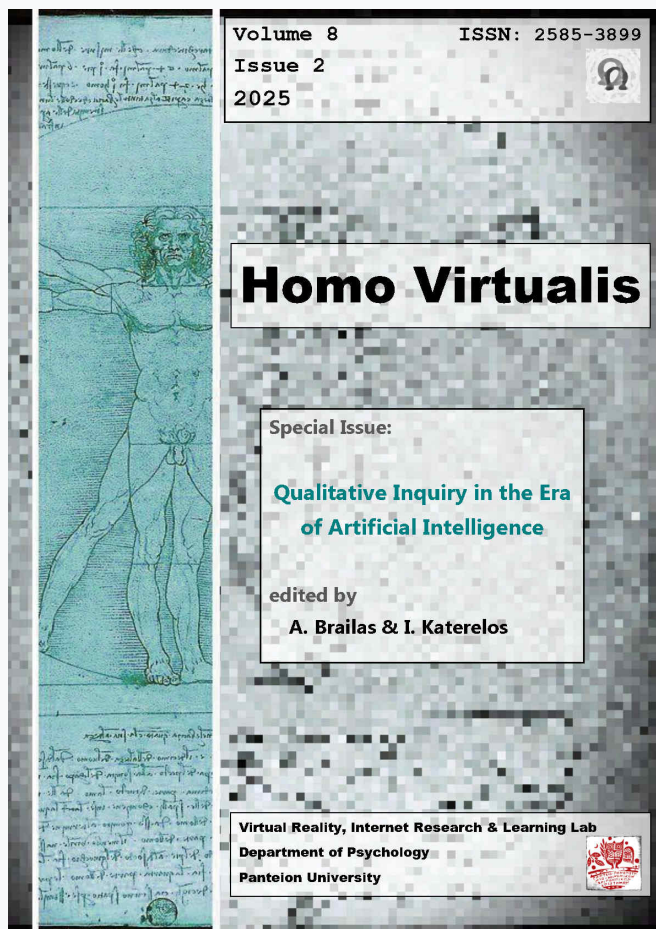


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## Appreciative experiences of young adult athletes: An inquiry of challenges, psychological resilience, and inner strengths

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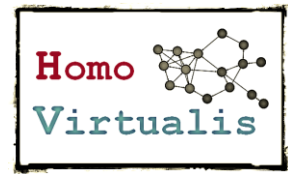
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## **Appreciative experiences of young adult athletes: An inquiry of challenges, psychological resilience, and inner strengths**

**Ioannis Lampris<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This study adopts an Appreciative Inquiry framework within the field of sports psychology to explore the lived experiences of young adult athletes. Its primary aim is to illuminate the positive experiences that serve as sources of psychological strength and resilience, while also identifying the challenges encountered throughout their athletic journey. The sample consists of ten non-professional athletes (both male and female), aged 18 to 23. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 35 minutes each. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure depth and accuracy in the subsequent analysis. Thematic Analysis was employed to interpret the data, leading to the emergence of three master themes, each encompassing specific themes and sub-themes: (a) *Challenges*, including practical difficulties, mental exhaustion, and physical fatigue; (b) *Sources of Motivation, Strength, and Psychological Resilience*, such as personal satisfaction and the development of meaningful relationships; and (c) *Lived Experience of Sport's Impact*, which includes perceived benefits related to physical and mental well-being, as well as contributions to personal growth and identity formation. The findings underscore the importance of amplifying athletes' voices in order to inform practices that genuinely support their psychological and emotional needs. By focusing on strengths, values, and aspirations, this study encourages future research to build upon the appreciative lens in order to design interventions and environments that enhance well-being, foster resilience, and create meaningful change in the everyday realities of young athletes.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry, Psychological Resilience, Young Adult Athletes, Thematic Analysis, Sports Psychology

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## **Introduction**

Sport is an integral part of everyday life for many individuals. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), the benefits of sport are varied and span multiple domains, particularly physical health and well-being, across all age groups. Additional benefits have been observed in areas such as psychosocial development (Malm et al., 2019), personality development (Baker et al., 2014), and reduced alcohol consumption (Villalba et al., 2016). On the other hand, there are also negative outcomes associated with athletic participation, including mental health decline (Gustafsson et al., 2008; Rice et al., 2016), risk of injury (Georgiou et al., 2020; Soligard et al., 2016), and eating disorders (Joy et al., 2016). Notably, these negative aspects tend to occur more frequently at higher levels of elite sport, where, as Malm et al. (2019) note, there exists a delicate balance between peak performance and adverse health effects.

An athlete's life is marked by various stages (age, skill level, motivation) and involves a range of experiences, both positive and negative, that significantly influence their personal development. These are experiences and internal processes that are often difficult to fully understand without being embedded in a sporting environment. How does an athlete live? How do they experience the moments that empower them? How do they face challenges? How do they change and mature over time through sport? These are questions that concern all athletes, regardless of performance level.

