

SPORTS CAREER DEVELOPMENT AMONG YOUNG BRAZILIAN FOOTBALL PLAYERS

DESENVOLVIMENTO DA CARREIRA ESPORTIVA ENTRE JOVENS JOGADORES DE FUTEBOL BRASILEIROS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the sports career development of young football players. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed to examine sport career development of 30 Brazilian football players in different phases of career development (experimentation; specialization; and investment). The interview guide was based on the five domains (athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic and financial) of a Developmental and Holistic Perspective on Athletic Career Development. Qualitative content analysis of the experimentation phase athletes revealed nine higher orders in relation to the four domains. Experimentation athletes showed a preference for football over other sports and other activities (such as school studies); for athletes in specialization phase it can be noticed a preference for football practice on field instead of other activities; in the transition from specialization to athletic investment, athletes reported having difficulties in adapting to the demands of training and high-performance competitions. In conclusion, this research showed the importance of planning for sports formation that addresses the excellence of the subject as a whole and not only the athletic emphasis, preventing developmental problems as early specialization.

Keywords: Sporting Development; Career transition, Athletes; Football; Psychology.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi explorar o desenvolvimento da carreira esportiva de jovens jogadores de futebol. Entrevistas semiestruturadas qualitativas foram empregadas para examinar o desenvolvimento da carreira esportiva de 30 jogadores de futebol brasileiros em diferentes fases de desenvolvimento de carreira (experimentação; especialização; e investimento). O guia da entrevista foi baseado nos cinco domínios (atletico, psicológico, psicossocial, acadêmico e financeiro) de uma perspectiva de desenvolvimento e holística sobre o desenvolvimento de carreira atlética. A análise qualitativa do conteúdo dos atletas da fase de experimentação revelou nove ordens mais altas em relação aos quatro domínios. Os atletas de experimentação mostraram preferência pelo futebol por outros esportes e outras atividades (como estudos

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escolares); Para atletas em fase de especialização, pode -se notar uma preferência pela prática de futebol em campo em vez de outras atividades; Na transição da especialização para o investimento atlético, os atletas relataram ter dificuldades em se adaptar às demandas de treinamento e competições de alto desempenho. Em conclusão, esta pesquisa mostrou a importância do planejamento da formação de esportes que aborda a excelência do assunto como um todo e não apenas a ênfase atlética, impedindo os problemas de desenvolvimento como especialização precoce.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento esportivo; Transição de carreira, atletas; Futebol; Psicologia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Of the 360.000 amateur and professional football players in Brazil, only 6% can play professionally, working in 742 clubs. Even fewer are paid competitive wages compared to other professions, countries, and leagues (Soares et al., 2011). In addition, studies highlight that less than 1% of the aspirants to the profession are assessed in the qualifications tests for selection of athletes in professional Brazilian clubs (Damo, 2007; Melo, 2010). It is therefore not surprising, that Brazil is the largest exporter of football players globally.

Around 1.500 players have been transferred to international clubs in 2013 alone, most of them between 17 and 22 years of age and incentivized by the growing monetary value associated with being a successful football athlete (Rocha, Bartholo, Melo; Soares, 2011; Soares, Melo, Costa, Bartholo; Bento, 2011). The Brazilian population has internalized cultural values in relation to football. This passion often starts during childhood as a result of the parents and society's influence, and continues throughout life. In a certain way, this personal identification with its football culture is what moves and maintains the football teams in Brazil (Ciampa, Leme; Souza, 2010). Football is the most practiced sport in Brazil, proof of this are the high investments in teams and events (Damo; Oliven, 2013; Marques, 2013).

Despite being a growing field of interest, career development of research related to the careers of young football players has received little attention in Brazil, especially with regard to holistic transitions to a professional sports career. Most research has emphasized transition out of sport into retirement, therefore defining a gap in the literature within career transition studies (Stambulova, Franck; Weibull, 2012), especially within football which is the most practiced sport worldwide (Fuller, Junge; Dvorak, 2012).



According to the Developmental and Holistic Perspective on Athletic Career Development (Wylleman, Reints; De Knop, 2013), an athlete's career development and trajectory might be considered a succession of stages and transitions (Pummell, Harwood; Lavalley, 2008; Stambulova, 2010; Samuel; Tenenbaum, 2011) including initiation adherence and continued participation in competitive sports organizations (Wylleman; Lavalley, 2004; Pummel et al., 2008).

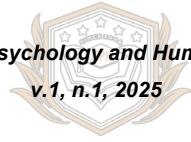
These transitions would occur simultaneously in five different domains of life: Athletic, Psychologic, Psychosocial, Academic/Vocational and Financial (Wylleman, Reints; De Knop, 2013). Such transitions are dynamic and challenge athletes with a variety of demands related to football practice routines, competition amongst players and personal and professional lifestyles. This transition requires effective coping strategies to successfully navigate the sports career. (Park, Lavalley; Tod, 2013; Petitpas, Brewer; Van Raalte, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler; Côté, 2009; Samuel; Tenenbaum, 2011).

Thus, being a professional football player carries a more significant role than just a sports career itself, posing as one of the main social ascension careers for the athlete himself and his family (Rubio; Carvalho, 2005). Special attention is needed to understand the challenges and influences of exposure to a football career development regarding positive human development and life skills acquisition, that are unrelated to their athletic performance.

Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the trajectory of sports development of football athletes. We characterized significant elements faced in athletic transitions within the five domains of a developmental and holistic perspective on athletic career development model, by performing an inductive content analysis of qualitative interviews.

2 METHODS

Considering that an athlete's career development and trajectory is a succession of stages and transitions including initiation adherence and continued participation in competitive sports organizations (Samuel; Tenenbaum, 2011; Pummell et al., 2008) we conducted a cross-sectional study with the aim to understand this process in the Brazilian reality, specifically in a group of football athletes in the Parana State.



2.1 Ethics Statement

The research project was presented to and approved by the club coordinators and technical committee. After this process, the parents and football players were contacted directly and invited to participate in the research. Signed consent was obtained by the football players, as well as their parents if the players were below 18 years of age.

