

*Athlete Social Responsibility (ASR):  
A Grounded Theory Inquiry into the Social Consciousness of Elite Athletes*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

In

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION  
with a Specialization in International and Intercultural Communications

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## ABSTRACT

Sport in Canada is struggling to demonstrate that it is accountable, value-based, and socially responsible. Simultaneously, there is a growing consciousness among elite athletes to use the power and appeal of sport to affect meaningful social change.

Through in-depth interviews, I sought to understand which values and experiences motivated 15 elite Canadian athletes to become involved in social and political activities. I employed a grounded theory approach to analyze interview data and to develop the Athlete Social Responsibility (ASR) framework.

My results show that ASR is grounded in identity and existential development. The research participants indicated that, early in their careers, sport provided discipline, direction, and purpose, but through the maturation process, they indicated that becoming socially and politically active was instrumental to their personal development, performance, and continued participation in elite sport. They voiced frustration that the current sport system does little to encourage such engagement and offered a number of innovative ways in which the current system could adopt an ASR perspective. These ideas included: developing a resource to help athletes find their cause and link with related organizations, companies, or charities; helping athletes find ways to connect to their local communities; and restructuring the Canadian Athlete Assistance Program to include both performance and ASR criteria.

**Keywords:** athlete social responsibility; grounded theory; psychosocial development; social innovation; sport leadership

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who supported me in the completion of this thesis.

To begin, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Michael Read, for his encouragement and support throughout this entire process. I am also grateful for the input from the other members of my committee, Dr. Jennifer Walinga and Dr. Margaret McNeil. Thank you for your incredible guidance and support.

I also wish to thank my friends and family for supporting me in my academic endeavors.

Finally, I would like to thank the athletes who participated in my study, without them this thesis would not have been possible.

Thank you.

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## Chapter 1

### A GROWING CRISIS IN SPORT

In 2003, a national survey conducted by the Canadian Center for Ethics in Sport (CCES) revealed that ninety-two percent of Canadians believed that community sport could have a positive impact on the personal and moral development of youth, but that less than one in five Canadians believed community sport was reaching this potential. To address this gap, members of the sport community held a national symposium to discuss why sport was failing to meet expectations. It was agreed that the factors contributing to the crisis in sport were: the prominence of a win-at-all costs attitude, weak collaboration and coordination within the sport community, the absence of accountability to ensure fair play, and evident contradictions between what sport says it will do and what it does (CCES, 2003). The outcome of the symposium was the adoption of an action plan using national dialogue to initiate change in an effort to create a more value-based sport system.

To date, the results of the action plan have been mixed. Initiatives such as Canadian Olympic Committee's (COC) 'money-for-medals' program suggest that sport is continuing to adopt a win/lose attitude (Kidd, 2009). In addition, the continual decline in sport participation numbers suggests that sport is still failing to meet societal expectations (Active Healthy Kids, 2008). In 2008, the President of the Commonwealth Games Foundation of Canada, George Heller, published an article in the *Globe and Mail* outlining the growing crisis in amateur sport and the urgent need for the sport community to consolidate, collaborate, and communicate to address this crisis. Heller suggested that the problem in sport is complex, and as such, will require a complex solution.

Both academics and journalists have argued that Canadian sport is at a critical point in its history - it will either continue to become an entertainment industry or grow into the value-based sport many Canadians want (Zeigler, 2007; Kidd, 1996; Zirin, 2008). The opportunity for change exists, but, if change is to happen, then intention and intervention are needed within the system, either through sport organizations or individuals. It is this need for change that inspired this study and will enable it, I hope, to contribute to the growing body of research within sport sociology around the topic of sport and social change.

### *The Paradigm Shift*

Through my sport experiences, from competing on the Canadian National Cycling team for ten years to representing athletes on multiple provincial and national boards, I have observed a small but pivotal ideological shift towards social responsibility in Canadian elite athletes. In 2006, a workshop titled “Sport for Development” at the Annual Forum of AthletesCAN – a national sport organization that represents all national team athletes – further confirmed this paradigm shift but highlighted a major problem. During the workshop, when speakers identified ways for athletes to get involved internationally, nationally, and rurally, athletes spoke up enthusiastically about a desire to get involved by giving back to sport and society. Many of those who expressed interest also felt that there were not enough resources or support for them to act on their interests (anonymous athletes, personal communication, October 2006).

The AthletesCAN ‘Sport for Development’ workshop raised many questions, but one question stood out from the rest: why were some athletes empowered to engage in social responsibility activities while other were intimidated by the same opportunities?