Although qualitative research has been a core method in sport psychology, most studies have focused primarily on: (a) elite athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli, 2005; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Kendellen & Camiré, 2019; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), (b) coaches (Strachan et al., 2011; White & Bennie, 2015), and (c) children and adolescents (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003; Strachan et al., 2011; White & Bennie, 2015). But what about adult athletes who are not, and do not aspire to be, professionals? Who, in fact, make up the majority of the athletic population?

This research is an Appreciative Inquiry aiming to shed light, through the eyes of young adult, non-professional athletes, on both the challenges they face and the positive aspects they experience, with emphasis on moments that motivate and instill pride. It is addressed to: (a) athletes of any level, offering an opportunity to draw strength by reflecting on their own experiences through others' stories; (b) coaches and parents, who may gain deeper insight into how their athletes/children experience sport and relationships, enhancing their interactions; and (c) sport psychologists.

## **Literature Review**

As mentioned in the introduction, qualitative research has been widely used in studies within the field of sports psychology. What, then, does the existing literature reveal regarding the themes explored in this study?

To begin with, regarding sources of psychological resilience, the presence of a supportive environment appears to be particularly significant for athletes. According to Calhoun (2024), athletes with higher levels of social support tend to experience lower levels of anxiety and fear of failure, while Galli and Vealey (2008) emphasize the impact that the presence, or absence, of support has on athletes' ability to regulate negative emotions. Additionally, peer support has been shown to positively influence subjective well-being, especially in student-athletes facing heightened stress levels (Cho et al., 2020). Personal psychological resources, such as positivity, determination, competitiveness, maturity, and perseverance, also play a crucial role in enhancing athletes' resilience and their ability to cope with adversity (Galli & Vealey, 2008; González-Hernández et al., 2020; McManama et al., 2021; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Furthermore, successfully overcoming hardships is itself a key factor in the development of future coping mechanisms and resilience-related skills (Brown et al., 2015; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Howells et al., 2017).

Turning to challenges, one of the most commonly cited stressors for athletes is injury, both the fear of being injured and the physical and psychological process of recovery (Georgiou et al., 2020; McManama et al., 2021; Merkel, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Soligard et al., 2016). Athletes also report somatic issues such as eating disorders and physical discomfort (Joy et al., 2016; McManama et al., 2021). Pressure to succeed and fear of failure represent significant sources of stress, especially during competitions, and these pressures often stem from coaches or parents (Merkel, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Other challenges athletes may face include competitiveness, disrespectful coaching behavior, favoritism, financial burden, family obligations, lack of time due to work or studies, and mental health deterioration (Gustafsson et al., 2008; McManama et al., 2021; Merkel, 2013; Rice et al., 2016; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

At the end of each interview, a brief reflective conversation was held with the athletes regarding how the experiences they described had influenced their broader life. Here, two relevant studies are worth mentioning (Camiré & Trudel, 2010; Camiré et al., 2009). Athletes reported that the skills learned through sport were transferable to everyday life. For example, learning to collaborate within a team or finding the courage to express their opinions. They also felt that sport contributed to their character development by teaching moral values, such as respect for opponents and diversity, and discouraging unethical behaviors like cheating.

### *An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as a theoretical and research approach, was developed by David Cooperrider in 1986 (Cooperrider, 1986). AI refers to a "positive mode of action research" that aims to change the perspective of a human community/system in order to liberate its potential (Ludema et al., 2006). Through interviews that emphasize empathetic understanding of participants (Troxel, 2002), typically in organizational contexts aimed at improving performance, AI investigates "what is" in

order to envision “what could be” (Cooperrider, 1986; Delgadillo et al., 2016; Troxel, 2002). Fundamentally, by focusing on what already exists instead of what is missing and on how to strengthen what is working rather than fix what isn’t, AI seeks to achieve positive change (Hall & Hammond, 1998). Over the past decade, AI has been increasingly applied in higher education and healthcare contexts (Collington & Fook, 2016). In 2005, Stavros and Torres introduced the use of AI in everyday interpersonal relationships, such as within families, with the goal of fostering “dynamic relationships” (Cram, 2010; Stavros & Torres, 2005). AI has also been used as a tool for personal development, spiritual growth, and performance enhancement (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

In the context of sports psychology specifically, AI has emerged in the past decade as a coaching tool to improve athletic performance (Bertram et al., 2016; Clements et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2019; Pill, 2015; Scholes, 2016; Trudel et al., 2016). It is primarily used with two objectives: to identify and assess effective practices that can lead to positive change, and to propose and implement those changes (Pill, 2015). This study focuses on the first of these objectives.

## **Methodology**

### *Epistemological Background and Methodology*

The epistemological and ontological foundation of this study lies in phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century (Willig, 2013). Phenomenology focuses on the contents of consciousness and personal lived experience. As such, it has gained significant methodological attention within the social sciences, including psychology (Willig, 2013). The subjective nature of how each individual perceives the world does not preclude the existence of an objective reality. However, this study acknowledges the inherent limitations in objectively describing reality (Brown et al., 2019; Smith, 1996). Therefore, its aim is to understand how each athlete has personally experienced sport throughout their life and to explore the sources from which they draw psychological resilience and strength (AI).

