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Article

Formed on Ice: A Qualitative Study of Motivation, Pressure, and Identity in Early Ice-Hockey Specialization

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Abstract

While much of the current research on early specialization focuses on physical outcomes, training models, and policy implications, little is known about how athletes themselves make sense of their developmental experiences. This study aimed to examine how ice-hockey players perceive and experience early specialization, with the goal of gaining a nuanced understanding of the athlete perspective. In this study, a qualitative study design was used where eight current and former ice-hockey players with experience of early specialization participated. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative conventional content analysis. Three overarching themes emerged, highlighting experiences of loneliness, pressure, and elevated expectations within elite sport environments, alongside the vital importance of support networks and team community: 'Thrown into adulthood with premature expectations', 'Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development', and 'The Struggle Between Dream and Reality'. Players described feeling pressured, isolated, and prematurely professionalized, often at the expense of personal development. The findings highlight the psychological and structural challenges of early specialization in elite ice-hockey. While support systems played a crucial role, they also contributed to performance anxiety and external expectations. These insights underscore the need for youth sport systems that prioritize long-term athlete well-being over short-term success.

Keywords: parental support; performance; social network; talent development; burnout

1. Introduction

Ice-hockey is a team sport that places significant demands not only on physical performance but also on personal and interpersonal qualities such as leadership, discipline, and cooperation. In Sweden, the development of elite hockey players is usually formalized through specialized programs at elite hockey high schools, which combine upper secondary education with systematic training. These institutions aim to foster both athletic excellence and academic progress, ultimately preparing athletes for potential professional careers [1]. Currently, over 79,000 individuals are licensed within Swedish ice-hockey, with the vast majority being boys and men [2]. This reflects the sport's broad appeal, but also underscores the pressures faced by young players in highly competitive settings.

Within this context, early sport specialization, defined as intense, year-round training in a single sport from a young age [3], often excluding participation in other activities, has gained attention [4]. Proponents argue that it provides a competitive edge and facilitates early talent identification. However, critics highlight the associated risks, including overuse injuries, psychological strain, and burnout [3,5]. Research indicates that long-term athletic success may not require early specialization [6,7]. Many elite athletes report diverse sporting backgrounds during childhood and only commit fully to one sport in adolescence [6]. Developmental models such as the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework and the Developmental Model of Sport Participation advocate for early diversification, promoting broad motor skill development, social engagement, and sustained

motivation [8,9]. These models emphasize that progression to elite levels should be gradual, developmentally appropriate, and supported by a balance of structured training and unstructured play.

Despite such recommendations, early specialization remains prevalent, often influenced by parental expectations, systemic pressures, and the pursuit of athletic scholarships or professional opportunities [10,11]. Parents, coaches, and institutions may interpret early signs of talent as justification for intensified commitment, which can increase performance anxiety and diminish long-term enjoyment [12]. Additionally, specialization is frequently institutionalized within youth sport systems, making it difficult for athletes to choose alternative development paths.

While much of the current research on early specialization focuses on physical outcomes [13,14], training models [9,15], and policy implications [16], relatively little is known about how ice-hockey players themselves perceive and make sense of their developmental experiences. Understanding their voices is crucial to evaluating the real-world impact of early specialization and informing evidence-based, athlete-centred approaches to talent development. This study aimed to examine how ice-hockey players perceive and experience early specialization, with the goal of gaining a nuanced understanding of the athlete perspective.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study used a qualitative interview design with an inductive approach to explore ice-hockey players' experiences of early specialization. Participants were current or former male players aged 18–30 who had specialized early and competed at an elite level in Swedish league play, either currently or in the past. Elite level was defined as senior competition in HockeyAllsvenskan (HA) or the Swedish Hockey League (SHL), and junior-level participation in J18 or J20 Elite [17]. The selection of subjects was completed systematically through criterion selection, to capture information-rich cases, enabling in-depth exploration of experiences [18,19]. Early specialization was defined based on two of Côté's [12] three stages of sport participation. The second stage, the specializing years (ages 13–15), involves narrowing focus to one or two sports. The third stage, the investment years (around age 15), reflects full commitment to elite performance. Exclusion criteria included players who had not specialized before 15 or lacked elite-level experience in Sweden. Recruitment began by emailing eight elite hockey clubs, targeting sports managers and communications staff. After two clubs declined, social media was used to expand outreach, and a HA representative shared the information letter with active players.