2.2 Research team

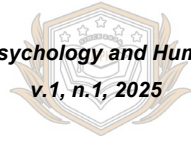
The 2 researchers were male, master's students in the Psychology field, with experience in qualitative research. They had prior knowledge of sports psychology research on athletic development, career transition and experience of supporting athletes in an applied sport psychology context. The second author of the present study had extensive experience of competing as a semi-professional football player and was familiar with the context of the participants. Both researchers participated in all stages (data collection, transcription and data analysis).

2.3 Participants selection and Recruitment

We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 30 Brazilian male football players from a team playing the First Division of the Brazilian Football Championship (top League in Brazil).

The team is known as one of the athlete formation clubs with the best structure in Brazil (Pluri Consultoria, 2020). The athlete formation program is organized in three levels of career development: sport initiation, selection of athletes for pre-pro and with 15 years signing a contract and being professionalized (Table 1).

Initially, the project was presented and approved by the club, and permission was signed by the parents of players under 18 years of age, so that they will be contacted directly and invited to participate in the research. Thus, 30 football athletes with ages between 13 and 20 years old constituted our convenience sample. Subjects were selected to illustrate athletic transitions in the three different phases of career development. Although the model developmental and holistic perspective on athletic career development adopted by Wylleman, Reints; Knop (2013) suggests the

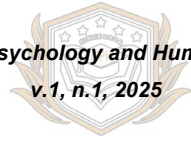


taxonomy of talent development by Bloom (1985), considering general athletic career development programs in Brazilian football, and considering the ages that athletes go through the different training levels, we chose to adopt Côté's (1999) model for athletics development.

Table 1 - Levels of career development

a) Sports initiation	Local football schools funded by the team, situated in different parts of Brazil. In this phase youngsters begin playing at around 6 years and have training sessions twice a week
b) Selection of athletes for pre-pro	According to performance evaluations from trainers, a number of athletes are selected and sent to a pre-professional school in which training sessions are upgraded to an intermediate level. Athletes start to practice on a daily basis, living in the school (around 12/13 years old)
c) Being professionalized	After another selection process the best athletes are sent to the main headquarters of the team (average age around 15 years), now signing a contract and being professionalized. These junior athletes start to train with performance and result expectations, taking part in national and international competitions and are sometimes traded as a football player at that age

Source: prepared by the authors, 2025



Thus, we ended up with three groups of analysis: a) Experimentation phase: 10 athletes in a transition phase from experimentation to specialization (around 13 years old) contacted with initiation schools defined in section (a) described above; b) Specialization phase: 10 athletes in a transition phase from specialization to investment (around 15 years old) contacted with pre-professional school outlined in section (b) described above; c) Investment phase: 10 athletes in investment phase reaching professionalization (around 17 years old). These athletes were part of the junior team outlined in the section (c) described above.

2.4 Interview Procedure

The semi structured interview conducted by the first and third authors was used to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of their career transition in the phases of athletic development. An interview guide was developed for the study to facilitate and standardize the acquisition of the qualitative data. The guide was built iteratively by the authors (JRNv and LPO) who conducted the interviews.

The guide was developed with the basis of the elements of the developmental and holistic perspective on athletic career development (Wylleman, Reints; Knop, 2013). Specifically evaluating the following indicators:

Athletic Domain - Satisfaction with the role, the sporting environment, the relationship with coach, teammates, friends, difficulties, parental influence, family support. Psychological Domain- Satisfaction with the role, recognition by peers, friends, family, career changes, motivation to practice;

Psychosocial Domain - Important People, significant peers influence these people, relationships with friends, coach, teacher, parent, family, personal motivations;

Academic Domain - Satisfaction with academic life, difficulties, importance of the study, interpersonal relationships. In this research, the Financial Domain (e.g., higher employability) was reported along with the vocational domain. Pilot interviews with football and futsal athletes were performed to guide conception, testing comprehension and accuracy of the guide to address out research

question adequately. Experts in Sport Psychology and Sports Sciences reviewed our interview script to provide further clarifications. We also investigated the feasibility, meaning and clarity of the interview questions (Bardin, 2008) following an interview script that was previously tested with college athletes from the State University of Maringá and researchers from the GEPEHD research group.

Our interview guide ended up with open, non-leading questions and predefined probes topics and was trained by first and third authors to be conducted similarly. Interviews were conducted across two separate sessions. The first part involved the informed consent acquisition with the athletes and/or legal representatives and the first section of the guide with an overview of the background information such as length of involvement in sport, reasons for participation, and goals.

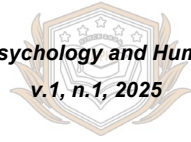
The second moment applied to the subsequent four sections (athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/financial dimensions) of the interview guide designed to explore the athletes' experience during their sports career and associate the career transition with the demands and specific features of the sport.

The interview with each athlete individually in an open place under the guidance of a responsible of the club, for approximately 1 hour. They were recorded on two recorders simultaneously to ensure proper collection of audio information. The audio collection was discussed and approved by the participants.

2.5 Data Analysis

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in a naturalistic way, resulting in 112 single-spaced pages of interview data. Two researchers (first and second author) read and reread all the interview transcripts to become fully familiar with each of the participants' accounts. Independently, first and second authors identified raw data themes (quotes or paraphrased quotes that captured major ideas conveyed) characterizing each football player's responses within the career transition dimensions.

Then, each researcher independently developed emerging themes for each interview. Successively, through extensive discussion, consensus was obtained on a joint list of subsection raw data themes characterizing each emerging theme.



Sectional raw data themes characterizing each football player were compiled across players, resulting in a list of raw data themes within each dimension of the interview guide, encompassing the sum total of responses by all 30 players. Thus, an inductive analysis was performed to identify common themes of greater generality from the list of raw themes. Second-level themes were labeled 'higher order themes', while the four career transition domains (dimensions of the interview guide) determined in advance to obtain the raw data themes were labeled 'general dimensions'.

