20 Team
P14	25–29	Pairs Figure Skater	7 Years	M	M	Olympics

Note. In each case where there is an age gap between the mentor and the protégé, the mentor is older. It should also be noted that some information has been presented in a particular manner (e.g., age range) or excluded (e.g., specific Olympic track and field event) to protect the protégés' identities.

^aThe first of two mentors involved in a mentoring relationship with the protégé. ^bThe second of two mentors involved in a mentoring relationship with the protégé.

in your sport and/or personal development. This athlete cannot be a family member or an individual with whom you have a romantic relationship.” Participants were also informed that they could have more than one athlete who served in a mentorship position. The recruitment process was continual until saturation of information was reached. In total, 17 athletes were contacted throughout the recruitment process, with three declining to participate because they had not considered another athlete as a peer mentor.

Individual semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with the participants. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), this type of interview permits the researcher to have a conversation within a specific subject area and to establish a conversational style regarding a predetermined topic. Moreover, a semistructured interview approach allows the participants to thoroughly discuss the meanings attached to their experiences, thus providing the researcher with a deeper understanding about participants’ perceptions than could be uncovered from a more rigid interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged between 60–90 min ($M = 67.32$). Each interview occurred in the city where the protégé resided at a mutually agreed upon location, day, and time. The participants were informed that their identities would be protected through the use of a coding system which would replace their names with a code (P1-P14). With the exception of three participants who each commented on two athlete mentors (P1, P8, and P11), all participants described their experiences in relation to one mentor.

Interview Guide

An interview guide comprising four sections was developed by the research team. The first section consisted of opening questions designed to build a discussion around the protégé’s career progression within their sport (e.g., Briefly describe your athletic career and how you got to where you are today in your sport). The second section comprised main questions that were based on the mentoring literature, including Kram’s (1980) conceptualization of instrumental and psychosocial mentoring (e.g., In what ways does [Mentor] give you advice that affects your improvement in sport and your advancement in your sporting career? In what ways does [Mentor] give you advice that affects your personal growth and development, both in and outside the sport environment?). These questions explored the support protégés received from their athlete mentors. The third section contained summary questions that related to the subject area and were tied to previous responses (e.g., Reflecting back on your relationship with [Mentor], how would you say this mentoring relationship has affected you as an athlete and a person?). Finally, the fourth section consisted of a concluding question which allowed the participant to further comment on their mentoring experience(s) and/or elaborate on previous responses (i.e., Are there any questions or comments regarding your mentoring experience(s) that you would like to ask or share?). All

interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher, which resulted in 181 pages of single-spaced transcribed text. Transcripts were subsequently sent electronically to participants for verification purposes. Of the 14 participants, two made minor edits which were due to grammatical errors during the interviews. Finally, transcripts were imported into NVivo 10, a computer software program in which qualitative data can be categorized and stored.

Data Analysis

The present study used a social constructivist approach to understand the participants’ views and interpretations related to their own experiences rather than trying to find a universal truth that is independent of human interpretations and social meanings (Creswell, 2013). The research was grounded in ontological relativism (i.e., social reality is constructed and multiple) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is subjectively created) (Smith & Caddick, 2012). For the current study, the researchers were interested in understanding the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes during their sporting careers. All data were examined using a hierarchical content analysis, a commonly used form of analysis which allows researchers to identify and coherently describe patterns in the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The research team used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, known as an abductive analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), throughout the coding of data that pertained to the study’s first purpose (i.e., athlete mentoring functions). This abductive approach, which Taylor, Ntoumanis, and Smith (2009) described as a dialogue between theory and data, has been adopted by scholars in the field of sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009). The first step of this analysis involved scanning the transcripts sentence-by-sentence and dividing relevant responses into meaning units. Tesch (1990) described a meaning unit as a “segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information” (p. 116). The second step involved assigning each meaning unit to either a higher-order instrumental or psychosocial mentoring category which were created deductively based on research pertaining to the broad classification of mentoring functions in organizational (Kram, 1980) and sport (Hoffmann & Loughead, 2016a) settings. Next, lower-order categories consisting of meaning units representing similar themes (i.e., specific mentoring functions) were formed either deductively or inductively. That is, lower-order categories were created in a deductive fashion if they aligned with Kram’s (1980) specific instrumental functions including sponsor, coaching, exposure, protect, and challenging assignments and psychosocial functions including role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Following this deductive process, lower-order categories were formed inductively to represent novel/unanticipated

themes (i.e., new specific mentoring functions) not previously identified in organizational mentoring research.