Earlier that year, speed skater Clara Hughes won gold at the 2006 Torino Winter Olympics and donated \$10,000 of her own money to Right to Play, an international humanitarian organization that uses sport and play programs to improve health, develop life skills, and foster peace for children and communities in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the world ([righttoplay.com](http://righttoplay.com)). That same winter, Canadian Olympic skiers Thomas Grandi and Sara Renner launched 'Play It Cool,' an innovative environmental program that teams elite athletes, who are concerned about global warming and who are committed to making life changes to reduce climate impact, with the David Suzuki Foundation ([davidsuzuki.org](http://davidsuzuki.org)). This trend was not exclusive to winter athletes, summer athletes were also becoming more socially aware. For instance, prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Nikki Dryden, who represented Canada in the 1992 and 1996 Summer Olympic Games in swimming, decided to have her birthday party double as a fundraiser for Team Darfur, an international coalition of athletes committed to raising awareness about the crisis in Darfur, Sudan ([teamdarfur.org](http://teamdarfur.org)).

Historically, many athletes, albeit a small proportion of the whole, have used their voices to address specific social issues. But to date, such behavior has yet to become normative within the sport community and has often been discouraged and even severely punished by sport organizations (Zirin, 2005; Wolff & Kaufman, 2009). In one of the more well-known examples of athlete chastisement, U.S. athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, medalists in the 200 meter event at the 1968 Olympics, were stripped of their medals for bowing their heads and raising black-gloved fists during the medal ceremony. Their actions were part of a coordinated effort in the 1960's to expose how the U.S. used Black athletes to project a lie about race relations both at home and internationally (Zirin,



2005). According to Avery Brundage, president of the International Olympic Committee, Smith and Carlos violated “one of the basic principles of the Olympic games: that politics play no part whatsoever” (Zirin, 2005, p.76). While it was accepted that countries were using sport as a political platform, it clearly was not okay for the athletes to do the same.

In his article, *On Sporting Heroes*, John Hughson (2009) defines heroism as “the exhibition of greatness tempered by a display of common humanity” (p.85). He argues that true sporting heroes, like Muhammad Ali and Jackie Robinson, were able to unite prowess and morality in order to humanize their sporting lives. While much has been written about the influential role some athletes have played in sport and society (Malec & Beckles, 1997; Zirin, 2005), to date little attention has been paid to the growing number of current elite athletes in Canada and around the world who are embracing this kind of heroism.

### *Research Overview*

The overarching purpose of this study was to examine the small, but pivotal, ideological shift towards social responsibility among elite athletes in Canada, a phenomenon I have termed athlete social responsibility (ASR). My primary research objective was to understand what is motivating ASR. Why are some athletes going above and beyond sponsor/team obligations and giving time, money, and energy to promote the benefits of sport and other social and political issues? My secondary aim was to explore the opportunities and/or barriers within the Canadian sport system that could support and/or limit ASR. In other words, what impact, if any, could ASR have on helping to build a value-based sport system? To meet these objectives, I conducted in-depth

interviews with 14 top Canadian athletes who are currently engaged in ASR and used qualitative analysis and grounded theory to develop a model of the processes and contexts that motivate ASR in Canadian amateur sport.

Social responsibility is defined by the Educational Policies Commission as “a process of identifying with other persons on a ever widening basis” (1963, p.7). It is a human developmental process made up of a series of stages, which is manifested through thoughts and actions from childhood to adulthood. Similarly, I define the term athlete social responsibility (ASR) as a process of identifying one’s role and responsibilities as an athlete to be more than simply competing and training. ASR is the process of developing a strong sense of responsible citizenship in sport.

The concept of athlete social responsibility also originates from the business concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is a widely accepted concept that has received a great deal of attention within organizational, management, and economic literature. At the heart of CSR is the belief that organizations have responsibilities beyond profit maximizations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006). However, while CSR is becoming more common in many sectors around the world, it remains a hotly debated and confusing concept. Some have argued that the confusion stems from how it is used and socially constructed, rather than from how it is defined (Dahlsrud, 2008). Some argue that the only responsibility of business is to make a profit (Friedman, 2002), while others argue that organizations, like business and sport, have a responsibility to make a positive contribution to society (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Babiak & Wolfe, 2006).

While CSR and ASR have common dimensions, they are fundamentally different in their loci of control and motivation. The CSR practice has been criticized as being

“managerially contrived”, “imposed hierarchically on employees”, “unilaterally strategic in intent”, and “too simple and mechanistic, being over-reliant on bland codes of ethical practice” (Maclagan 2008, p.372). Patrick Maclagan (2008), from the University of Hull, argues that CSR takes away from an individual’s capacity to make and act on sound moral judgment, which is especially disadvantageous when resolving conflicts within the wider systems. Conversely, ASR is an athlete-driven phenomenon that is altruistic in intent and emergent in nature. Individual athletes are demonstrating a high degree of moral capacity in their desire to become socially responsible, but to date, sport organizational structures are either antithetical or ambivalent towards ASR.