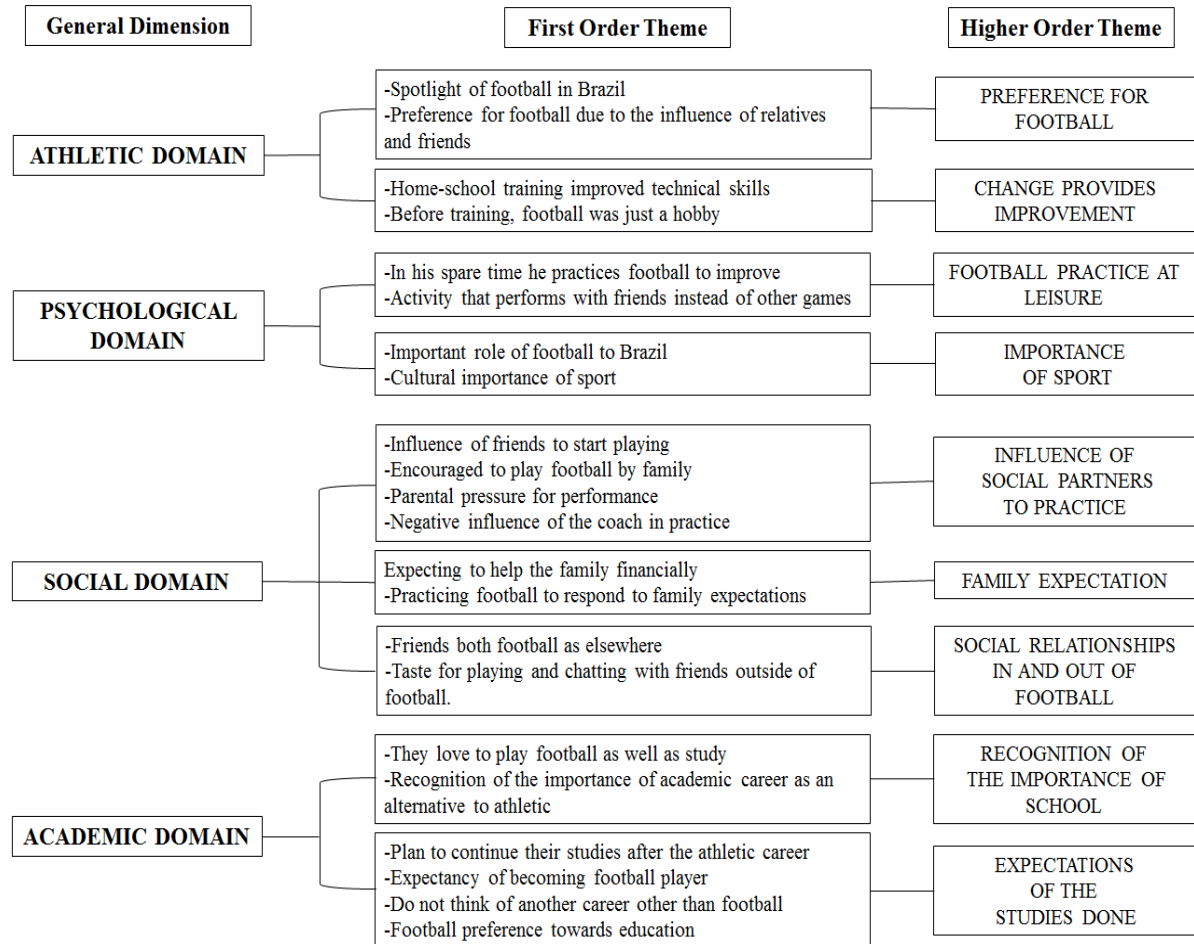
As a supplementary verification of the inductive analysis, the raw data themes and higher order themes were tested by conducting a deductive analysis, in which the researchers went back to the original transcripts and verified that all themes and dimensions were represented.

Sets of raw themes and higher order themes were organized by group (experimentation, specialization and investment) to characterize transitions in each moment of the athletic career development (Figures 1, 2 and 3). To present the results of those revealed, they were translated from Portuguese into English by the researchers themselves and reviewed by the sworn translators who evaluated the article.

3 RESULTS

The four general dimensions (athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/financial) used to extract the 22 raw data themes from the transcripts regarding athletes' career transition at the experimentation phase are depicted in Figure 1. Subsequently these raw data themes were organized into 9 higher order themes. Each of these higher order themes is exemplified by unit quotes to illustrate the meaning.

Figure 1 - Hierarchical characterization of athletes from phase of experimentation in the four domains of career transition



Source: prepared by the authors, 2025

3.1 Experimentation phase

Experimentation athletes showed a preference for football over other sports and other activities (such as school studies), indicating that since childhood the Brazilian boys have a preference for football and a dream of becoming a professional player.

The preference for football over other sports may be related to its media presence and greater importance to relatives and friends, as portrayed by the statement of an athlete:



I have practiced handball, but only in school, in physical education classes at school. I liked it, like all sports, but I love football. I fell in love because it is very cool, I like it, and everybody talks too. I love playing football. Everyone says that football can be a future profession. My mother, my friends, relatives. All of them say it (AEX5).

Another important issue in the athletic domain was the change provided by training, where athletes of this stage reported technical improvement and greater interest in differentiated systematic training of daily practice with friends or at school, as evidenced in the quote:

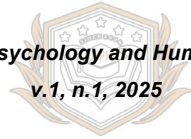
No, I started, it's just I did not know ... my colleagues started to train here, so I came to train, then after they explained that they had to go to the gym to apply for the training, so I went. Oh, it improved, because here there is a specific training, improved shot, everything. (...) Since school it has changed a lot. It was more... it was not as strict as here, here it is harder (AEX7).

In the psychological domain, athletes have reported great identification with football practice, adopting it as a pleasant or playful experience, held in leisure time, as expressed by this athlete:

In the afternoon when there is no training here (in the club), we go to a small open gym to play. When there is no task to be done in the afternoon, we stay there all day long playing' (AEX2).

This choice of football as an activity performed in their free time seems to be due to the importance of the sport specifically in Brazil. Thus, the practice of football would represent an expectation of development and social ascension, assumed as a dream or purpose to be achieved, as the athlete phrases:

Football is the world's best sport, for example, Ronaldinho Gaúcho. Ronaldinho was like me, had no father, and those things, and so he was playing, was playing and turned out to be a great player. Now he's the best in the world' (AEX1).



In this context, the influence of social peers in sport practice is emphasized as crucial for the athlete's engagement. It was revealed by the athletes in the experimentation phase that their main significant social peers were family and friends, as it is noticed in the statements below:

My parents want me to be a footballer, my friends say that I was good at playing on the street, then my parents put me in the local train facility (club), they say I may have a good future (AEX6).