Thematic Analysis (TA) seeks to explore participants’ experiences from their own perspective (Willig, 2013) and recognizes that the analysis represents an interpretation of those experiences (Willig, 2013). As such, TA was deemed an appropriate method for examining the appreciative experiences of athletes, as lived and described by the athletes themselves.

### *Research Questions*

To generate the data, the method of interviews was selected, specifically, the semi-structured interview format. The semi-structured interview is the most widely used method for data collection in qualitative psychological research because it emphasizes participants' narratives and lived experiences (Willig, 2013). It is also the

primary method used in both TA and AI (Brown et al., 2019; Smith, 1996; Willig, 2013).

The Interview Guide was developed through coordination meetings with the supervising professor and based on a review of relevant literature (Brailas, 2025; Willig, 2013). The initial research question that guided this study was: "What experiences fill athletes with pride and motivate them to keep going?" This is also the central "appreciative question" and was developed according to the supervisor's guidance and aforementioned academic sources. During the development of the interview guide, a second research question emerged as a counterpart to the first: "What challenges do athletes face in relation to their sport, their relationships with others (teammates, coaches, social circle), and their daily life, and how do these challenges affect them?"

In a TA framework, interview questions should be open-ended and encourage reflection (Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016; Willig, 2013). The guide was thus designed to first introduce the participants as individuals and athletes, discussing how and why they chose their sport and their day-to-day life. It then guided the exploration of the two core research questions through experiences the athletes chose to share, especially in relation to their interpersonal relationships and the difficulties they face. Participants were also asked to select and describe, in as much detail as possible, one experience from their life as an athlete that they remember with pride, an experience that "warms their heart" (AI question). The aim was to immerse us in the moments they lived and help us understand, through their experience, what gives them motivation, joy, and satisfaction. Finally, the interview concluded with a brief reflective conversation, in which participants shared thoughts about their athletic journey and future outlook.

### *Sample*

The target population of this study consisted of young adult athletes. To narrow the age range, an upper limit of 25 years old was set. As a result, participants ranged from 18 to 23 years old and included individuals of all genders. For the purposes of this study, the term "athlete" referred to individuals, regardless of competitive level, who have been regularly engaged in a sport (at least once a week for at least one year) and are or have been registered members of a sports club or team. This refers to individuals who practiced sport during their childhood or teenage years (either casually or competitively) and who continue to do so as adults, not with professional aspirations, but out of genuine love for their sport.

The sample was collected using convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Participants were initially recruited through local athletic clubs and organizations, which then helped promote the study to other athletes.

Most athletes were either practicing a second sport as a hobby or had changed sports at least once in their life. Three had temporarily withdrawn from sport due to

mental health reasons, and two had paused due to illness or injury. The sample may appear heterogeneous because of the sports variety. However, for the purposes of this study, “age” and “non-professional competitive level” were deemed as the two most important factors.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information and Athletic Background of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Sport	Years Active	Highest Competitive Level Achieved
GM	Male	21	Tennis	16	National
BA	Male	23	Soccer	17	Local
AN	Female	20	Track/10K	3	Local
DA	Female	22	Ballet	16	National School of Dance
DI	Male	23	Soccer	14	Local
AR	Male	18	Archery	7	National
ME	Female	21	Sailing	13	International
MY	Female	23	Heptathlon	8	National
GP	Male	21	Tennis	5	Local
EI	Female	22	Cycling	8	International

### *Conducting the Interviews*

Once the interview guide was finalized, participants who expressed interest in the study were contacted to schedule a time and place for the interview. For practical reasons (mainly to ensure clear audio recording and to promote participants' comfort) quiet locations were chosen during off-peak hours or where they usually train. After reading the information sheet (explaining confidentiality and the right to withdraw) and obtaining informed consent, interviews were conducted and audio-recorded using a mobile phone placed discreetly to ensure comfort. Interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes, with three extending to 50 minutes due to participants' desire to share more in-depth narratives.

Five interviews were conducted online using Skype. The use of technology in research has become increasingly common (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), and there is growing literature on the viability of online methods in qualitative research, including ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Tunçalp & L. Lê, 2014) and semi-structured interviews (Al Balushi, 2016; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). However, despite its advantages, such as enabling interviews with participants in remote areas or those with limited time, the use of online video or voice recording is still not widely adopted (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; de Villiers et al., 2022).

In this study, interviews were conducted online when requested by participants due to scheduling constraints or geographical distance. No noticeable difference was observed in participant behavior between face-to-face and online interviews. According to Deakin & Wakefield (2014), participants' familiarity with technology influences how comfortable and expressive they are during interviews. Given that the sample consisted of young adults raised in a digital environment, it is unsurprising that no significant difference was noted between the two conditions.

### *Data Analysis Method*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, focusing on participants' spoken words without including non-verbal elements, while minor edits were made for readability. This approach aligns with content-focused analysis, as used in this study (Oliver et al., 2005; Willig, 2013). However, some elements, such as incomplete sentences, false starts, laughter, word repetitions, or deep breaths, were retained when deemed relevant to the content analysis (Willig, 2013).