2.2. Procedure

Interviews were conducted between February to March 2025, either in person (n=2) or via video link (n=6). All sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to support transcription and analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a self-developed interview guide. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes and addressed topics including players background, hockey career trajectory, and perceptions of early specialization.

2.3. The Interview Guide

The authors developed a semi-structured interview guide consisting of questions addressing three main topics: (1) The early hockey career; (2) experiences and perceptions of early specialization; (3) social support and motivation; and reflections and the future (Supplementary file). A pilot interview was conducted with one subject to test the guide and identify any potential shortcomings. Minor adjustments were made to the guide based on feedback from this pilot interview.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were processed using qualitative conventional content analysis [20], chosen to capture players' emotions and lived experiences in their own words. Categories were not intended to verify existing theories; instead, themes were expected to emerge naturally from the data. After transcribing the interviews, the authors repeatedly read the texts to gain an overall understanding and identify patterns [19]. Initial impressions and thoughts were noted, followed by the identification of meaning units relevant to the study's aim. Both recurring and divergent experiences were included. The units were condensed and assigned codes, which were then compared for similarities and differences and grouped into categories representing the manifest content. Overarching themes were then developed to interpret the latent content, reflecting the underlying meanings beyond the explicit statements [20]. All authors participated in the analysis, engaging in open and critical dialogue throughout each step. Codes, categories, and quotes were collaboratively reviewed and cross-checked until consensus was reached [21]. Examples of the analytic process are presented in Table.

Table 1. Examples of meaning units, condensed meaning units, codes, categories and themes from the present data.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
"It all just got to be a bit too much sometimes. You'd catch yourself thinking how nice it would've been to just have a day off, to just stay home for once."	"One day off would've been nice"	Burnout	Forced Maturity	Thrown into adulthood with premature expectations
"Back then, it really felt like you had so much more energy. You could be at the ice rink all day."	"You could be at the ice rink all day"	Youthful stamina	Hockey bubble and identity	
"When you're in an environment like that, pretty closed off, you're only around people who do the same thing"	"You're only around people who do the same thing"	Closed social environment	Loneliness within the team	
"You just went along with it and thought it was normal, because, of course, you didn't really know anything different"	"Thought it was normal, you didn't really know anything else"	Normalized experience	Structural demands and cultural narratives	
"You should do it for yourself, not to please anyone else. Too many parents push their children too hard"	"Parents push their kids too hard"	Parents pressure	Parents' dream	Balancing Support and
"My family has always supported me in whatever I've wanted to do"	"My family supported me"	Family support	Extrinsic motivation and pressure	Pressure in Athlete Development

“When I mentioned to my dad that I was thinking about choosing floorball, he got really upset, even a bit angry”	“When I mentioned floorball, my dad got pretty upset”	Disappointed dad	The hockey dad
“I felt that life is too short not to follow your dreams”	“Life is too short not to follow your dreams”	Dreams	The NHL dream
“I haven’t stopped dreaming, but it’s highly unlikely that I’ll play higher than the Allsvenskan, I’ll say that”	“I’ll never play higher”	Realization	Reality check The Struggle Between Dream and Reality
“There were many times when you didn’t want to get up in the morning”	“You didn’t want to get up”	Low internal motivation	Self-Doubt and Performance Anxiety

3. Results

Eight ice-hockey players participated in the study, representing HA (n=5), Hockeyettan (n=1), and Division 3 (n=1), with one no longer active in league play (n=1). They had all participated in elite level in Swedish league play or at elite junior-level. Based on their experiences and perceptions of early specialization, three overarching themes and ten categories were identified: ‘*Thrown into adulthood with premature expectations*’, ‘*Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development*’ and ‘*The Struggle Between Dream and Reality*’ (Table 2). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to replace players’ real names.