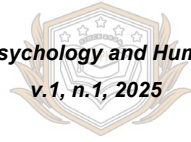
Thinking? To give a better future for my mother, my brother. I think being a footballer will provide me a better future (AEX1).

However, this influence is not always positive, as the expectation of parents and sports professionals in an athlete's career can result in extreme pressure for performance, as well as negative models of coaches and trainers, as athlete AEX1 portrayed: 'I stopped training because T. (coach) swore me a lot'.

Despite the preference for the practice of the football field, the athletes showed an acknowledgment for the importance of school, reporting that they are as fond of playing outdoor football as they were going to school. They mentioned that studying would be a second option to get a career out of the sport or after the end of their athletic career, as the athlete's statement:

I'm doing well, and it is very good, because, for example, if I can not be a football player, or have an injury, I will not be able to play anymore, so I have to graduate. Then I will not be able to work more on that, and I'll have to work on something else (AEX8).

However, since the experimentation phase there has been a preference for an athletic career at the expense of academic professional development. Some athletes have reported interest in continuing an academic career, but only after the end of athletic career, while others can no longer consider other careers than that of a professional football player, a difficulty that is evident when the athlete reports:



Ah, if football does not work out, I'm going to another career, but I do not think of any because I do not see myself doing anything else (AEX7).

3.2 Specialization phase

For athletes in specialization phase (Figure 2) we have identified a preference for football practice on the field instead of other sports activities, as emphasized by the athlete:

I like everything, indoor soccer, handball, I like to play everything, volleyball. But I prefer football, since early age I've been wanting to be a player, even because football here in Brazil is taken more seriously. I also see the players on the field, and it makes you want to be there at their place (AES2).

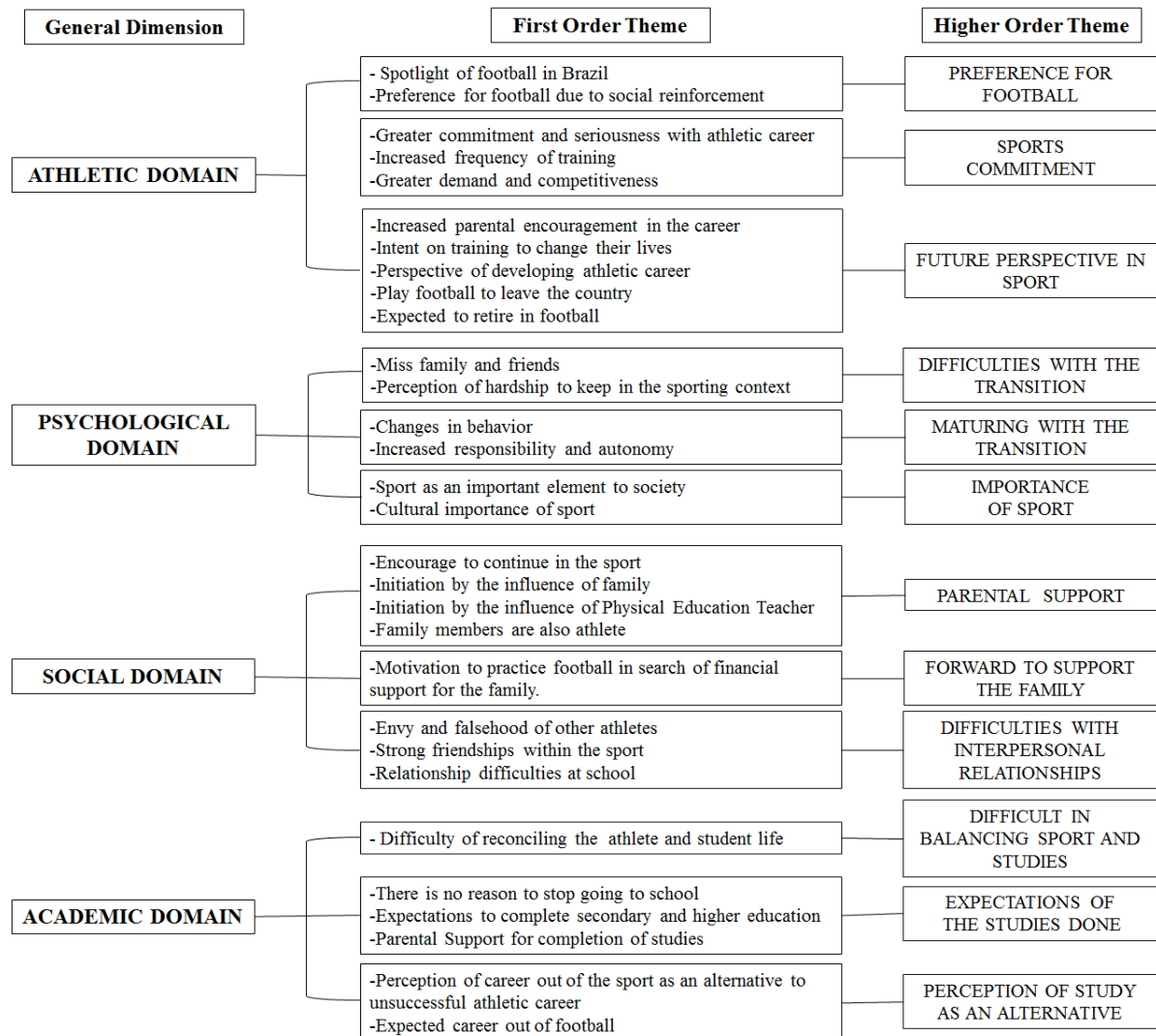
This preference could be explained by the greater emphasis on football in Brazil compared to other sports like volleyball or basketball, as well as by social reinforcement achieved with this practice, like fame, financial support and respect.

During this phase, the commitment to their sports practice also intensified, increasing the frequency of trainings (athletes begin to train every day) and competitions; the requirement by the club and the family is also higher and the sporting career is viewed more seriously, providing the establishment of goals and expectations towards it:

When I played there, you played small championships, you know? Here it's the opposite, and small championships are no longer important because it is a great club, and you always have to go to win and play seriously. Over there it was more for fun when I went to a championship. But here it's not, here it's serious. At the beginning, in the first championship I played here, I was taking it more for fun, then you start to watch the game and take it more seriously. After you've been getting experience from others, playing in the league and team wins it, and then you start learning. At first, you think it's more for fun, but then I was getting the way it's done (AES4).