The transcribed data was imported into Taguette (<https://www.taguette.org/>), an open-source software tool for qualitative data analysis. After familiarization with the data through multiple readings, initial coding was performed. These codes (tags) were then grouped into categories, from which overarching themes emerged, in line with the process of Thematic Analysis (Brailas et al., 2023; Willig, 2013). The analysis began within each individual interview and was followed by a cross-case analysis, allowing for the identification of master themes (Willig, 2013) that represented shared meaning across participants. The aim was to present the findings in a coherent way while still preserving the unique and personal experiences of each participant.

### *Reflexivity and Trustworthiness*

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling throughout the research process. This journal served as a space to critically reflect on my assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving interpretations. As a former competitive athlete and coach, I recognized that my background could influence the meanings I assigned to participants' narratives. By documenting my thoughts before, during, and after interviews, and revisiting them during analysis, I aimed to remain aware of my positionality and minimize interpretive bias (Brailas et al, 2023).

## **Results**

### *Master Theme 1 – Challenges*

The first master theme addresses the secondary research question, exploring the challenges athletes face.

**Practical Issues.** Starting with the most basic concerns, participants mention a range of practical problems and difficulties. Regarding facilities, Participant BA states: "I

*train at a field that was never completed, it's still a dirt track... I know that if I fall, there's a serious risk of injury..."*

In terms of costs and equipment, AR and ME respectively explain: *"The most expensive bows cost around €2,000... At a certain level, you're no longer using club equipment because it's training-grade," "Just consider a new boat... it costs around €20,000.... Plus travel,... Transport is the most costly part."*

However, the main practical challenge is lack of time. Nine out of ten participants are university students, while four out of ten also work part-time. According to AR, study demands often prevent participation in training: *"...I haven't trained in a very long time. Since the summer I've gone twice... mainly due to time."* Many athletes, like GP, work before or after practice, which makes their daily schedules quite difficult: *"...I finish work at 7:30 and try to squeeze in running afterward... so I can then go to tennis. And I try to stick to that."*

**Table 2:** Analytical Table of Themes

Master Themes	Themes	Sub-Themes
Challenges	Practical Difficulties	Cost / Facilities, Limited Time
	Mental Exhaustion	Competition / Rivalry, Injustice, High Expectations, Lack of Recognition
	Physical Exhaustion	Physical Strain, Injuries / Illnesses
Sources of Motivation / Strength / Resilience	Satisfaction with Self	Successes, Personal Growth, Overcoming Difficulties, Goal Achievement, Role Fulfillment, Recognition from Others
	Relationship Development	Fair Play, Support from Friends / Family, Team Atmosphere
Lived Experience of Sport's Impact	Health / Well-Being	Mental Well-Being, Physical Well-Being
	Personality Development	Core Values / Principles, Mental Resilience, Coming of Age, Outlook on the Future

Eight out of ten participants are also involved in a second sport or other activity. As BA notes: *"...I have to juggle three things...and there are also other activities I'm involved in... Sometimes you need to adjust, and you're not always given the time you'd like to dedicate; there's fatigue, stress... It's not always convenient, even psychologically."*

Finally, four out of ten athletes train daily, leaving them with virtually no free time. ME and EI are trying to combine elite-level training with studying for medical school and university:

"Now that I'm in the Olympic category, training is 5 to 6 times a week... Some days I'll have breakfast and not eat again until 8 p.m. because I'll be at the hospital all day... then training, then gym."

"...my training sessions last from 1 to 4.5–5 hours... At the same time, I have university... I try to find time for my friends and family too..."

**Mental Exhaustion.** One of the most significant challenges, regardless of performance level, is **mental exhaustion**. Participants describe various causes of psychological fatigue, the main ones being:

(a) Excessive time demands that drastically interfere with daily life:

"We had 10 hours of class and rehearsals every day... I couldn't go out for a night or even grab a coffee because I'd have to wake up at 6 the next morning... it was just too many hours." (DA)

"I remember during my first semester waking up at 7:30, going to university at 9, having class until 3, bringing food I'd cooked and clothes for training, leaving campus, traveling an hour to the training facility, practicing, and returning home at 9 p.m. That was every day... I'd go out one Saturday and only until 10–11 p.m. because I was dead tired." (MY)

(b) An overly competitive atmosphere: *"There's competitiveness. It's about projecting yourself rather than the group... Even from a young age, I didn't get along with many in the sport... there were cliques in the teams..."* (ME)

This competitive climate is often fostered by coaches, as DA and MY describe:

"...there was a lot of rivalry... The issue was mainly the teachers. They were stricter, making distinctions between individuals." (DA)

"...in practice, the competitiveness was fed by the coach. And it wasn't just her, I've noticed all track coaches do that. They try to pit us against each other to produce results." (MY)

(c) Perceived unfairness, which for many is experienced as lack of recognition, especially from coaches:

"...not being assigned to a group you deserve in training... We had a coach who didn't believe in his athletes at all,...He didn't respect us as players." (GM)