Table 2. Themes and categories from the analysis.

Themes	Categories
Thrown into adulthood with premature expectations	Forced Maturity Hockey bubble and identity Loneliness within the team Structural demands and cultural narratives
Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development	Parents’ dream Extrinsic motivation and pressure The hockey dad The NHL dream
The Struggle Between Dream and Reality	Reality check Self-Doubt and Performance Anxiety

3.1. *Thrown into Adulthood with Premature Expectations*

The following theme describes the feelings and experiences associated with the identity of ‘hockey player’ and was shaped by four categories; *Forced Maturity*, *Hockey bubble and identity*, *Loneliness within the team* and *Structural demands and cultural narratives*. This theme captures the experience of young players, particularly around the age of 15, being abruptly thrust into adult roles and expectations within elite sport settings. It reflects how participation at a high level often requires adolescents to navigate mature environments, such as locker rooms and competitive hierarchies, long before they are developmentally prepared.

These quotes capture the unintended trade-offs and psychological impacts of early and intense involvement in elite sports (Table 3). They reflect a lack of informed choice at a young age, where players commit to a path before they are developmentally ready to evaluate their long-term interests. Adam highlights how early choices and commitments in sports can lead to other opportunities being

unconsciously passed up at a young age. The sense of being “in a bubble” or “just going with it” suggests a loss of agency and awareness, while reflections on being “spoiled” highlight the difficulty of adjusting to life outside the structured, performance-driven world of elite athletics. Collectively, these voices underscore the long-term consequences of early specialization, not only in missed opportunities, but also in the challenges of transitioning to everyday life beyond sport.

Table 3. Exemplary quotes for the theme Thrown into adulthood with premature expectations.

Quotes (meaning units)	Category
<p><i>“Hanging out with adult men when you were 15” –Hugo</i></p> <p><i>“A little more than one could dream of, far too young and then you have to sign a contract” –Hugo</i></p> <p><i>“When you’re fourteen, you really don’t know yet what you’re going to be good at. Whether you realize it or not, you end up passing on opportunities without even knowing it”- Adam</i></p>	Forced Maturity
<p><i>“I don’t know if I can manage to have a regular job, you get a bit spoiled that way” –Pelle</i></p> <p><i>“You’re living the dream, and then suddenly you’re in this bubble—you just go with it” –Adam</i></p> <p><i>“Honestly, it’s true, I didn’t really do much else in high school besides training” –Anton</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve always felt pressure, but it’s mostly from myself, I’ve always been my own toughest critic” –Ville</i></p>	Hockey bubble and identity
<p><i>“It’s just constant pressure—it never lets up” –Hugo</i></p> <p><i>“As soon as you’re not with the team, it feels like there’s no one you can really turn to” –Axel</i></p> <p><i>“It’s kind of like you’re always competing against your best friends—it really comes down to who wants it the most” -Ville</i></p>	Loneliness within the team
<p><i>“I wouldn’t say that early specialization is necessary to reach elite level; however, I do believe that the system is somewhat built for you to specialize” –Gustav</i></p> <p><i>“It’s not like youth sports where everyone gets a juice and a bun and can take part. In professional sports, it just doesn’t work like that—no matter what sport it is” –Lucas</i></p> <p><i>“They call it Elite Focus, but that doesn’t mean you’ve got to be the best already”- Axel</i></p> <p><i>“If you want a long career, you should be peaking at 30, not at 16” –Joel</i></p>	Structural demands and cultural narratives

Players also reported experiencing constant pressure that extended beyond physical training, encompassing the psychological strain of continuous performance. It was also noted that loneliness became more pronounced when the team community, often a fundamental aspect of a player’s identity, dissolved, resulting in a more isolated individual experience. In such contexts, the team environment remained the only perceived source of safety and belonging.