The data pertaining to the study's second purpose (i.e., mentoring outcomes) were coded through an inductive analysis (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). An inductive approach was chosen given this particular phase of the analysis was not grounded in any preexisting theoretical framework (Patton, 2002). Following suggestions by Côté et al. (1993), this inductive process first involved combining meaning units sharing similar information into lower-order categories. Lower-order categories with similar meanings were subsequently clumped together to represent a higher-order category.

Tracy (2010) noted that *sincerity* and *credibility* are two criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research. Sincerity, which refers to notions of genuineness and authenticity, can be achieved through self-reflexivity (Tracy, 2010). Self-reflexivity occurs when a researcher makes attempts to become self-aware about how his/her own perspectives and biases may influence the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the results (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Three methods were used to enhance self-reflexivity in the current study. First, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview (Allen-Collinson, 2011) wherein the researcher's assumptions of peer mentoring were explored from two perspectives: a) a former athlete who had been peer mentored and, b) a current mentoring researcher. The researcher was interviewed by an experienced qualitative scholar who was not involved in the project. This bracketing interview occurred before the researcher conducted any interviews and provided him with an opportunity to reflect on any preconceived notions regarding the subject area. Second, the researcher conducted a pilot interview with a former intercollegiate soccer player who had been peer mentored

while playing varsity sport. After the interview, the researcher obtained feedback about whether the questions posed were driven by particular biases or motivations (Tracy, 2010). Finally, the researcher regularly sought the assistance of a "critical friend" (i.e., second author) who acted as a sounding board and provided an alternative perspective throughout the coding process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Credibility was established through thick descriptions and multiple-analyst triangulation (Tracy, 2010; Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). In-depth descriptions detailing participants' experiences being mentored, including the context surrounding those experiences, are provided in the results section. These rich descriptions help to *show* the reader the meaning behind the data, rather than *tell* the reader what to believe (Tracy, 2010). Further, by seeking the perspectives of several researchers, multiple-analyst triangulation was achieved (Tracy, 2010). Specifically, the first and second authors consulted with the third author, an experienced qualitative researcher familiar with the mentoring literature, who accepted and agreed with the interpretations of the data.

Results

The hierarchical content analysis resulted in three higher-order categories (i.e., *instrumental mentoring*, *psychosocial mentoring*, and *mentoring outcomes for protégés*). A summary of the higher-order and lower-order frequency counts in each category can be seen in Table 2. It should be noted that the inclusion of these frequency counts does not imply that particular themes are more important or of greater value than others. The higher-order categories and their associated lower-order categories are discussed below.

Table 2 Summary of Higher-Order and Lower-Order Categories Pertaining to Protégés' Mentoring Experiences

Higher-Order Categories	Lower-Order Categories	Protégés
Instrumental mentoring (151)	mental guidance* (43)	all but P9
	coach relations* (20)	P1, P2, P5, P6, P8, P13
	task instruction* (58)	All but P5
	career assistance* (30)	all but P1, P2, P7, P11
Psychosocial mentoring (248)	role modeling** (96)	All
	acceptance and confirmation** (58)	all but P9, P14
	counseling** (42)	all but P4, P11, P13
	friendship** (52)	All
Mentoring outcomes for protégés (64)	sport confidence (20)	all but P8, P12, P13
	sport performance and development (19)	all but P4, P5, P8, P13
	willingness to mentor (25)	All but P5, P9

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent meaning units.

*Mentoring functions unique to an athlete population.

**Mentoring functions previously identified by Kram (1980).

Instrumental Mentoring

Protégés described how they received mentoring that facilitated their performance, goal attainment, and advancement in sport. In particular, protégés noted their mentors used specific functions including mental guidance, coach relations, task instruction, and career assistance. These specific functions were formed inductively.