Maclagan (2008) suggests that organizations need to focus on nurturing whole people and responsible individual decision makers, or as he calls them, “moral managers” (p.378). He argues that this is not only respectful of an individual’s right to realize her/his human moral potential, but also could bring about true cultural change. As Maclagan suggests “the presence of such morally aware, self-actualizing members who possess enhanced appreciation awareness, helps organizations adapt to the values and expectations of their stakeholders in more turbulent times” (p.372). ASR is not part of an overall managerial strategy but derives from an athlete’s personal experience and desire to become a responsible citizen. It could be argued that while sport is failing to meet social expectations, athletes are increasingly becoming the moral managers of sport and could help lead it into a new era.

I am extremely thankful to the fourteen athletes who shared their stories about how they discovered social responsibility. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King (2003) asks “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (p. 164). King suggests that

stories are the most important tool for creating change in our world and that there is power in repeating the stories that we want to create. As someone who has studied and worked in the field of communications, I consider this Master's thesis a modest beginning at trying to create positive change in the world of sport through telling a story about change.

In her book, *Writing the Sacred into Real*, Alison Deming (2001) writes about how, when the beliefs and values of a society are breaking down, stories help people to uncover new patterns or truths amidst the chaos of life. The people within the Canadian sport system currently face crucial decisions. Will they continue to help create a sport that is profitable and entertainment-driven or will they help build a sport that is value-based and makes a positive impact on the health and well-being of Canadian society? Stories are a tool we can use to uncover patterns and truths in search of what Canadian sport is and can be in the coming decades.

Before continuing, it is important to explain the design of this thesis. The introduction (Chapter 1), methodology (Chapter 2) and conclusion (Chapter 5) are bookends to the two distinct study parts in the middle (Chapters 3 & 4). The introduction sets the stage for the project, the methodology summarizes how the research was conducted, and the conclusion offers final remarks. The two parts in between, Chapter 3 - *A Growing Phenomenon: Individual Athletes Demonstrate a Growing Social Consciousness* and Chapter 4 - *Tipping the System: The Complexity of Organizational Change in the Canadian Sport System*, contain the results of my interviews with elite Canadian athletes engaged in ASR. In Chapter 3, *A Growing Phenomenon: Individual Athletes Demonstrate a Growing Social Consciousness*, I develop the ASR model by

identifying what motivated socially responsible behavior among my interviewees over the course of their athletic development. I then ground ASR in insights from developmental psychology to show how ASR reveals deficits in the Long-Term Athlete-Development Model. In Chapter 4, *Tipping the System: The Complexity of Organizational Change in the Canadian Sport System*, I explore the opportunities and barriers to ASR within the Canadian amateur sport system (hereafter Canadian sport). I then use complexity science and a social innovation approach to critically analyze how ASR has developed within the current system and how it could serve as a possible solution for sport leaders, administrators, and coaches in developing a value-based sport system.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Developing Methodology**

Using a grounded theory approach, I conducted fourteen in-depth interviews with Canadian elite athletes who were engaged in social responsibility activities. ‘Elite athlete’ was defined as someone who had achieved an international level of competition, competing in such events such as Olympic Games, World Championships, Pan-American Games, and Commonwealth Games. The athletes in the study were between the ages of 24 and 38. Nine were women and five were men. Twelve were still pursuing athletic careers and two had retired. These athletes competed in a variety of winter and summer sports, including cross-country skiing, rowing, aerials, downhill skiing, speed skating, hockey, swimming, track and field, and triathlon.

Participants for this study were selected with the help of the organization Right to Play, an international humanitarian organization that uses sport and play programs to improve health, develop life skills, and foster peace for children and communities in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the world ([righttoplay.com](http://righttoplay.com)). Right to Play was chosen because of its growing visibility in Canada and its popularity among athletes in Canada and around the world. There are currently approximately 100 Canadian athletes, of the 430 athletes around the world, who argue that play was an important part of their development and therefore advocate on behalf of the right of all children to play.