Gustav and Lukas reflect on the demands and expectations of elite sports, which they see as conditions to accept. Axel and Joel highlight the importance of long-term athletic development rather than early peak performance. Their view challenges the focus on early success in ice hockey, advocating a more sustainable, gradual approach to growth. The quotes also show that systemic structures and cultural expectations drive early specialization, often beyond players’ preferences or readiness. Together, these perspectives reveal a critical awareness that the elite sport system prioritizes short-term success over long-term development and well-being. Players recognize that, although early specialization is not ideal, structural and cultural pressures make it seem inevitable.

3.2. Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development

Having a supportive network is frequently identified as a key aspect of player development. However, support is not always experienced positively; in some cases, it was perceived as pressure that impedes rather than facilitates progress. This theme includes the categories: *Parents' dream*, *Extrinsic motivation and pressure*, and *The hockey dad*. The theme underscores the dual role of parents as both a source of external pressure and a provider of support. It also highlights the players' perception that they were living out their parents' dreams (Table 4).

Table 4. Exemplary quotes for the theme Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development.

Quotes (meaning units)	Category
<i>"The parents want it more than the player does" –Pelle</i>	Parents' dream
<i>"Parents shouldn't be trying to live their own dreams through their kids" – Gustav</i>	
<i>"The fact that such great pressure is placed early can easily translate to the idea that you must be the best now, and there is nothing else. You must be the best now, and that is the most important thing ahead of you" –Axel</i>	
<i>"In my opinion, there are frighteningly many parents who have absolutely no clue about ice-hockey and what it means to be an ice-hockey player" – Axel</i>	Extrinsic motivation and pressure
<i>"What can you say, there was support but not all the way. I don't think she was prepared for reality" –Joel</i>	
<i>"At one point, I called my mom and almost cried because I wanted to quit, but she told me to keep going" –Hugo</i>	
<i>"For me, it's really about making my dad proud –that's part of what drives me" –Adam</i>	
<i>"My dad's my biggest fan –he hasn't missed many games. It's a huge support, but at the same time, it adds some pressure. You just don't want to let him down" –Lucas</i>	
<i>"Do I regret him getting a bit crossed with me? No, because if he hadn't, I probably wouldn't be here today" –Lucas</i>	The hockey dad
<i>"I saw my dad's gear and thought, 'This is what I want to do,' so I guess I've never really complained about it" –Anton</i>	
<i>"My dad knows you don't have to be the best at 15 to make it later. As long as I'm having fun, I'll keep going" –Gustav</i>	

The findings also emphasize that hockey frequently becomes the primary focus, and many parents may lack the requisite understanding to offer effective support. Additionally, this dynamic was reflected in partner relationships, which were reported to be strained, particularly when one party was less involved than the other. A common, often unconscious expectation is that a father should feel pride in his child's achievements. This is communicated through subtle praise,

encouragement, or comments implying that success validates the father. This dynamic can create pressure to perform, not just for the player's growth but to meet parental expectations. Consequently, achievements may be tied more to the father's pride than the player's own goals. However, support feels strongest when it comes from genuine encouragement, like a father who values enjoyment throughout the athletic journey.

3.3. The Struggle Between Dream and Reality

As a young ice-hockey player, harbouring dreams of a career in the NHL is a common occurrence. These dreams remain, but over time the distance between the dream and reality becomes increasingly palpable. The following theme illuminates the thoughts and feelings that arise in connection with these future dreams, as well as the critical moment when the dream no longer seems attainable. It also highlights the importance of long-term athletic development in contrast to early sport specialization, alongside an acceptance of the structural expectations inherent in elite sport. It emerged from three categories: *The NHL dream*, *Reality check*, *Self-Doubt and Performance Anxiety* (Table 5).

Table 4. Exemplary quotes for the theme The Struggle Between Dream and Reality.