Mental Guidance. Protégés noted their mentors acted much like personal sport psychology consultants by providing guidance that enhanced the psychological component of their games, which in turn helped them remain focused and perform optimally. For instance, protégés described receiving advice that helped them concentrate:

I remember I wasn't skating very well and I said, 'I don't know what I'm doing wrong, I'm getting freaked out.' She stopped me and said, 'You have no control over those things. You have no control of anyone but yourself. Yeah you might be in a little rut right now, let's scale it back and concentrate on the things that you have control over.' (P8)

Similarly, mentors often engaged in discussions with protégés concerning mental preparation for competition and/or practice. Protégés felt the various suggestions offered by mentors regarding the use of mental strategies had a positive effect on their performance:

I was struggling with my game and my shots weren't falling. He came up to me and said, 'Listen, keep doing what you're doing', but he also gave me some advice about mental preparation.... His big thing was always visualizing before games, even if it's five or 10 minutes.... So I started visualizing. You know, I was struggling with my free-throw shot. He said every night to visualize myself making 10 free-throws before going to bed. All of a sudden, 'wow,' my free-throws are starting to improve. (P3)

Finally, protégés indicated their mentors offered guidance about coping in high-pressure, stressful situations: "If I got scored on three times right away I would ask her like, 'How do you deal with that pressure?' So then we would discuss that pressure situation." (P7) As another example, one protégé described how her mentor supported her when she felt nervous before a race:

I remember we were at a major international competition. I was like, '(Mentor) I'm getting so nervous for my race' and he was like, 'Oh don't get nervous, I don't get nervous anymore.' He said, 'Why are you nervous?' And I was like, 'I don't know, it's my first international competition, I've never raced these girls.' He said, 'Don't get nervous, you're fine...' So I went into that race with a completely different attitude. (P4)

Coach Relations. Mentors played an important role in facilitating positive relations between protégés and their coaches. Specifically, mentors used this function to

ensure that protégés were continually having constructive interactions with their coaches that assisted them in achieving their task-based goals. For example, protégés described how their mentors involved themselves in coach-protégé conversations, so as to act as a liaison between the two:

(Mentor) was really helpful in taking both concerns of coach and athlete when they arose and were maybe hindering my training or the relationship. He was able to take both sides and be that middleman, and just buffer the situation, so that we could move forward in a positive direction in terms of my progression in track. (P5)

My coach made a decision that I was uncomfortable with.... So I talked to (Mentor) about it and I was like, 'What do you think I should do?' She said, 'Okay listen I can come help you with the conversation with coach, help facilitate it.' She kind of backed up my point. (P13)

In addition, mentors supported their protégés when they received criticism and nonconstructive feedback from coaches. Protégés discussed how their mentors instructed them to focus on their own performances rather than the negative comments of coaches:

She said, 'A coach will give you feedback, and yes you have to listen, but sometimes don't worry or don't think too much about what they're thinking. You kind of have to focus on what you're doing and not so much on what the coach is saying. If it's constructive feedback, take it, but if it's not, then don't.' That suggestion helped me moving forward with coaches. (P6)

Task Instruction. Protégés described the various types of task-specific knowledge they acquired from their mentors. Specifically, mentors were able to translate their own experiences in sport into tangible advice for protégés. For instance, protégés noted how they received technical and tactical instruction that supported their sport-specific development:

Because we had a relationship, and because of his position, I got his perspective. I'm a forward and I'm going up against a defenseman, I don't know what they see.... Let's say we did a drill, a 1-on-1 type of situation and it didn't go to my liking or I felt like I could have done more, after practice I would go up to him. He would basically show me, 'cause we would always have like 30 minutes to an hour after practice to do whatever we wanted. He would play the forward and show me what he didn't like to encounter in the corner or when guys come down the wing on him [as a defenseman]. (P2)

Protégés also emphasized that their mentors provided constructive feedback and did not hesitate to correct

them from a technical or tactical standpoint when it was required:

There wasn't anything that he really told me that got me upset, but there were things that he told me that I was doing wrong, but that benefitted me in the long run. So basically I remember throwing javelin with him and throwing it the wrong way. And he's like, 'You got to stop that. You can't throw the javelin that way. If you continue to do that then something's going to happen to your elbow and then you're done.' (P10)

Furthermore, mentors' insights helped protégés understand how aspects related to training, nutrition, and recovery had a significant impact on their ability to excel in sport:

He'd say, 'Add greens to your smoothie here, try a smoothie there.' It would have been more recovery tools that he would have given me. You know things to stay loose and to be ready for the next workout, like compression gear, ice bath, massage therapy once a week. . . he made it clear to me why this stuff was so important. (P4)

Career Assistance. Mentors drew upon their own experiences and contacts within elite sport to guide protégés' athletic careers. Specifically, protégés indicated that their mentors informed them of the politics/dynamics of their sport:

He was talking to me about how figure skating is all rigged in its politics. I was like, 'Oh, what do you mean? If you skate the best then you should win!' He enlightened me by saying that figure skating is a very personal interpretation and how I had to be on my best at times that I didn't think that I had to. Not just on the ice, but when I'm around judges, when I'm around organizers, so that people would see me in a positive light. (P14)

Mentors also shared knowledge concerning factors that did not directly enhance on-field performance (e.g., talking to the media, traveling effectively to competitions), but that had implications for an athlete's overall career success: "We travelled to Puerto Rico and he showed me what to bring with me to travel. He also showed me things like signing up for Aeroplan. He taught me the essentials of travel...because I had never travelled before." (P10)

Protégés further described how their mentors would discuss and/or recommend other individuals within the sporting environment that could assist with career advancement: "I kind of made connections through (Mentor). Sponsorship-wise he helped with getting my name out there and building a brand in order to further myself in the sport." (P5) As another example, one protégé noted:

I would say that he uses other references more than himself. They are people or other runners that he looks up to.... He shares his experiences that he's had with other runners and other training groups that can be useful in helping you make decisions in your own career. He just has so many people that he can easily draw upon who can help you. (P12)

In addition, mentors used their personal and professional connections to gather information that would be useful to protégés regarding future athletic opportunities:

He's always asking me what my next move is. Actually before I signed with (name of team) in (name of country), he had a friend of his who played for the team, and I kind of wanted the run down on the team. You know, how they treated their players and what the housing situation is. He'd ask his buddy and relay the information back and let me know honestly how it was. It's just good to have somebody who has so many connections. (P3)

Psychosocial Mentoring

According to the protégés, the mentoring they received facilitated their personal growth, enhanced their perception of competence, and clarified their identity, both within and outside of the sport setting. That is, unlike instrumental mentoring which was limited to influencing a protégé's advancement in sport, psychosocial mentoring targeted a protégé's personal development as an athlete and an individual. Protégés described how their mentors used specific functions including role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. These specific functions were formed deductively.

Role Modeling. Protégés overwhelmingly discussed how their mentors acted as role models by exhibiting desirable values, attitudes, and behaviors. Protégés felt their mentors did not simply "talk the talk", but would "walk the walk" in terms of setting a good example:

I'm more of a 'show me' sort of person. You can tell me whatever you want and I'll take it for what it is. But if you show it to me and you're a good example, it means more to me. And that's what (Mentor) did. (P1)

Mentors also carried themselves in ways that were appealing and impressive to protégés. As an example, one protégé admired the way her mentor was a role model in sport and in life more generally. This protégé wanted to emulate her mentor's athletic characteristics:

She never really took me aside and said, 'You should do this, you should do that.' It was more that her actions spoke much louder than her words on the ice. . . . Like I said, it was really her presence and the way she carried herself that kind of made me like, 'That's what I want to be.' (P7)

Similarly, this protégé aspired to be like her mentor outside of the sport domain:

Now she has a family, she has kids. So now I see her acting with her kids and that's a new kind of role model that I have, or a new type of mentoring. Because it doesn't change who she is, she's still always that great person. You know, she's experienced different things. She always has her way to deal with them in a very nice fashion. So I just see her act with her kids and that's who I want to be. (P7)

Furthermore, protégés noted how they related to certain aspects of their mentors, which helped them solidify their own identities:

In terms of his personality, I like that he's confident and like I said, he's weird. He probably knows that he's weird, but he doesn't care. That's on and off the ice. He respects everyone but he's not going to change his behavior. It touches me in a particular way because I don't view myself necessarily as the 'standard hockey player'. I don't want to either. It's nice to see someone like that, an example of someone who is able to do both. It gives me hope that I can stay who I am and be a hockey player. (P2)