The Director of Athlete Relations and Communications for the Canadian arm of Right to Play identified eleven potential interview participants who had been strong ambassadors for the organization. Due to time commitments, only nine were able to

participate. Interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. First, the athletes were asked to describe any significant childhood memories and/or any influential people who were a part of their growing up years. This was meant to draw out any seminal experiences or influential people that may have impacted his/her later sense of social responsibility. These questions were followed with a number of open-ended questions about the athlete's sport career. Again, these questions were meant to incite athletes to share their most memorable and influential sport experiences. Eventually the questions became more directly related to the athlete's social responsibility activities and, specifically, their reasons for getting involved with Right to Play. All of these questions helped to address my first research objective, as presented in chapter 3, which was to explore the personal motivations for development of ASR. Later in the interviews, athletes were asked a number of direct questions about the nature of their social responsibility activities within the sport system at large. This encouraged athletes to reflect, not only at an individual level, but also at an institutional level. Throughout the interviews many of the athletes had already incorporated comments about the sport system, demonstrating that, while their actions were individually motivated, they were greatly influenced by the greater sport system. It was for this reason that my second objective, as presented in chapter 4, explored ASR within the context of Canadian sport.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. A qualitative framework was used to analyze interview data using three levels of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Open coding was used to find the major categories within ASR, whereby a category "represented a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances" (1990). Axial coding was used to further identify

links and relationships among the emerging categories, and selective coding was used to piece together the relationships in a meaningful, coherent way. These three levels of coding helped to develop the ASR model, a model that tells the story of how each of these individual athletes developed a sense of social responsibility, and how ASR could be a tremendous benefit to organizational change.

After my first round of interviews and analyses was complete, I conducted a second round of six interviews with more directed and focused questions in order to further develop the emerging athlete social responsibility framework. The same sequence of transcribing, coding, and analysis took place during the second round of interviews. Snowball sampling was used to select participants who were not connected with “Right to Play,” but who were selected based on the referral of athletes that I had already interviewed. It is common in grounded theory that, as categories emerge, grounds for comparison become apparent which ultimately direct the selection of further participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After fourteen interviews, a clear athlete social responsibility model had emerged and I stopped my data collection. This kind of focused sampling aided in the development of the categories until no new properties emerged (Charmaz, 2006).

I situated my study within the framework that Feagin and Vera (2001) call “liberation sociology.” Others have suggested that this approach follows “the tradition of the early sociologists who approached their research as a vehicle to promote and foster progressive social change” (Wolff & Kaufman, 2009, p.29). It follows the existential ideology that research itself is meaning making. All the athletes I interviewed expressed that, through the interview process, they had come to a better understanding of what had



motivated their sense of responsibility. Throughout the process of conducting and analyzing interviews, I used memo-writing to document and develop awareness of my thoughts, biases, and perceptions over the course of this research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This helped me to better understand how, as a past Canadian national team athlete, this research is a continuation of my story.

## Chapter 3

# A GROWING PHENOMENON: INDIVIDUAL ATHLETES DEMONSTRATE NEED FOR MORE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SPORT

### Introduction

Research suggests that athletes who focus on performance, while keeping a healthy perspective of sport, themselves, and the world, are more likely to succeed long-term in sport and in life (Brown, 2001; Henricks, 2006; Stirling, 2007). As Canadian sports psychologist Matthew Brown (2001) states “it’s not necessary for athletes to forfeit themselves or their values in order to perform well” (p. 159).

Today there are a growing number of successful Canadian elite athletes seeking opportunities to create positive social change. One only needs to look at the long list of Canadians serving as athlete ambassadors for the humanitarian aid organization Right to Play ([rightoplay.com](http://rightoplay.com)) or the number of athletes who are speaking out on climate change with the David Suzuki Foundation Play-it-Cool program ([davidsuzuki.org](http://davidsuzuki.org)). This movement is noticeable not only in Canada, but around the world. In his book, *What’s My Name, Fool?*, American journalist Dave Zirin writes: “There are very real signs that athletes and fans are starting to speak out for the first time in a generation” (2005, p. 257).

Historically, a small, but influential, number of athletes have actively used sport to address social issues such as equality, justice, and freedom (Wolff & Kaufman, 2009; Kidd, 2000). It has been argued that some of the most celebrated athletes, like Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali, have maintained enduring popular respect because of their

capacities to demonstrate extraordinary sport skill and moral resilience (Zirin, 2005; Malec & Beckles, 1997). In other words, true sporting heroes are those one who can achieve sporting excellence while projecting a common sense of humanity (Hughson, 2009). Despite evidence for the strong connection between athletic performance and moral resilience, athlete activism has often been discouraged (and even punished) by sport organizations (Zirin, 2005; Kidd, 2000; Wolfe & Kaufmann, 2009).

In our increasingly socially conscious world, a number of sport leaders, journalists, and sociologists are recognizing the failure of institutional sport to demonstrate that it is capable of moral and socially responsible leadership (Zeigler 2007, Zirin, 2008; CCES, 2008; Rudd, 2005; Jarvie, 2007; Kidd, 2009,1996). Few are recognizing the emerging athlete-driven movement of athlete social responsibility (ASR) and its potential positive implications on the sport system in Canada and around the world. A better understanding of the motivations and impacts of this growing movement among elite athletes to engage in social responsibility activities could reveal potential solutions to the growing crisis facing Canadian sport.