Quotes (meaning units)	Category
<i>"My love for hockey will probably never fade"- Joel</i>	
<i>"When you're a kid, it's all about making it to the NHL and being the best in the world" – Axel.</i>	
<i>"I really thought I was going to the NHL" – Adam</i>	The NHL dream
<i>"I felt that life is too short not to follow your dreams" – Lucas</i>	
<i>"But pretty quickly, you start to realize, that dream isn't all that realistic" – Axel</i>	
<i>"The career doesn't last forever – I get that, trust me"- Lucas</i>	
<i>"I know a lot of friends who quit because it just wasn't their day – or even their year" – Adam</i>	Reality check
<i>"A lot of people quit when others start getting better and they're no longer the best. That's always been the way I've pushed myself to work harder" – Gustav</i>	
<i>"Then you come to X, where everyone's about the same level, and you're not the star anymore" – Ville</i>	
<i>Do I just break down and keep going, or do I give up because things didn't turn out the way I wanted?" – Lucas</i>	
<i>"Between my first and second year of high school, things hadn't gone the way I expected, they'd gone really badly. It felt like everyone else was developing faster than me, and at that point, it just didn't feel worth it anymore. I stopped caring"- Anton</i>	Self-Doubt and Performance Anxiety
<i>"There were many times when you didn't want to get up in the morning" – Hugo</i>	

Axel and Lucas express the insight that an athletic career is both short and uncertain. Lucas reflects on the limited timeframe and together, their statements illustrate the difficult trade-offs young players face. The players emphasize their personal strategies for coping with adversity, while also reflecting on how former teammates have navigated similar challenges. Together, their accounts illustrate how the drive to succeed may be both reinforced and tested as competitive pressures increase. For most, indications of unconscious performance anxiety were apparent, whereas a smaller number explicitly articulated a clear sense of pressure.

4. Discussion

This study employed a qualitative, inductive methodology to investigate ice-hockey players' experiences and perceptions of early specialization. Analysis of the interview data revealed three primary themes, which underscored feelings of loneliness, pressure, and heightened expectations within elite sport environments, as well as the critical role of support networks and team community.

4.1. *Thrown into Adulthood with Premature Expectations*

This theme highlights the tension faced by youth players who enter elite sport pathways before they have the cognitive, emotional, or social maturity to make informed life choices. Their experiences show how early specialization can limit identity exploration and close off other life options. As Adam notes, fourteen-year-olds are still forming their identities and often unaware of long-term consequences. The "bubble" metaphor suggests a narrow world where players go along rather than make reflective decisions, echoing Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood [22], where delayed exploration may lead to later disorientation or unpreparedness. Pelle's comment about struggling with the idea of a "regular job" further illustrates how the highly structured and reinforced environment of elite sport may inadvertently inhibit the development of transferable life skills or realistic self-concept outside of sport. These reflections suggest that early sport specialization may hinder adaptive identity development, leaving individuals vulnerable to identity disruption when their athletic role is challenged or ends.

The statement "*It's just constant pressure, it never lets up*", conveys an internal monologue marked by stress and fatigue, establishing a central theme of persistent pressure within the context of elite sports. This pressure extends beyond the physical demands of training to encompass the psychological burden of continuous performance, self-improvement, and the need to meet both personal aspirations and external expectations. The findings reveal a critical tension between players' personal perspectives on development and the structural realities of elite sport systems. While several players, such as Gustav and Joel, expressed scepticism toward the necessity of early specialization, their narratives also acknowledged that the existing system implicitly demands it. Gustav's remark that "the system is somewhat built for you to specialize" reflects the way institutional structures and long-standing cultural narratives reinforce early commitment, even when players themselves question its value.

From a structural functionalist view, elite sport functions as a system built to efficiently produce performance outcomes by sorting players early. This logic often emphasizes short-term success, creating high-performance environments where individual readiness is secondary to results. Lucas' comment, "In professional sports, it just doesn't work like that", highlights the shift from inclusive, recreational sport to a meritocratic model demanding quick adaptation and early excellence. Axel's critique of the "Elite Focus" program suggests that early labelling can create premature pressure. Joel's view that "you should be peaking at 30, not at 16", supports LTAD models [9,15], which stress delayed specialization and development aligned with biological and psychological growth.