"I've seen situations where kids advanced because their parents were on the club board..." (ME)

"I became champion and they told me I wouldn't go to the European championship, someone else would. – Why? – There are no criteria, we chose her." (EI)

Another source of mental strain is high expectations, primarily from coaches. This often alienates athletes, especially at a young age, and distances them from the sport:

"...my coach didn't make me love football... All he cared about was getting the job done like we were robots. That was one of the reasons I eventually quit... if that's how it is, I wasn't sure I wanted to do this." (BA)

"...the pressure became excessive. Just constantly pointing out our mistakes...I found it all overwhelming." (GP)

This overly strict, outcome-oriented approach is perceived by athletes as outdated. As DA explains: *"...there are other ways, other methods to achieve the same result with less psychological pain."* MY says that this coaching style was what led her to quit elite sport after high school: *"...it was all or nothing... The truth is I didn't want to continue. I did it for a whole year and stopped in the second November. I remember feeling so pressured and stressed..."* Even unspoken expectations from parents can add psychological pressure, as EI describes: *"You want to give back, make them proud... Even if they don't show it directly, you can tell they expect something from you, so you want to deliver."*

**Physical Exhaustion.** Many athletes, under pressure from their coaches, push their bodies beyond reasonable limits during training or competition:

"...the training and competition were extremely demanding. You had to be fully focused for two days straight, with diet, performance, sleep, everything. It was very draining... my body was constantly in pain." (MY)

"You'd reach a point where your body just couldn't take it anymore. And then the coach would say, 'Don't sit around, do something,' even though your body had already passed its limit." (DA)

DA also points out that this physical strain has long-term effects: *"When you're young, your body just goes, you don't feel anything. But as you get older, you feel everything... now, with the humidity, my joints ache."*

Injuries are a major issue for many athletes and can cause significant setbacks. AN had to switch sports because of tendinitis: *"...I wanted to continue... but then I got tendinitis... so I started track and field to keep doing sports without aggravating the injury."* Unfortunately, recovery is not always guaranteed. AN adds: *"I don't know if it'll fully go away, but I'm doing various treatments to help. Laser therapy, acupuncture, etc."*

Long illnesses can also be a major setback. EI, a member of the Olympic team, was out for three months due to illness, which affected the team's qualification efforts: *"We're still on the qualification threshold, but without me, and without some key points we lost, it's still up in the air."*

### *Master Theme 2 – Source of Motivation/Strengths/Mental Resources*

The second master theme essentially addresses the core research question and constitutes the largest part of the analysis. It emerges primarily through the

appreciative questions and the personal experiences the athletes chose to share with us.

**Satisfaction with the Self.** Satisfaction with oneself is one of the primary factors contributing to psychological resilience. When athletes feel content with themselves, they possess more motivation and inner strength to continue “their struggle,” greater confidence in their ability to overcome difficulties, and a heightened sense of joy in their achievements. The athletes explained what personally brings them joy and makes them feel satisfied with themselves and why.

For GM, it was the recognition and trust shown to him, being allowed to contribute to the team in a club championship: *“...some people believed in me and gave me an opportunity that not everyone gets, to be part of this particular competition and to experience everything I experienced.”*

BA recounts a match in which, even though his team was losing, they decided to “keep fighting until the end,” which earned them recognition from others: *“When the match ended and the referee blew the whistle, he came over, congratulated us personally, gathered us, and told us: ‘You are the best and most united team in the tournament.’ That was the most important thing.”*

Overcoming challenges, achieving success under difficult conditions, or even just trying to persevere despite adversity, is a significant source of joy and strength. AN shared her experience of losing her father during a tournament: *“I was extremely sad and didn’t have the will... but I told myself, okay, I want to win this match.”* Despite her psychological state, she came first in the tournament, saying: *“I was really happy that I managed it.”*

Naturally, success and goal achievement are very important to athletes. No one wants to keep giving their best and never succeed. DA described the difficult preparation process for her entrance into the National School of Dance and her feelings when she finally succeeded:

*“You’ve dedicated so much time to this to fail. Not that you’re a failure if you don’t make it... but in that moment, you don’t think that way.”*

*“...that’s when I felt really good, because I said, okay, I may have been exhausted, done everything at once, but it was worth it in the end... That was the moment I felt best about myself, that I succeeded, and now something new is beginning.”*

Athletes also spoke about moments when they realized their personal development, the progress of their abilities as athletes. AR explained that it’s not success in itself that gives him satisfaction, but: *“All the times I went in as the underdog... I went just to do my best.”* As he describes, these were the times he wasn’t the favorite, went in just hoping to perform well, and yet his performance proved that his level had improved: *“I ended up achieving something... it turned out my level was higher than I had expected.”*

ME recounted her experience at a world championship (non-professional category), where she and her crew competed in the women's category for the first time: *"It was a championship where we had no expectations, we hadn't set a goal,"* and they ended up finishing third. Still, it wasn't the medal itself that mattered most: *"I don't know if it's just the success, as in the medal. Maybe it's personal development? I reached a point I had set for myself, and I did it."*