Through fourteen in-depth interviews, this study used grounded theory to develop a model of *athlete social responsibility (ASR)* (a term coined in this study to explain the growing movement of athletes engaged in social responsibility activities) with the purpose of providing sport leaders, policy makers, and stakeholders insight into how to develop a value-based sport system in Canada. ASR is further grounded in developmental psychology, and later discussed in relation to Canada's long-term athlete development model. To meet the above goal, this study was based on the following objectives: 1) to identify the motivations and barriers of ASR, 2) to develop a theory around ASR, and 3)

to identify gaps and recommend potential opportunities for the Canadian sport culture to facilitate ASR as a way to cultivate a value-based sport system.

### *Social Responsibility*

Within the last ten years, the concept of social responsibility has received considerable attention within professional sport and is increasingly applied to sport management (Babiak, et al, 2007). This trend grows out of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement that emphasizes the responsibilities of corporations to society beyond profit maximization (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006). The emerging dual perspective of linking profit and social responsibility has led organizations away from traditional charitable giving in order to integrate business operations and interests with community involvement (Dean, 2003). Despite its grassroots aims, CSR has been criticized for being too managerially contrived, top-down imposed, and reductionist in nature (Maclagan, 2008).

The increasing desire among athletes to engage in social responsibility activities is a true grassroots movement. For this reason it is fundamentally different than CSR and deserves a great deal of attention because, as some have argued, bottom-up approaches to change are much more successful (Cheney, et al., 2004). However, CSR literature highlights two important factors when considering socially constructed phenomenon: process and context. Process is defined as a natural or involuntary operation or series of changes (Bisset & Barber, 2004) Thus, in order to understand the process of ASR, it was important to consider the process of how athletes developed a sense of responsibility

throughout their human development within the context of their sport experiences. For this reason, I endeavored to ground ASR in developmental psychology.

### *Historical Perspective*

Social responsibility is a well-established concept that, historically, has been widely explored and accepted within developmental psychology. It plays an important role in Erik Erikson's (1959) ego identity development model which continues to provide much of our understanding of human development (MacAdams, 2000). The concept of social responsibility also overlaps with ideas of balance (Orlick, 1998) and flow (Csikszentimihalyi, 1990). Research suggests that when athletes achieve a sense of balance and perspective in sport and in life, they are more likely to engage flow experiences thereby achieving full functioning and self-actualization.

The emerging positive youth development perspective does not specifically use the words 'social responsibility' but instead uses the term 'contribution' to refer to the important role social engagement plays in helping young people thrive in life (Lerner, et al., 2005). Positive youth development highlights the importance of developing organizational systems that nurture young people's positive development through mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions of their social world (Lerner, et al., 2005). Comparatively, within Canada's current long-term athlete development model (LTAD), there is little reference made to either contribution or social responsibility.

The LTAD, a federal government initiative, was developed by a consortium of sport specialists in the mid 2000's to develop a framework of athlete development that

focuses on growth, maturation, and trainability. It was a strategic attempt to bring Canadian sport in alignment to address the many shortcomings impeding the entire system. While the model stresses the importance of character building and the holistic development of the athlete, there is very little content regarding the psychosocial development of an athlete (canadiansportforlife.com). In fact, while the physical development of an athlete is laid out in elaborate detail within the model, the cognitive, mental and emotional development of an athlete is relegated to the appendix of all materials. This directly opposes the positive youth development perspective which advocates that models like the LTAD should focus on “enhancing the fit between the capacities of young people and the assets for positive development that exist in their communities” (Lerner, et al., 2005, p.15). In other words, while physical development is important to a person’s life, it is merely one aspect of a person’s overall capacity as a human being. The following study explores why athletes are engaging in social responsibility activities and how it impacts their development as athletes and as human beings.

## **Results**

The model of athlete social responsibility that emerged from my interview data has four major phases: narrowing, defining, opening, and redefining (see Figure 1). This model provides a framework for how the athletes I interviewed came to develop a strong sense of social responsibility. Although this model suggests a top-bottom linear path of development, each athlete experienced this path somewhat differently. Some athletes navigated through the different phases quickly, while others stayed in certain phases longer. Some athletes skipped phases, while others fluctuated back and forth between

phases. In all cases, athletes described their unique journey that took each of them from playground to podium to principle.