Acceptance and Confirmation. Mentors consistently supported their protégés by accepting them as valued athletes and individuals. Unlike some other veteran athletes, protégés felt their mentors were receptive and nonjudgmental toward their feelings or opinions: "She would come from a place of like non-judgment when you brought stuff up. I always felt like that when I would have discussions with her. Obviously that made me feel comfortable." (P13)

Protégés also described that mentors were welcoming, approachable, and interested in their pursuits. Mentors often showed interest in their protégés through timely attention and/or praise: "She kept reminding me that I have what it takes to succeed and just to do what I do best. So it was basically just reassuring me of that, that I could do it." (P6)

Likewise, protégés discussed how their mentors highlighted their strengths and abilities. For instance, one protégé noted that his mentor continued to accept him unconditionally as the relationship progressed:

One thing still sticks in my mind today. I wrestled really well once and ended up squeaking out a win against (Mentor). I was so happy about it, and nothing was like broken in our relationship or any of that.... He was mad he lost but after that we still trained together and he told me, 'You're going to be a world medalist someday.' What he said stuck with me ever since. (P11)

Taken together, this function was used to confirm protégés' personal and athletic identities, which in turn enhanced their sense of self-worth:

We talk fairly regularly on the computer and he kind of congratulates me and always reminds me of things he's told me in the past about being 'who I am' and representing myself in a positive way. He keeps reminding me and saying, 'I've said since day one you're going to be this person and you're moving in the right direction.' And he keeps telling me that, 'I knew since day one that you're the best athlete in the world...' (P10)

Counseling. Protégés indicated that their mentors acted as trusted confidants with whom nonperformance related personal concerns within or outside of the sport setting could be discussed. Thus, mentors often served as sounding boards for protégés' struggles or doubts:

After (name of event) she struggled with depression. She won a medal and thought that it would make her life perfect, and it really didn't. So we've both been able to connect and talk about our struggles and communicate. We have a therapeutic friendship in that sense. There's a lot of trust and openness where I can divulge my struggles.... She's had a lot of emails from me saying, 'I'm down and I'm struggling.' She would always bring it back to finding that inner peace and inner calm, whether that's on or off the ice. (P8)

In addition, mentors engaged in active listening and offered feedback to influence protégés' outlook on different situations. In particular, protégés noted that their mentors used their own experiences to offer perspective on issues:

I had a girlfriend from Canada and we broke up my second year. It was tough being over there by myself. Me and (Mentor) talked about all that. He had just married his wife and had a young daughter. He told me how it was and broke it down. He said, 'There's always somebody else. Don't stress about it too much. You have to concentrate on basketball. Obviously she was important to you but over time, everything will heal. Anytime you need to talk I'm here.' He knew how important a support system was. (P3)

Interestingly, despite the fact he sought guidance from his mentor regarding personal difficulties, one protégé remarked that he did not equate counseling with mentorship:

I would say daily I would talk with him. Whether our talking was always necessarily mentoring or if it was more of like a counselling relationship, I'm not sure. I look at it more like that. If there were personal issues I could talk about them with him. (P1)

Regardless, protégés reported that their mentors played an invaluable and supportive role in their growth as individuals, particularly during times of need.

Friendship. Mentors and protégés engaged in sport and nonsport related social interactions. That is, mentors had enjoyable “everyday” discussions with protégés while in the sporting context, over meals, or during social gatherings:

I would say a few days a week we would definitely discuss sport-specific or even life stuff. We’d hang out, watch a movie, play X-box, go to the mall, and have something to eat. As you’re spending time together you’re always having those conversations. (P3)

As a person she was also really nice to me. Usually foreign players have a car so she offered to give me rides to the gym, even though she didn’t have to do that. She also took care of me. For example, she’d cook for me. That kind of stuff. We were spending lots of time together. We became good friends actually. Our personalities kind of clicked right away and we felt comfortable discussing different topics. (P9)

Further, protégés appreciated how their mentors informally shared personal stories and moments with them. One protégé described a memorable experience he had with his mentor:

This one time he invited me to go with him, so we spent like a solid 2-3 hours in the car. We talked pretty much about everything, about hockey, girlfriends, family. I would say that was maybe another defining moment in the relationship...because he opened up a bit more. I think in the beginning he didn’t want to show any I guess signs of weakness. But I think at that point he knew that I respected him enough that he could open himself up... I guess we were able to just discuss whatever was on our minds. (P2)

While these conversations were often face-to-face they also occurred through technology-based mediums (e.g., Skype, text messages, and telephone calls), particularly for those protégés and mentors involved in long distance relationships.