With the transition to the specialization phase, the emphasis was placed on future prospects within the sport and increasing parental encouragement in their sons' athletic careers.

Figure 2 - Hierarchical characterization of athletes from phase of specialization in the four domains of career transition



Source: prepared by the authors, 2025

Regarding the psychological domain athletes experienced difficulties with the transition to the stage of specialization, facing the distancing from family and friends that were left behind for the dedication to sporting career, as stated by the athlete:



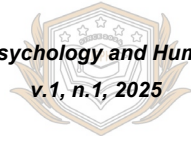
I hope to be a well-known professional player, I do not want to play just to play or playing at a bad team, I want to play football to be a guy who is recognized, famous, that play outside the country, because playing the entire childhood away from the parents, if you have already lost it all, then at least you need to have a strong stimulation in life (AES3).

On the other hand, the participants demonstrated increasing maturity due to family estrangement, resulting in increased autonomy, accountability and behavioral changes, such as coping with problems and adversities that previously were solved by the parents, asound in this athlete's statement:

Negative, because you lose a lot of living with parents, I spend thirty days away from my father and five or six days with him. I think the negative side is the family, of course. I think the positive side is life lessons, beginning to live alone, doing things by yourself. For example, at home my mother always makes my bed, here we have to arrange that, and also we wash clothes or get the clothes done if you can afford, but no underwear, we always wash underwear (AES8).

For these groups, sports were perceived as an important cultural element for Brazil and for the athletes' lives. This fact encourages the commitment with football practice and assists in coping with the previously mentioned family estrangement and deprivation of social relationships outside of their direct context in the football club. The psychosocial domain had parental support as the main factor of encouragement to continue in the sporting context, especially in families that already have athlete members (parents or siblings). Another source of encouragement for practicing football were the physical education teachers who supported the initiation and served as an example of role model for athletes in the specialization phase, as we see in the quote: "So whenever I am home during vacation, they tell me to fight, to not give up, to go for my dreams if it is to play football. They always encourage me, keep telling me not to give up (AES1)".

Another noteworthy element in the psychosocial domain was the expectation of growth in the sport context seeking financial returns as a way of helping the family and thus providing financial support to them. On the other hand, interpersonal relationships were perceived as difficult, as many athletes reported having to face the envy and



falsity teammates and have difficulty in establishing friendly connections with schoolmates, and thereby limiting relationships to friends in the sporting context, as highlighted in this athlete's report:

They are other boys that can take my place in another team, just because he says that is my age and he's not. For example, he's older than me, but he says he's my age, so at the end he can take my place, because he will be in advantage of being older, he can be better but he is not that age that he says. So, I do not like it (AES9).

In terms of the academic and vocational development, the athletes in specialization reported difficulties in navigating a student and athletic life simultaneously, complaining about physical fatigue after workouts and trips to competitions that would impair school performance, as highlighted in the following statement:

It is hard, there is a lot to do. It's homework, training. School homework I have to do at night, just after training. It's very difficult, but it's good right? I do not like to study, I find it boring, but I want to finish everything, go to college, everything. Because if I can not be a football player, I can go to college, do a physical education course, and get a job easily (AES4).

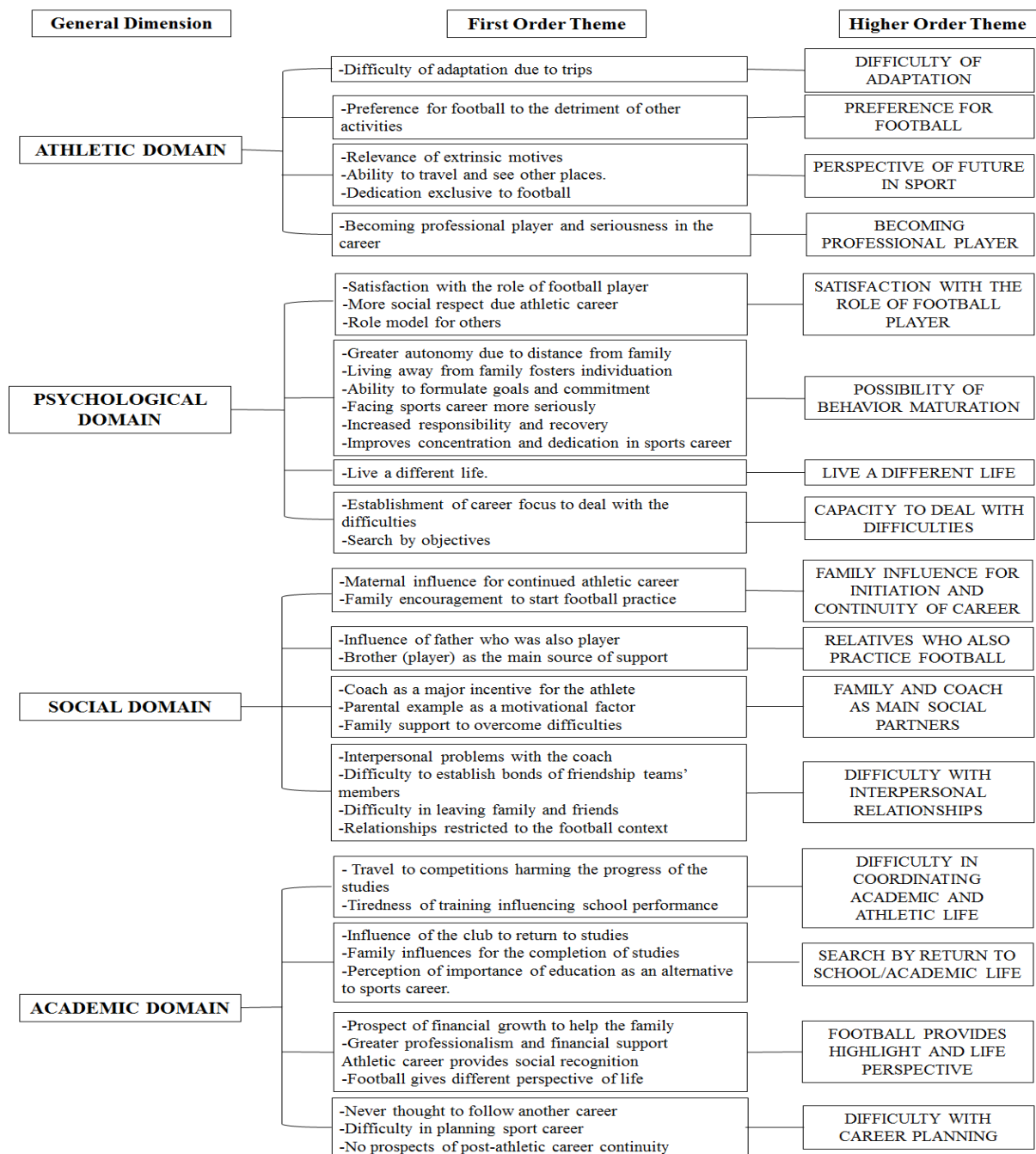
However, the expectation of graduating from school was reported by and considered as a way to meet parental expectations and gain their support. Several athletes in the specialization phase recognized the importance of an of academic and vocational life as an alternative to an unsuccessful football career, as illustrated here:

It does not attract me not to study. I only guess I'm following the path of football, but it is very important to study, God does not want to, but if it happens and I get injured or if I can not turn out to be a professional player, nowadays you can't be without studying. I think, for the future, have a profession. If I can not become a player to be able to support a family, having a profession, because nowadays for all professions you need to study, accepts when your financial life is easy that you don't need. (AES5).

3.3 Investment

The transition from specialization to sports investment was summarized in Figure 3, below:

Figure 3 - Hierarchical characterization of athletes from phase of investment in the four domains of career transition



Source: prepared by the authors, 2025



In the transition from specialization to athletic investment (Figure 3), the study participants reported having difficulties in adapting to the demands of training and high-performance competitions. As it occurs from the transition of experimentation to the specialization phase, athletes have shown preference for football practice instead of other activities, but now with greater emphasis on sports careers.

Still referring to the athletic domain, it is evident that there is a change in the motivational factors compared to the other phases. Emphasis is given to an increasing extrinsic motivation such as finance, hiring, trips to different countries and social prominence, resulting in an exclusive dedication to football practicing, as pointed out by the statement of one of the athletes:

I think mainly coming to the (club), have moved here. My life has changed a lot when I came here. It has changed in a positive way, because when you play in a small team, you do not have [...] several things change, treatment, salary, things like that, you do travel with the club. The highlight is greater, and because it is something that gives you a lot of money, it involves a lot of money in football, and more because of my father, my mother (A15).

Another player emphasized the professionalism found in the athletic career phase, taking the greatest seriousness and dedication to the practice and its development. This change is characterized in the athlete's statement:

All day long, because I train in the morning, I finish at noon, have lunch and in the afternoon I have training again, and at night there is a game to watch. When I signed the contract I saw it was really serious. Then I saw the contract and I saw how much money I worth if I am sold, I saw it was really serious. Because in the past, when we arrive, we just want to learn to play and do not see the money or how much it is. Once you start to grow, you will see things, see the falsehood that there is in football, the guy trying to steal your money. Begin to earn a bit and the guy already wants to take your money, Then you see that the business is serious. Then you start to stop and think you must have a good person on your side. Football is serious. A lot of money that you do not know what to do with the money, and you must know what you will do with this money (A13).



In the psychological domain, a satisfaction with the football player role was emphasized by the athletes, highlighting the social recognition, as reported by the athlete:

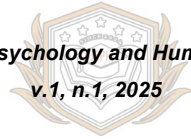
(...) It is a dream come true, in my life, my father, my mother, everyone dreams of being a great football player and now I'm here in the (club). None of them imagined that I would be here today, thinking (...), where I am today. People see me as an example, I left there, no one accepted me to play football as a career, just my mother. My father complained that she was only spending money on me. It was supposed for me to help him at the farm, but today I'm here. Now when I go there they look at me differently, my father always asks for me to take things for him. Sometimes my mother looks at me and cries (A11).

The involvement with the athletic career seemed to provide further maturation and behavioral changes as a consequence to meet the demands of the investment phase. Athletes reported increased autonomy and individualization because of family estrangement, greater commitment, development of personal goals, increased responsibility, improved concentration and dedication to their sports careers. Thus, sport as a profession was perceived more seriously during the investment phase, as demonstrated by the athlete in his statement:

More responsibility, previously I only played for fun, then I had to start playing more seriously. It was more responsibility. I began to focus more on my goals; focus more on the things I wanted in what was best for me (A14).

On the other hand, some athletes reported a desire to have a professional life that was not different from other people working regular hours and living close to their families and friends. However, the study shows evidence of greater coping capacity of threatening situations, using as strategies the focus on sporting career and the pursuit of achieving objectives.

Once again, the family appeared to be the main motivational factor to continue the sporting career and along with the coach, were identified as the most significant social peers, serving as a motivational factor, role models to be followed and support provided to overcome difficulties. Another important aspect mentioned was the



presence of family members who also identified themselves as athletes to serve as a support in dealing with the difficulties and demands of the phase of athletic career, emphasized by the athlete in his statement:

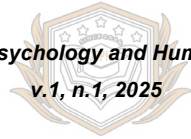
My parents were always there. When I played in the same small school, I had game eight in the morning my father and mother were there watching. Once I did, on Mother's Day, I scored four goals in the championship, then had a T-shirt done commemorating the date, my mother still has this T-shirt. My mother is very supportive too, she really supports me. When I tell her that I'm happy here, she cries (...). My mother's awesome, she and my father. Mainly for them that I'm here, they give me strength even when I am down in the dumps they raise me (A13).

In the psychosocial domain, the main difficulty pointed out by the subjects were interpersonal relationships. Relationship problems were reported with the coach, difficulties in establishing bonds of friendship with the other players, relationships restricted to the football context and difficulties leaving family and friends to dedicate their time and efforts to the sports career. These situations are portrayed by the athlete:

At first it was hard, you get there, do not know anyone and have to start making friends. At such times I thought about my friends, that I could be there with my friends. I even thought about leaving, but as I told you, I began to build friendships, they were growing here (A16).