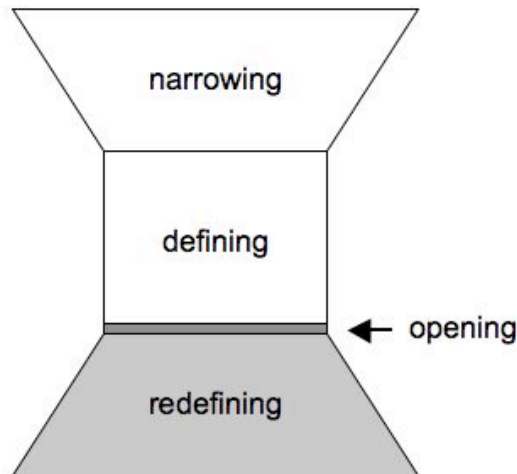


Figure 1. Athlete Social Responsibility Model

### *Narrowing*

The athletes I interviewed suggested that, in childhood, the world started out big, with endless opportunities and embodied a “why not me” spirit. The athletes spoke about having ideas of what they could become through what they saw, heard, or experienced.

For example, one of the athletes shared the following story.

*“The start to my Olympic journey came one day when my family was driving home from the cottage and we pulled into a Petro Canada Gas Station and they were having a cross-Canada contest where you could put your name into a drawing to run in the torch relay. I remember thinking, ‘hey that looks cool.’ I jumped out and filled out one ballot and brought a whole bunch more home to fill out. Literally, when you are 10, you think that you are guaranteed to be chosen, so I was pretty excited about it. Later that summer, when we were back at the cottage I went off by myself on the dirt road and I carried a hammer in my right hand. It was ridiculous, I was just a silly 10 year old. It took me a long time to remember that I had done that, but when I did remember, it was kind of the first moment I realized what the Olympics were all about.”*

When I asked the athletes to describe their most memorable childhood experiences, three recurring themes were evident: play, fun, and social. These words were repeated with compelling frequency in the interviews and gave credence to their importance in childhood. In most cases, ‘play’ referred to the activity being done and ‘fun’ referred to the overall feeling of the activity.

*“Every opportunity we were out playing. You get to school an hour early so you could play outside with your buddies and then recess would come and it would be a mad dash to the door and to the soccer pitch and you’d be right into a game. And then there would be lunch, and I don’t ever remember eating lunch. It was always a mad rush to somewhere to play a game.”*

While the athletes I interviewed talked about the importance of playing and being active in childhood, most of their stories were ‘social’ in nature. In describing their most significant childhood memories, the athletes spoke about the critical role family and friends played in their lives. Some shared stories about the pivotal role their family had in influencing their sport interests. Stories included getting drug along to sport events by parents or getting “smoked into the cement” by an older sibling during a street hockey game. Others credited friends and the social benefits of sport for fueling their early athletic interests. As one athlete reflected, she started playing ringette at age six, *“because that’s what all of my friends did. It wasn’t because I was actually interested in sport... I didn’t have any idea of what being an athlete meant, or even wanted to be an athlete.”*

Outside of friends and family, athletes identified other specific people (ie. athletes, teachers, coaches, sponsors, etc.) who directly or indirectly influenced and encouraged their sport interests. Many of these people were instrumental in helping the athletes believe in themselves. As one athlete said, *“My first coach. He made you think you could fly.”*



Through all their stories, another theme that emerged was that ‘how’ athletes experienced giving in childhood was instrumental in developing their sense of giving, and greatly influenced ‘how’ they gave back later in their sport careers.

*“One person who definitely changed who I am was my first sponsor. He doesn’t have money himself and I think he cooked the books to sponsor me. It wasn’t like now where you find sponsors who have millions of dollars – you don’t find the people who have nothing and who will still give you something. He was one of those guys that didn’t have anything and still found something to give...Now, I’m super cool with my teammates and the younger guys who I meet and help them, loan them money, and give them advice.”*

One athlete shared the following story about how her childhood sport hero was instrumental in helping her develop a strong sense of responsibility.

*“I did have one hero, Pelle Lindbergh, who played for the Philadelphia Flyers. When I was about 10 years old he was involved in a drunk driving incident and he was the drunk driver. I remember my parents telling me about that and I was absolutely devastated. I couldn’t go to school the next day. I think since then I haven’t really had heroes because he was just disappointing in the end. This hero that I idolized because I watched him on hockey night in Canada was, in the end, not really a good guy. It made me realize that these heroes were not heroes as people, so any hero that I had from that point on was somebody that I knew, like my brother, like my cousin who went to the Olympics.”*

*“I think it redefined for me what it means to be a role model. It is still really weird that so many little girls look up to us. I still think that is strange, but I do accept it is reality and that what I do is looked upon by others. So I feel a sense of responsibility not only in front of kids but away from the rink too.”*

As they got a little older, the athletes I interviewed described the process of moving from childhood to adolescence as a time of narrowing in focus. Sport, which had started as an enormous world of play and fun, was demanding more focus and commitment. All the athletes spoke of achieving success and were encouraged by coaches and parents to increase their focus on a particular sport. For some athletes, this narrowing provided them with a sense of direction and purpose in life, and they willingly made sacrifices in order to embrace this singular focus.