Lastly, protégés believed that the friendship function became more pronounced as the relationship progressed where the sharing of support became more mutual: “Once I moved here full-time we remained friends and training partners. And over time its turned into a more dynamic, more mutual relationship.” (P12)

I gained playing time and I got better. So I would still ask her things or she would give me advice, but maybe I had less to improve on or talk about with her in that sense...I was probably getting closer to her level. Now I see her more as a friend. I guess it’s evolved in that she is now both a mentor and friend at the same time. (P9)

Mentoring Outcomes for Protégés

Protégés noted a number of outcomes that resulted from their mentoring experiences, ranging from increased confidence, to improved performance, and a willingness to serve as mentors to other athletes.

Sport Confidence. Protégés described how the guidance they received from their mentors was instrumental in increasing their confidence in their athletic abilities. Moreover, protégés felt their mentors made them believe they could achieve great feats and become champion athletes:

It’s given me confidence. Like, ‘Oh, this guy thinks I’m that good?’ When I was young I didn’t even think I would ever make it to the World Championships. Then he told me what he thought of me and I was like, ‘Oh, maybe I could be that good or maybe I could do this?’ So it pushed me a lot. . . it built my confidence when it needed to be built. (P11)

I think he made me believe in what I was doing. He made it become a reality. You know there was never any negative with (Mentor), there still isn’t. It was always positive and everything was to work toward that one dream of making the Olympic team. I guess that support just makes you more well-rounded as an athlete because you believe in yourself that you can reach those dreams. (P4)

Sport Performance and Development. According to the protégés, the guidance from their mentors contributed to skill development, resulting in better performance:

Once I got here my skills started developing so fast ‘cause I had mentors like (Mentor1) and (Mentor2) in the room all the time, teaching me so many things and pushing me to work harder. . . . I probably wouldn’t be the wrestler I am today without them. (P11)

It’s extended the longevity of my career sports-wise because I’ve been able to develop those skills at such an earlier age. . . . I was able to develop those key skills like preparation, visualization, mental ability, and little nuances (Mentor) showed me within basketball. I was able to learn those a lot earlier and still put them into my game before it’s too late. (P3)

Similarly, protégés felt they developed athletically at a faster rate due to their mentors:

I think learning from (Mentor) when I was younger helped me be at that high level and gave me that drive to be better and have that passion to push myself. If I didn’t have that mentorship then I would have progressed at a level that would have maybe been slower or maybe I wouldn’t have progressed at all, you know? (P14)

Willingness to Mentor. As they gained experience the protégés reported a willingness to provide mentorship

to teammates or other athletes, something which they attributed to their previous positive experiences with their own athlete mentors:

I try to give to others the confidence and the encouragement that my mentor gave to me. He kind of taught me how to bring people under my wing and show them the ropes. (Mentor) showed me the ropes, so now I need to return it. (P4)

I try to put myself in situations where I can help out others now that I've been helped. I feel like the effect that (Mentor) had on me, maybe I can give that to somebody else and help them get to that next level. . . because his experience with me certainly helped me take those next steps. (P10)

I feel like everyone's path is different, but I try to give others advice that will help them along their paths. I try to make that conscious effort because I know that when I was younger that support and mentorship helped me. So I want to help others in the same way. (P14)

In sum, protégés felt they were well-suited to take on the role of peer athlete mentor, and were keen to do so given their prior experiences receiving guidance in mentoring relationships.

Discussion

The general objective of the current study was to examine the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes. More specifically, the central purpose was to identify the mentoring functions exhibited by athlete mentors. The results indicated athlete mentors provided a variety of specific functions that facilitated protégés' progression through sport (instrumental mentoring) and development from a personal standpoint (psychosocial mentoring). Although instrumental and psychosocial mentoring are separate dimensions, the quotes from participants in the current study illustrated that there was at times some overlap between and within these two global types of mentoring functions. This finding was not unexpected as mentoring functions are fundamentally rooted in support and guidance and thus are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Beres & Dixon, 2014; Kram, 1988). The secondary purpose was to explore the outcomes related to protégés' mentoring experiences, the results of which revealed that protégés benefitted in terms of enhanced performance and confidence, and also demonstrated a willingness to provide mentorship to their peers. The findings of the current study and their implications for researchers and practitioners warrant further discussion.