In sum, these insights show how players navigate a system where cultural norms, structural pathways, and unspoken expectations make early specialization seem not just common, but necessary. This normalization can mask risks like burnout, identity foreclosure, and limited social growth, even as some players remain critically aware. The gap between what players see as ideal and

what the system demands raises questions about how talent development models are applied, and whether they truly support holistic, long-term athlete development.

4.2. *Balancing Support and Pressure in Athlete Development*

This theme highlights the disconnect between public perception and the internal challenges these youths face, including emotional, social, and identity-related pressures that may go unnoticed by those outside the elite sport context. The pressure can become overwhelming even at an early age, particularly when it originates from multiple sources, including individuals who lack a meaningful connection to the player. The findings from this theme illuminate the complex and often contradictory role of parental support in the development of young ice-hockey players. While a strong support system is commonly seen as a facilitator of athlete success [23] [24,25], the results suggest that support, particularly from parents, can simultaneously serve as a source of pressure. This duality aligns with previous literature indicating that parental involvement, though well-intentioned, may contribute to heightened stress and diminished intrinsic motivation when it becomes overbearing or misaligned with the athlete's personal goals [26]. Players' narratives often reflected a sense of fulfilling parental dreams rather than their own aspirations, particularly in relation to their fathers. The motif of the "hockey dad" emerged as a significant figure, both as a source of encouragement and as a symbol of performance-related expectations. This mirrors research on sport parenting which emphasizes that when athletes perceive parental pride as conditional on performance, it can lead to internalized pressure and self-worth tied to achievement [27].

The statements reveal that some parents lack understanding of elite sport's demands, which can increase players' psychological strain, especially when expectations are unrealistic, or communication is weak. These tensions also affect romantic relationships, strained by the time, energy, and commitment the sport requires. These findings align with Wylleman and Lavallee's [28] model of holistic athlete development, which emphasizes the importance of both athletic and psychosocial factors in athlete well-being. Despite these pressures, the data suggest that parental support rooted in genuine care and a focus on enjoyment can help protect against burnout and performance anxiety. This supports self-determination theory [29], which holds that autonomy-supportive environments, those fostering intrinsic motivation and emotional safety, promote lasting engagement and satisfaction. Overall, the findings point to the need for more nuanced parent education in elite youth sport. Encouraging emotionally supportive, autonomy-focused, and realistic parental behaviors may not only boost performance but also support long-term mental health.

4.3. *The Struggle Between Dream and Reality*

The lived experiences of young ice-hockey players captured in this theme speak to a profound and often painful journey between aspiration and acceptance. At its core, the narrative traces how dreams of reaching the NHL, a symbol of ultimate success, are gradually tempered by the realities of elite sport, exposing a stark tension between youthful idealism and the demands of structured, high-performance environments.

For many, the dream of playing in the NHL functions as both a motivational force and a central component of identity [30]. Joel's statement, "My love for hockey will probably never fade," represents a passion for the sport that persists even as expectations shift. However, Axel's reflection, "you start to realize, that dream isn't all that realistic", highlights the common process of dream recalibration that occurs as players mature and face increasingly competitive environments. This is further reflected in Lucas' comment: "The career doesn't last forever, I get that, trust me," suggesting an early understanding of sport's limited shelf life. Such realizations align with research showing that young athletes must frequently balance idealistic goals with realistic evaluations of their chances in elite sport [31]. The emotional burden of elite sport surfaces strongly in players' narratives, often in the form of performance anxiety, fear of failure, and self-doubt. Ville's observation, "you're not the star anymore," illustrates how identity disruption can occur when a previously high-performing athlete encounters a more competitive peer group [32]. These transitional phases are often poorly

supported and can negatively affect self-esteem and intrinsic motivation, especially in environments that emphasize results over development [33,34]. Adam and Gustav reflect on peer dropouts and how they stayed motivated, highlighting systemic attrition in youth sport. Research shows many athletes quit not from lack of talent, but due to burnout, low enjoyment, or feeling inadequate [35]. Early specialization can intensify these issues by limiting identity growth and increasing stress. As the players note, those struggling with injuries, development, or mental health often feel forced to leave the sport.