Finally, the athletes spoke about setting and achieving goals, regardless of how small or big they were. MY described a year-long preparation for her last national youth competition and the match itself. Despite the difficulties she faced during the match, she managed to reach her goal: *"That was a moment of immense joy... because I felt that everything we had done for a whole year came together when it needed to. That's when I said, 'You know what? You can make it, even if something goes wrong.'"*

GP had set a goal during the pandemic, when he couldn't play tennis, to follow a running schedule with a marathoner friend. As he explained, setting a goal and sticking to it is the most important thing and something he remembers with pride: *"...I managed to stick with it, and for me, that's very important... I set a very difficult goal, I stuck with it, and it paid off."*

**Relationship Development.** In addition to the satisfaction described above, the relationships athletes build and cultivate through sport are of immense value to them. Almost all participants spoke of how important their relationships with others, especially teammates, are. Notably, this applies to both team and individual sports.

A positive team or club environment and the bond with teammates seem to be paramount. BA names his relationship with teammates and the team's unity as the main reason he loves football: *"...that's the essence of football... I do what I do not just for myself, but also for the team."*

For DA, the support among peers was a key source of psychological strength that helped her endure both physical and emotional fatigue at the dance school: *"You think, 'I'm not alone'... It's important to have people, not necessarily to hang out with, but people who listen, respect, and help."*

MY described her relationship with fellow athletes in the heptathlon as similar to a basketball team, even though it's an individual sport. As she explained, because the competitions last a long time, it's easier to get to know and bond with other athletes, something she values highly in her sport::

*"It was like we had a basketball-type relationship; there was that team element. One of my closest friends is from there."*

*"The nicest thing is that it's the only track and field event where you can develop relationships with others. I've made many friendships through it... It's not like running 100 meters and leaving."*

EI shared her most treasured memory of a tournament, barely mentioning the race itself. What stayed with her was the team atmosphere, the relationships between members, and the entire experience of traveling for an important tournament abroad, which felt more like a trip with friends:

"Our daily life there, how much we laughed, the pranks we pulled, the team spirit we had during the match, how we helped each other during training, how much I improved... It was something different I had never experienced before... I felt like they were my family, still do... Those were some of the best weeks of my life."

A major part of this positive climate and connection lies in fair play, the unwritten code of sportsmanship and mutual respect, extended both to teammates and opponents. AR describes it as: *"The healthiest mindset in archery during a match is to do your best, not to aim for first place."* He explained that this attitude, which prevails in his sport, is the reason he switched to archery. According to AR, it's the only sport where opponents behave like they're on the same team: *"...when we see that someone isn't doing well for any reason... we try to lift them up. I remember once I had a problem with my bow, and another athlete came with his coach and fixed it for me."*

Finally, it's worth noting that already-existing relationships, such as with family and friends, are also sources of mental strength. While participants didn't focus much on these relationships, they always mentioned them with warmth and appreciation. In all cases, family was the one who introduced them to sport at a young age, while friends offer emotional support when things get tough. EI, who has a particularly demanding schedule, said about her friends: *"I'm happy that people who understand my situation and support me have stayed by my side. And I know they'll always be there for me, in tough times and good ones too."*

### **Master Theme 3 – Lived Experience of Sport's Impact**

The third master theme refers to all those thoughts and feelings participants shared about how they perceive the influence of sport in their broader lives, beyond training and competition. It captures how sport has personally affected and changed them.

**Health and Well-being.** All athletes, without exception, acknowledged the importance of sport for their physical health. However, they mainly emphasized its impact on their mental well-being.

For AN, sport provides relief from the stress of everyday life: *"...it reduces stress because I have a lot of it... I feel like my mind clears."* At the same time, it acts as an outlet, an emotional release from exhaustion and tension. She recalled the lock down period as an example: *"We went into lock down again for a while, and I remember out of frustration I went and ran 21 kilometers."*

**Personality Development.** The most significant influence of sport, however, was evident in the participants' personal development during their transition into

adulthood. They spoke about how their experiences and the values they learned through sport helped them mature and grow.

They mainly referred to how these experiences taught them to be more mentally resilient in the face of difficulties, not only in the context of sport. According to GM, an individual sport like tennis forces you to manage difficult situations on your own during a match, which fosters maturity: *"...you don't have someone behind you, supporting you, it's just you playing against the other. So I think all that matures you much more as a person."*

MY and BA described how overcoming challenges helped them discover their limits and develop greater self-trust: *"I can do things I thought I couldn't. It made me really believe in myself," "...the patience and persistence and the hope that, even though I'm in a tough situation, I have strength... it has really helped me endure psychologically."*

Teamwork, respect for opponents, and acceptance of defeat were also unanimously identified as valuable lessons from sport:

"The first skill that comes to mind is teamwork... From a young age I had to cooperate with other kids to play in matches. You learn that you might lose... how to handle defeat, understand why we lost and what I need to improve to win next time" (DI).

"...it taught me to accept defeat. Archery is a sport that teaches you that... a sense of solidarity, mutual respect... fair play" (AR).