The findings pertaining to the first purpose underscored some interesting insights on the mentoring functions used by peer athlete mentors. According to the participants, athlete mentors provided assistance that helped them perform, attain their goals, and advance

in their sporting careers, which is consistent with the notion of instrumental mentoring as described by Kram (1980). However, protégés described receiving specific instrumental functions that were unique to an athlete population and therefore different than those outlined in Kram's (1980) research in an organizational setting. That is, protégés felt they received support regarding the mental component of their games, their relations with their coaches, their task-based knowledge, and career assistance. The finding that athlete mentors used different instrumental functions than mentors in business contexts is not surprising because individuals' behaviors in mentoring relationships are influenced by various organizational aspects, including the hierarchical levels that exist within organizations (Kram, 1988). Kram (1988) highlighted two levels of mentoring relationships in organizations—peer and superior-subordinate. Kram (1988) noted that the superior-subordinate relationship can create an unequal distribution of power in the hierarchical structure between protégés and mentors, which can interfere with the development of a supportive relationship. However, in the current study, participants discussed their athlete mentors who were their peers. This peer dynamic flattens the hierarchical nature of the relationship between protégés and mentors, creating different [task] responsibilities for mentors (Kram, 1988). Consequently, the more flattened structure of peer athlete mentoring relationships is a plausible explanation for the emergence of instrumental mentoring functions more relevant to an athlete population.

In contrast to the results highlighting the presence of unique instrumental functions within the sport realm, protégés in the current study described receiving specific psychosocial functions that closely resembled those in organizational contexts (i.e., Kram, 1980). Indeed, athlete mentors facilitated protégés' personal growth and development within and outside of sport by serving as positive role models, praising and accepting their protégés, attending to their protégés' personal concerns, and engaging socially with their protégés. These results support the theory that peers can fulfill the same types of psychosocial functions as traditional mentors (McManus & Russell, 2007). In addition, regarding the results of the current study, it is interesting to note that protégés felt the friendship function became more pronounced as the relationship evolved and the talent and experience gap dividing mentors and protégés became less apparent. This finding suggests that peer athlete mentoring relationships likely become more reciprocal with time, which sheds some light on the dynamic nature of these relationships.

As it relates to the first purpose of the current study, the findings concerning the instrumental and psychosocial functions provided by athlete mentors can also be used to develop a sport-specific definition of peer athlete mentoring. Therefore, based jointly on the results of the current study and the definition of mentoring from organizational psychology presented at the onset of this paper (i.e., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999), it is proposed that peer athlete mentoring is a dynamic

process in which a more experienced and knowledgeable athlete (i.e., mentor) serves as a trusted role model to another athlete (i.e., protégé), assists him/her in their pursuit of goal achievement and advancement in sport, and/or supports his/her personal growth and development. Athletes involved in the process have a nonfamilial and nonromantic relationship. It is hoped this definition will offer clarity on the nature of this construct and spur additional research.

The results pertaining to the current study's second purpose provided evidence concerning the consequences of peer athlete mentoring relationships. Specifically, protégés reported that the guidance and support from athlete mentors had an impact on their performance and sport confidence. While it is not clear which mentoring functions per se had an effect on protégés' performance and confidence levels, the results of an interdisciplinary meta-analysis by Eby et al. (2013) may provide some insight. Eby et al. found that both instrumental and psychosocial mentoring were positively related with protégé performance. These results suggest that both types of mentoring may play a role in helping protégés develop their sport skills and achieve peak performance. The findings from Eby et al.'s study further showed that only psychosocial mentoring was positively associated with protégé self-efficacy. Thus, it is plausible that psychosocial mentoring, particularly athlete mentors' use of "acceptance and confirmation" to praise and confirm protégés' abilities, is primarily responsible for enhancing confidence in peer mentored athletes. Finally, as a result of their own experiences being peer mentored, the protégés in the current study reported a willingness to support and mentor other athletes. This finding demonstrates that the benefits of peer athlete mentoring can extend beyond protégés themselves, and also mirrors research in the domain of organizational psychology that showed mentored employees were more willing to mentor others compared with those without a mentor (Ragins & Cotton, 1993). Overall, the positive experiences of protégés supports and extends previous research showing a link between being peer mentored as an athlete and greater satisfaction levels (Hoffmann & Loughead, 2016a, 2016b).