Another difficulty was to coordinate the academic students' life with the football athlete's life. The frequency of trips to competitions and post-workout fatigue appeared to influence the academic performance, a challenge that was highlighted by this athlete:

I finished my training, I was very tired, there was no longer that energy to train and go to class. I was discouraged, then I came and talked to my parents who supported me. I was out of school for a couple of years until I saw what I was doing wrong, so I went back to school. I trained in the morning and afternoon and studied at night (A18).



Despite the difficulty that athletes reported seeking to return to school, there was a general perception of the importance of completing high school and college as an alternative to unsuccessful sports careers. Nevertheless, the athletic career was still considered more attractive because of the life perspective that it could provide. The interviewed athletes perceived football as the primary vocation and career option, with great prospects for financial growth, which was mentioned to mainly support the family, increased professionalism, social recognition and different life perspectives than what they grew up in.

While attributing importance to the high school and college completion, the athletes still experienced difficulties with planning their alternative career outside of the athletic pathway, as pointed out by the athlete:

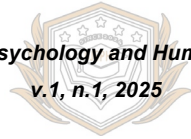
(...) I can not imagine, can not imagine (what I would be if I wasn't an athlete). I don't think about another career, I see that college is still kind away from me, I dream of having a car, getting out. Playing football is what I love is the only thing I know to do (A17).

From this perspective, some athletes have come to declare that they never considered another profession except being a football player, despite the difficulties in planning for retirement and little prospect of continuing academic education after the end of their athletic career.

4 DISCUSSION

To our best knowledge, this is the first study in Brazilian literature to analyze the athletic career development from career transitions of young soccer players through a holistic approach, analyzing the perceptions of transition in the athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/vocational and financial domains simultaneously among football athletes in different stages of their athletic careers. In the present study, we have found that in all three transition periods common themes related to skills improvement and the perception of football as an activity with the possibility for a better lifestyle, resulting in preference and commitment to practice.

Parents and family members were consistently reported as the main social peers, influencing the engagement with the sport and the continuity of practicing, in



order to meet their expectations of being successful in their sports career and providing financial assistance to the family. Interestingly, the demand for being a professional football athlete starts early in the experimentation phase, stressing the content preference for the sports career in relation to education or other vocational career in all transition stages.

The transition to sports career development marks an intensification of sport dedication, revealing difficulties with interpersonal relationships outside and inside the sports domain, increasing the presence of athletic related social peers such as coaches or colleagues. Athletes report personal growth in independence and autonomy, reflected in the difficulty with maintaining the student-athlete's life, resulting in some cases in the abandonment of academic careers, despite a perception that studies may be an alternative to unsuccessful sporting careers.

The intense commitment to the sporting context of the investment phase results in a high athletic identity and financial/career stability, highly supported by the family and significant others. However, the downside of a restriction and difficulty maintaining extra activities besides soccer, revealed problems in maintaining their academic careers and planning for a professional career after the end of their sports practice.

4.1 Athletic domain

Our results contradict the proposed concept for the experimentation phase, that suggested the practice of different modalities aiming at relaxing activities that provide pleasure to the individuals (Côté, Horton, MacDonald; Wilkes, 2009). However, we observed a strong preference for football and an exclusive dedication to soccer without any reports of other kinds of sports activities, except in physical education classes at school (AEX5). These findings indicate an early commitment, where the main focus of the practice is not recreational, but the development of professional athletic skills (Figure 1), diverging from the overall idea that specialization of activity in the early ages, does not facilitate success in later years and may be, in most cases, the abandonment of sport (Barreiros, 2005).

The goal of becoming an elite athlete who is assigned by the literature to the investment stage in our study was already seen in the specialization phase (Figure 2), which is different from international models (Salmela; Moraes, 2003). Of course, each person has a different time to development, as reported by Agergaard and Ryba



(2014), that 'the transition should not be seen as a simple process of assimilating to a new local setting, but rather as a process through which athletes develop a transnational belonging involving membership in groups that extend beyond national borders' (p. 236). In fact, athletes at that stage showed changes in motivational style, showing extrinsic interest in sports practice. One possible explanation is the diffusion of sport at all levels of society in Brazil and the large number of practitioners of the poorer social classes (Alcântara, 2006), functioning as a major social mobility measure attracting large amounts of youngsters to an early dedication to a sports career (Macagnan; Betti, 2014).

Our findings from the athletic domain align with what is proposed by Wylleman, De Knop, Verdet, and Cecic-Erpic (2007), where athletes come to confront the need to seek professional status and focus on a period of their life exclusively to the dedication and preparation for competition, at the expense of developing in other spheres of human excellence.

4.2 Psychological domain

Considering the psychological domain, participants were mainly adolescents and are, therefore, preparing to adopt meaningful roles for themselves and for society (Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus; Goossens, 2012). As shown in our results, football seems to satisfy the need to develop an identity mainly by the role and significance this sport has in the social context of the country providing the recognition needed to establish a strong commitment to an athletic identity (Berzonsky, 2008; Lally, 2007; Lally; Kerr, 2005).

However, this process in our study was deemed a negative outcome, with athletes reporting the problems associated with a strong athletic identity. This challenge has been consistently reported in the literature (Houle; Kluck, 2015), such as a lack of other life roles, difficulty with student-athlete careers, and a narrowing of social support networks. Other reports corroborate (Hecimovich, 2004; Papaioannou, Ampatzoglou, Kalogiannis; Sagovits, 2008; Malisoux, Frisch, Urhausen, Seil; Theisen, 2013) the negative effects of high commitment and reduction of investment in other social roles, leading to injuries, anxiety on performance, parental and coach pressure, isolation and burnout.



Such characteristics were common to all athletes in the different career stages was the recognition of the importance of football to society and culture (Figure 1, 2 and 3). This importance legitimated the choice of sport as a professional practice, providing respect for social peers and satisfaction with the role of the athletes' investment phase. It also justified the choice to practice rather than choosing other activities, and provided the possibility of future growth and for athletes in the specialization phase. It also showed how successful players were mirrored by children and inspired by the possibility of future prospects.

On the other hand, positive aspects of appropriately intense commitment were also identified. Athletes highlighted the possibility of maturing and developing autonomy through their sports participation. Participating in sports and physical activity may be inherently intrinsically motivating for many people, especially when they involve self-chosen optimal challenges, as this can help people enjoy the sense of autonomy and mastery (Teixeira, Carraça, Markland, Silva; Ryan, 2012). Similar results were found with other sports modalities, such as good peer communication and friends (Fraser-Thomas, Côté; Deakin, 2008) as well as adherence and motor performance (Brewer, Van Raalte; Petitpas, 2000).