Taken together, the players' voices underscore a complex emotional landscape, one where passion, pressure, and pragmatism intersect. It reflects the tension between long-term development and the structural rigidity of elite sport systems. While passion is a recurring motif, the pathway to success is narrow and unforgiving. Their insights reveal not just personal struggles but wider questions about how we cultivate young players. Are we preparing them for a sustainable and fulfilling journey in sport, or merely for the slim chance of stardom? Considering this, the discussion raises a critical need for supportive systems that recognize the psychological journey of young players, embrace non-linear development paths, and promote identities that extend beyond the rink. The findings highlight the importance of providing parents, coaches, and sports organizations with guidance and training to manage competitive ambition while supporting players' emotional health, thereby reducing pressure and encouraging long-term participation in sport.

4.4. Limitations

This study draws on the internal generalization, providing detailed insights within this specific context, rather than generalizing findings to other settings, groups, or populations (external generalization)[36]. Thus, we acknowledge that the insights gained from this small sample are of limited generalizability. To ensure internal validity, established criteria for reliability, credibility, and transferability were applied[19]. It is important to note that the players in this study reflect on past experiences rather than current involvement in the situations discussed. This retrospective perspective should be considered when evaluating reliability, as their recollections may have been influenced by subsequent impressions or the perspectives of others. Conversely, the passage of time may have facilitated deeper reflection and a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Conducting all interviews in person would have been advantageous, as it would have allowed the authors to interpret respondents' body language and non-verbal cues. However, to achieve broader geographical coverage and player diversity, the authors opted to conduct some interviews via video link. Consequently, the varying conditions of the interview settings must be considered when interpreting the data.

5. Conclusions

The findings highlight the complex interplay between early specialization, psychological pressure, and the sociocultural structures that shape elite ice hockey in Sweden. Players' narratives reveal how premature professionalization can lead to identity foreclosure, emotional distress, and a diminished sense of personal agency. Although support networks, particularly familial ones, can aid development, they may also reinforce performance pressures and external expectations. Early aspirations of professional success often collide with the realities of elite sport, exposing patterns of self-doubt, performance anxiety, and the emotional cost of falling short within a rigid, high-stakes system. This persistent tension between aspirational goals, such as reaching the NHL, and the lived experience of elite sport underscores the need for more sustainable models of athlete development. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing ambition with long-term well-being in the design of youth sport systems. They also point to the need for education and clear guidelines for parents, coaches, and sports institutions to help mitigate pressure and promote emotionally sustainable athletic engagement. Ultimately, researchers and policymakers are urged to reconsider existing talent development frameworks, advocating for later specialization and more holistic support structures.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at the website of this paper posted on Preprints.org.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.R.A., L.K.A. and P.S.; methodology, S.R.A., L.K.A. and P.S.; validation, S.R.A., L.K.A. and P.S.; formal analysis, S.R.A., L.K.A. and P.S.; investigation, L.K.A. and P.S.; resources, S.R.A.; data curation, L.K.A. and P.S.; writing—original draft preparation, S.R.A.; writing—review and editing, S.R.A., L.K.A. and P.S.; visualization, S.R.A.; project administration, S.R.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. SRA is the guarantor of the study.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki [37], and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (DNR 2024-05136-01 and 2025-01700-02).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are included in the article. Original transcripts are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations:

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HA	HockeyAllsvenskan
SHL	The Swedish Hockey League
J18	Junior-level age 18
J20	Junior-level age 20
LTAD	Long-Term Athlete Development

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