The results of the present research have implications for practitioners (e.g., sport psychology consultants, coaches) interested in fostering mentoring relationships between athletes. Practitioners may be able to promote and facilitate the development of effective peer mentoring relationships via workshops where athletes are introduced to the *specific* mentoring functions they can provide to their teammates. For instance, workshops have been effectively implemented to teach intercollegiate athletes how to exhibit specific leadership behaviors (see Duguay, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2016). The results of season-long workshops showed not only an increase in the use of leadership behaviors by the athletes but also an increase in athlete satisfaction, task peer-motivational climate, and a reduction in ego peer-motivational climate. Similarly, the use of this type of workshop could be a

promising strategy to inform elite athletes on the use of mentoring functions in sport. Further, by highlighting the positive outcomes associated with peer mentorship (e.g., enhanced protégé performance), veteran athletes may be more willing to support developing team members. The crucial role that coaches play in fostering peer athlete mentoring relationships must also be briefly acknowledged. It has been suggested that coaches should create a team climate which promotes peer mentoring between team members (Hoffmann & Loughead, 2016a). In fact, intercollegiate coaches have integrated newcomers into their teams by either formally pairing veterans with rookie athletes or by creating situations that naturally encourage a culture of veteran mentorship (Benson, Evans, & Eys, 2016). Consequently, coaches and practitioners should explore different avenues to facilitate positive connections between potential athlete mentors and protégés.

The current study's strengths and limitations should be noted. Our sample included male and female protégés, who competed in a variety of independent and interdependent sports, and who ranged from 20 to 34 years of age. Consequently, by recruiting individuals with diverse backgrounds, a broad range of experiences were examined. Although no differences were detected with respect to the gender, age, or sport of the participants in the current study, future research could explore how or if these factors affect the nature of peer athlete mentoring relationships. For instance, quantitative research in an organizational domain showed that, regardless of gender, protégés felt they received the same degree of instrumental mentoring from male and female mentors; however, they reported receiving more psychosocial mentoring from female mentors (Tharenou, 2005). In contrast, when mentors were surveyed, male mentors believed they provided more instrumental mentoring to protégés than did female mentors, while female mentors believed they provided more psychosocial mentoring than did male mentors (Allen & Eby, 2004). Thus, the gender composition of mentor-protégé dyads among athletes may be one avenue for future investigation. The protégés in the current study were also elite level athletes. This represents a population that has yet to be examined in sport mentoring research, and thus offers scholars and practitioners with unique insights into the lived experiences of the most talented mentored athletes. Investigating how mentoring experiences contribute to the development of adolescent athletes or other youth cohorts is a potential research direction for scholars in the area of positive youth development. Despite the current study's strengths, we did not concurrently examine the experiences of peer athlete mentors. Understanding the perspectives of individuals who provide athlete mentoring functions is an area worth exploring in future research. In particular, it would be interesting to uncover athlete mentors' motivations to engage in peer mentoring. Recent sport research revealed that intercollegiate athletes were motivated to contribute to others' well-being for reasons that satisfied their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deal

& Camiré, 2016). Gaining insight into athletes' motives for contributing to their peers' development would be a useful addition to the literature. Finally, all protégés in the current study described their mentoring relationships as having developed naturally and organically. Consequently, we were not able to examine the perceptions of athletes who were formally assigned to their mentoring relationships and determine whether these were perceived to be equally beneficial. Investigating the nature of formal mentoring relationships between athletes could offer important information, especially since there is evidence in organizational contexts suggesting these types of relationships can at times be problematic for protégés and their mentors (e.g., Eby & Lockwood, 2005).

In conclusion, the current study offers both practical and theoretical contributions concerning the specific functions that are provided in athlete mentoring relationships, as well as the positive outcomes that result from these mentoring experiences. These findings expand upon recent research that has examined peer mentorship in an athlete population. It is anticipated these results can be used to enhance the effectiveness of peer mentoring relationships between athletes, resulting in more positive experiences for those being mentored.

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