"To be competitive but... once I enter the space, to respect the other person competing" (EI).

For ME, the most important value is discipline, something that has proved useful in various aspects of her life, especially in her studies: *"It made me more organized, to set boundaries."*

AN emphasized honesty, a value that sport, and particularly tennis, teaches by necessity, since there are no referees: *"Honesty, integrity... mainly because there's no referee, you have to admit your own mistakes."*

Lastly, regarding the future, sport's influence appears to be enduring. Beyond their desire to continue engaging in sport throughout their lives, 2 out of the 10 participants are already working or doing internships as coaches or fitness instructors, while another 2 expressed an interest in pursuing a similar path.

GP, in particular, believes that his dream of becoming a math teacher is rooted in his sporting experiences: *"With sport, I did something I enjoyed, something that taught me things and helped me grow as a person... That's why I want to become a teacher."*

## **Discussion**

By exploring the appreciative experiences of young adult athletes, this study sought to shed light on the challenges they face, but more importantly, on the mental

resources they draw upon, as described through their own lived experiences. A thematic analysis was conducted to provide athletes with the opportunity to narrate their experiences. The analysis revealed three master themes: (a) the difficulties they face, (b) the sources of psychological strength they rely on, and (c) the positive impact that sport has on their lives in general.

Various challenges were identified, including practical issues, such as inadequate facilities and the financial cost of sports participation, and physical strain, including fatigue, illness, and injury. In terms of practical difficulties, there are only limited references in the literature, most of which pertain to cost. Considering that the majority of existing studies have been conducted in countries like the United States and Australia, it is understandable that issues related to infrastructure are rarely emphasized. Moreover, these studies often focus on professional or scholarship-supported athletes, for whom cost may be a secondary concern. However, for non-professional athletes in a country with less developed sports infrastructure, such as Greece, these factors seem to constitute a minor but noteworthy obstacle. While the cost of certain sports, particularly those requiring expensive equipment, may not be easily reduced, the state could take action to improve sports facilities, creating spaces that are both accessible and enjoyable for public use.

Regarding injuries and physical difficulties, although these are identified in the literature as one of the two major stressors in sport (Georgiou et al., 2020; McManama et al., 2021; Merkel, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Soligard et al., 2016), our participants did not place the same emphasis on them. This difference likely stems from the fact that for professional athletes, an injury may pose a significant threat to their career, whereas for non-professionals (who may also have fewer opportunities for injury), these issues, although challenging, are not considered the most pressing. Participants in this study focused more on physical fatigue and pressure from coaches, which they deemed excessive given that they do not aspire to a professional sports career. A potential solution could involve adapting training approaches through open dialogue between coaches and athletes.

However, the most prominent difficulty reported was psychological exhaustion. While the literature identifies fear of injury -as mentioned above- and performance anxiety (Merkel, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) as the two dominant psychological stressors, participants in this study primarily attributed their mental fatigue to overloaded schedules and lack of free time. As non-professionals, these athletes also manage academic or work responsibilities. The pressure of everyday obligations combined with their demanding training schedules makes it difficult for them to stay motivated or train with the frequency and intensity they might prefer. On the other hand, those who choose to continue training despite other responsibilities often experience guilt or stress for not being able to dedicate time to other valued activities or relationships. The discrepancy with the existing literature does not lie in the nature of the stressors, but in how significantly each is perceived. This variation, as previously

noted, likely arises from the professional versus non-professional athlete divide. In all cases, participants placed significant importance on their mental health. Notably, three participants reported taking temporary breaks from sport to rest and recover until they felt ready to return. This raises the question of whether it may be time for sports organizations and clubs in Greece to offer psychological support services, at little or no cost, by hiring sport psychologists, as is done in several European countries and other continents.

It becomes evident that athletes rely on specific sources of psychological strength and motivation. One key source is self-satisfaction. The achievement of personal goals and recognition from others act as motivators and fill them with pride in their abilities. Although there are differences in how success is defined, participants noted that, even if they do not view it as an end in itself, achieving success offers a sense of relief and validation for their efforts and personal development. In the literature (Galli & Vealey, 2008; González-Hernández et al., 2020; McManama et al., 2021; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), athletes often highlight personal traits such as positivity, determination, and maturity as important in coping with adversity, less emphasis is placed on their athletic skills per se. However, both our findings and the literature (Brown et al., 2015; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Howells et al., 2017) agree on the importance of overcoming difficulties. Successfully navigating challenges provides athletes with the confidence that they have the strength to overcome future obstacles and helps them discover their personal limits.

The most significant source of strength, however, was identified as social support and interpersonal relationships. A team's familial atmosphere, the formation of friendships, and the awareness that one is not alone in facing challenges are all important protective factors that enhance athletes' mental health and bring them joy and satisfaction. While professional athletes in the literature recognize the importance of peer support, they tend to prioritize support from their broader social circle, family and friends (Calhoun, 2014; Galli & Vealey, 2008). In contrast, non-professional athletes in this study placed more value on relationships within the sport context. In fact, according to the participants, a positive team environment, when present, along with love for the sport, were the two main reasons they continue to participate in sports. It is clear that building a strong support system should be a priority for families and especially for coaches who are responsible for young athletes who have only recently reached adulthood.