Similarly, the ability to face the demands and threatening situations (coping strategies) is considered a determinant for athletes under development (Gould, Finch; Jackson, 1993; Smith, Smoll, Schutz; Ptacek, 1995; Dale, 2000; Park, 2000; Pensgaard; Roberts, 2003; Amiot, Gaudreau; Blanchard, 2004; Ouwehand, Ridder; Bensing, 2008). Our findings among football players in the investment phase revealed greater abilities to deal with difficulties, mainly using strategies focused on the establishment in sporting careers and the pursuit of achieving the proposed goals and targets.

4.3 Psychosocial domain

The issue of psychosocial development reporting of outdoor football athletes emphasizes the influence of parental support and social peers for initiation and continuation of sports. Thus, the results of this research showed that football players have an important role in helping financially in family spending (Figure 2). These findings are related to the findings of Moraes, Rabelo; Salmela. (2004), noting that the outdoor football players in Brazil come from families of low social class (Moraes et al.,

2004). This possibility to help the family financially appears to be a motivating factor for the athletes included in this research study. According to Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, and Fox. (2009), parents have a role in the development and permanence of their children in the sporting context.

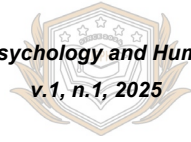
In our study the parents were considered of great importance for the athletes, but the increasing distance occurs early on, within the specialization phase (13-15 years), in which athletes move from their city to train in more structured clubs, and are living in the club with other athletes. Regarding club mates, relationship difficulties were observed in athletes' phase of expertise and investment, opposing the findings of the studies of Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) and Wylleman et al. (2007). Specifically in the specialization phase, athletes have reported difficulties relating to others because of envy and lying between them.

On the other hand, friendships outside the club were also scarce due to the great dedication to the sport, taking extra time that would provide the establishment of links outside the context of football practices (Figure 2). Only in the experimentation phase have there been reports to people outside the sporting context in a positive context, as pointed out by the literature (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Thus, to counterbalance the difficulty of friendly relationships within the club, athletes seemed to seek family support (Figure 1).

4.4 Academic domain/Financial domain

By analyzing the transitions in their academic and vocational life, outdoor football players showed difficulty in handling athletics with student life. Among the difficulties with athletic and academic transitions, Côté (1999) emphasizes that the increased daily commitment to the sport probably occupies the athlete's time, leaving the rest of the short time for studies. This could overload the players, making them feel tired after training and discouraged from studying.

However, the outdoor football players, instead of having problems in the athletic career during the academic transitions, our study showed that the process is reversed, as athletes are rather dropping out of school to stay in the sport (Figure 2). Similar results were found in Brazilian tennis athletes (Vianna, 2002) which could suggest a problem related to sporting culture in the country.



This is a worrying factor found in the reports of the athletes in this study, since the abandonment or difficulties with studies can have lasting consequences on their academic and vocational formation, as well as psychologically and socially, as shown by Ouwehand et al. (2008). They verified that education is an important factor of preventive coping (stress coping), relating the educational level with planning and prevention. Through education people develop skills that are important to the effective adoption of preventive coping processes, such as problem solving, analytical and communication skills (Prenda; Lachman, 2001).

On the other hand, despite reporting problems (and abandonment) with academic life, athletes (in all phases) demonstrated the desire for continuing their school/university education. In the experimentation phase, some athletes have expressed interest in continuing their education after the end of their career, but it is understood that these athletes are not mature enough to be discerning about the importance of education. During the specialization phase, the expectation of finishing school with an interest to finish a degree was largest, alongside the parental support that served as a major motivational factor (Figure 2). The interest in interrupting the studies was predominant in the investment phase athletes, with great influence of the club and family to do so (Figure 3).

This result indicates concern for life outside sport and preparation for retirement. Thus, post career planning is considered crucial for adapting to life after a sports career (Stambulova, 1994), and a high level of education can influence the post-athletic career opportunities (Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom; Annerel, 1993).

Another factor contributing to the growing interest of athletes for excellence also in school life is the prospect of alternative occupations if the athletic career did not result in a professional path (Figure 2). However, even though the athletes voiced concerns about the end of their sports career, there were signs of resistance regarding the planning of post-athletic career, similar to Wylleman et al. (2007) that showed a lack of commitment to the planning of a post-retirement career, identifying this event as too far away to worry about before the start of their professional career. Even those athletes who thought of a career after being a football player, still had the possibility to remain in the sporting context as a professional, coach, officer or any related profession.



4.5 Limitations

A possible limitation of our study is the stratification technique of our subjects. The study included athletes of different age groups and can not keep up with the transitions such as aging and evolution of the athletes, and often we are not sure how these different ages influenced their responses. On the other hand, this type of research allows us to observe the different perceptions of athletes who are at specific developmental moments facilitating the understanding of the demands of each period.

Another limitation was the evaluation of a single training club of Brazilian football, not allowing comparisons between other clubs and regions. However, for this club to be recognized as one of the best training institutes of athletes and receive players from all regions of the country, the findings of this research can serve as parameters for coaches and football clubs to structure the training of their athletes.

5 SUGGESTIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest the continuity of studies comparing results transitions in Brazilian athletes from other regions and other nationalities, understanding how different sports policies influence the development of the athlete and their performance. We also suggest further research to compare the development in different modalities and competitive levels. New studies taking each domain as a starting point for further research to investigate the parental and social peers role, the development of psychological features such as coping, resilience, moral and identity, and the relationship between academic and athletic performance, or the importance of school for athletes, focusing on improving the development programs of sporting talent back to the performance and the development of human beings.

It may be noted that the football formation context presents itself as a potential to assist in the physical (athletic), psychological and social development of young athletes, promoting the development of mental abilities and social climbing. However, we also point out the importance of planning the athletic career in a way that addresses the excellence of the subject as a whole and not only the athletic emphasis, preventing developmental problems such as early specialization, restriction in interpersonal relationships, and end of career, or academic and vocational restrictions and difficulty in exploring roles.



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