*“I’m indebted to sport. I think that sport saved me, I probably would have been into drugs. Really, I have no idea what I would’ve done if it hadn’t have been for sports. I wasn’t motivated in school until I got into sports. I was like a very C average guy in the beginning of high school and then in grade 11 my average went up to honors and it was only because sport taught me how to work, to get through stuff. I’m indebted to sport and the people around me.”*

*“It was exactly what I needed at that time. It was discipline; it was direction, which at that point of my life was really a good thing because I was out of control. And it really changed my life. I went from failing school and not going to school to getting A+’s cause I knew if I wanted to travel for sport I had to do well in school. It really shifted the direction of my life, and that is when I started being an athlete.”*

However, other athletes I interviewed expressed a very different reaction to this narrowing, speaking of this phase in terms of loss and surrender.

*“I did both hockey and skiing when I was younger. When I was 12, the hockey coach came to me and told me I couldn’t keep missing practice for skiing and that I would have to choose between the two sports. To me, it wasn’t a difficult choice, but at the same time it was a big moment because all of a sudden I was a ski racer, I wasn’t just a kid doing different sports.”*

*“When I started grade 8, I moved into the A group, that is when all the other sports ended. I peaked in Grades 6 and 7. I got to do every sport, I was loving school, I was swimming well. In grade 8 everything changed and went downhill. I became this person who just swam, who wasn’t related to the school at all, and the more into swimming I got, the less into my school friends I got.”*

In all cases, the narrowing phase involved a choice that, as the athletes I interviewed suggested, drastically impacted their sense of self. They went from being just your average, active kid to being a focused athlete.

### *Defining*

This defining phase is the period when sport became the singular focus of these athletes’ lives; their world revolved around sport and sport goals. In this phase, my interviewees talked about learning to become an athlete and developing valuable skills

such as focus, commitment, and dedication. In this phase they learned stress management, time management, and goal setting. They were rewarded for their focus by increasingly achieving their goals, standing atop the podium, and receiving greater support (ie. financial, social, emotional) from funding bodies, coaches, Canadian sport, the Canadian public, etc. As one athlete put it *“The higher the level I achieved, the more support came along with it and the more encouraged I was to pursue it at even higher levels. It was a real step by step process.”*

The athletes I interviewed also indicated that, through this phase, they developed a strong work ethic, gained self-confidence in sport, discovered that success comes with risk (to succeed one must also be willing to fail), and learned how to make sacrifices. Not only did sport take increasing amounts of time out of their lives—which meant social sacrifices—but there were also many economic and personal sacrifices.

*“I didn’t grow up in a very wealthy family. I used to go out and pick rocks to earn my ski pass every year. Skiing was kind of a novelty. I remember when I was 16 my dad said to me – ‘the first time I see you on TV, I’ll buy you a TV’ (we didn’t have one growing up). That year I happened to be on TV at nationals, and I remember thinking – ‘yes I get a TV.’ He went down to the hotel that was going out of business and bought their old TV for \$100.”*

One of the biggest themes to emerge from this phase, as identified by the athletes I interviewed, was the impact that this focusing had on their lives as young people. One athlete’s story describes the sentiments of many—this focus plays an influential role on the development of an athlete’s healthy, or unhealthy, sense of self.

*“Awhile ago, I was cleaning my parents attic and I found a sports psych test that I had undergone when I first made the national team. I was 14. There was a one-page summary on the front, and it basically had these things like – well, I rated myself ten out of ten on a scale when I identified myself as a swimmer, but a two out of ten when I identified myself as a person. The sports psychologist wrote in the summary that there was a real problem and that these things needed to come closer together. But, of course, it was never done or addressed. Instead, it*

*continued to be a way for him [coach] to push me, to push my buttons, because my whole identity rested on becoming the best. This works for a while but when you become older, if you don't have any sense of self-worth or value, it doesn't matter if you are a great athlete. The whole thing is going to collapse."*

Many of the athletes spoke about the importance of learning to enjoy the process of being an athlete. Many of them felt that if they had learned to focus on the process, rather than just focusing on winning, they would have achieved greater success earlier in their sport careers. By focusing on the process, athletes felt that they would have continued to grow both in and outside of sport.