Finally, participants described how sport has transformed their lives. Here, the alignment with the existing literature was complete, both in terms of transferable life skills and moral values (Camiré & Trudel, 2010; Camiré et al., 2009). They spoke primarily about the development of their personality during emerging adulthood, emphasizing that sport has taught them values such as teamwork, respect for opponents, acceptance of failure, perseverance, and patience, along with life skills such as socialization, functioning as part of a group, organization, and discipline. It is

evident that sport can serve as a tool for broader social and personal development among youth, provided it is framed appropriately. This final part of the interview functioned as a reflective exercise for many participants. As several admitted, they had never considered these things before. After the interviews, many told us that this was their favorite part of the process because it helped them realize how far they have come, not only as athletes but as individuals.

### *Research Limitations*

This study's main limitation stems from Thematic Analysis and phenomenology's inherent subjectivity in participants' narratives and researcher interpretations. To ensure trustworthiness, qualitative research often uses reflexive journaling, member checking, or peer feedback (Brailas et al., 2023). Another useful strategy is data triangulation, which involves using multiple data collection methods beyond interviews. The limitation here is that only the Reflexive journal was employed.

It is also important to address the relatively small sample size which naturally limits the scope of generalizability. However, this characteristic should not be viewed as weakness but rather as deliberate strength aligned with the qualitative, in-depth nature of the investigation. The primary aim was not to produce broadly generalizable results, but to gain a nuanced, rich understanding of the phenomenon as it manifests within this particular setting (Brailas, 2025). Using an Appreciative Inquiry approach, the study aimed not only to explore experiences deeply but also to promote positive change for participants by encouraging them to view their athletic journeys with renewed pride and optimism about the future.

### *Reflexivity and Positionality*

As a researcher with a background in competitive sport, my interpretation of the findings was inevitably shaped by personal experiences. I have long seen adversity in sport as a catalyst for growth, a view echoed in some participants' accounts of resilience. Also, my critical stance toward excessive coaching pressure may have drawn my attention to narratives around coach-athlete dynamics and mental health. Similarly, my belief that sport fosters maturity likely influenced my sensitivity to expressions of personal growth. While these perspectives enriched my engagement with the data, I remained reflexively aware of their impact. To maintain critical distance, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

Engaging in this research was both an academic and deeply emotional process. As participants shared moments of pride, I felt profoundly moved. Their stories of perseverance and growth echoed my own athletic experiences, creating a strong sense of connection and admiration. However, the interviews also brought emotional challenges. Hearing about profound adversity, such as the death of a parent, left a lasting heaviness. Balancing the roles of empathetic listener and analytical researcher was difficult. Conducting the study required me not only to interpret participants' experiences but also to continuously reflect on how they affected me intellectually,

emotionally, and personally. Thus, the research became more than inquiry; it was a transformative encounter that deepened my understanding of the complex inner worlds of athletes.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, this study highlights, through athletes' lived experiences, the various challenges they face, such as physical fatigue, injury, and psychological strain, and the internal and external sources from which they draw mental strength, such as personal traits and abilities, support from their social network, and most notably, their relationships with teammates. In the final, reflective part of the interviews, participants described the long-term impact of sport on their lives, emphasizing the acquisition of important life skills and values.

Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of mental health and made it clear that a supportive and "family-like" atmosphere within sports contexts is a top priority for them. The call for an alternative approach to training non-professional adult athletes, alongside an emphasis on team climate and interpersonal relationships, may be the most important contribution of this study, given that the existing literature predominantly focuses on professional athletes or adolescents. Additionally, the need for psychological support for athletes regardless of level emerges as an issue that should be addressed in Greece, where such services, if offered at all, are typically available only to elite athletes. Finally, this research can function as foundation for future studies that will aim at enhancing well-being rather than athletic performance.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

In the reflective segment of the interviews, participants emphasized values and love for the sport over performance and results. This topic, raised in relation to training and coach-imposed goals, is a particularly interesting area that this study only briefly touched upon. Future studies could explore in greater depth the performance versus passion dichotomy, particularly among children and adolescents who are still in the process of maturing. Our participants clearly favored the latter.

Regarding the core focus of the present study -mental resources and challenges- it is evident that this research alone cannot address the significant gap in the literature. Further studies are needed across a variety of sports settings, not only to confirm the current findings but also to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding that could lead to practical recommendations for addressing identified challenges and enhancing positive aspects. For example, a case study involving an amateur sports team could be designed in multiple phases: (1) exploring athletes' needs and experiences (AI, first stage), (2) proposing solutions for improved training processes based on findings and implementing those solutions (AI, second stage), and (3) evaluating their impact on individual athletes, team dynamics, and athletic performance. The most critical step, in other words, is to move from exploration to

action. Because the findings of such research gain greater value when they lead to practical changes and improvements in people's lives.

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**Notes on Contributor**

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