*"If you can learn to enjoy the process, learn to enjoy your sport and to be happy, if you can learn that early on, you're in a much better position to keep your career longer, to go longer in sport, but also to set yourself up for the rest of life."*

Many of the athletes raised concerns that sport overemphasizes winning. Many of them felt that the sport culture promotes the ideology that, in order to succeed, athletes must become selfish, self-focused, and self-absorbed. For a period of time, the athletes I interviewed adopted, believed, and practiced this ideology, but in doing so their identities became married to, and codependent on, sport.

*"I don't think sport breeds socially aware people. I think it is the opposite. I think it breeds zombies. I think it breeds people who aren't developed, they aren't encouraged to be developed or who are not encouraged to do things outside of what makes them a good athlete. That's unfortunate."*

Put another way, the athletes whom I interviewed indicated that, while sport supported them in achieving their physical potential, it failed to help them achieve their human potential. They explained how, as they progressed in their athletic careers, sport began to lack meaning.

*"As I grew older in sport, I was constantly trying to find new motivation to work hard and to really push the limits, I needed to have greater purpose."*

In the beginning of their athletic careers, these athletes were motivated by the thrill of competition and winning, the kind of motivation that sport does a good job of promoting. But when they began to need greater meaning, sport was unable to help. While they had learned how to strive for success, they hadn't learned what to do once they were there. It had sheltered them from seeing the bigger picture of life out of fear that it might impact their athletic performance, but this was to the detriment of their human development. As one athlete summarized this realization, *"We take, take, take. It isn't a healthy way to live."* Despite the fact that many of the athletes I interviewed are, and were, some of the best athletes in the world, all of them expressed a moment at the pinnacle of their sport careers where they increasingly felt lost and confused.

*"All I knew was training and working hard. I mean, I had creative outlets, I had artistic outlets, writing outlets, but I was really lost as a human being."*

### *Opening*

The opening phase, as described by the athletes I interviewed, is defined by a catalytic experience that challenged them to reexamine life, their sense of purpose, and their identities. This catalytic experience forced them to look outside of themselves and the sport world. One athlete describes her catalytic experience this way, *"I realized the thing that was making me want to leave sport was the selfishness of it."* For some athletes this experience was marked by intrapersonal confusion and conflict—during which time several contemplated quitting sport. Others sought refuge in activities outside of sport, became involved in academic pursuits, or just got "busy."

For some of the athletes I interviewed, the catalytic experience occurred after achieving success. Others spoke about the catalytic experience as occurring when they came back from the Olympic games.

*“After I came back from the Olympics, I went back to my small town and saw the impact it had on the coming together of a community. They knew so much about me and were inspired by what I had done. It opened my eyes.”*

For one athlete this catalytic experience happened on the start line at the Olympics.

*“After my first Olympics, [I remembered] the energy I felt on the starting line. I literally felt like I had millions of people inside me urging me forward, wishing me the best, and wanting me to succeed. I really felt the energy inside, and was not afraid of it, but was just totally inspired by it and motivated by it. I realized that when I take that, it’s my responsibility to give back. It’s my responsibility to give that back.”*

Another athlete experienced the catalytic experience after he experienced a huge sense of failure in sport.

*“I felt pretty terrible after the Olympics. It was a tough time. I like to explain it as being dumped. Olympic gold was our prize girl, and everything was going well until we asked her to marry us and she slapped us on the face. It hurt. It got me thinking, if I continue to do only rowing, failures will happen. Right now I’m solely relying on being a rower, because that’s all I know I am. It’s great when you are on top and everyone thinks you are great. But when you are down at the bottom of the pile you start to search for an identity.”*

Some athletes spoke of speaking opportunities that enabled them to see the difference they could make, while others spoke of an experience that suddenly made them aware of their humanity.

*“I remember one day watching a CBC documentary about humanitarian disasters, it opened my eyes and got me thinking. It was the same day that I had received the team clothing for the year. It was then I started to think...we have so much, we have too much.”*

Some athletes spoke of influential people who opened them up to the world and helped them, not only to be aware of the human condition, but also the capacity of the human being. In all the stories, my interviewees expressed a common sense of being opened up to their humanity. They realized all that they'd been given and all the opportunities, support, and resources they'd received through sport. This realization fostered a sense of responsibility to give it back in some way. Regardless of how an athlete actually experienced the catalytic experience, all athletes gained a heightened awareness of self, of sport, and of sport in society through the experience.

*“Your world opens up when you see what else is out there instead of just living in your bubble. You understand more about the world. It opens your eyes beyond your high performance sport world. We always joke that the oval [shape of the racing course] is a bubble, but actually it really is.”*

Through this awakening process my interviewees felt a renewed sense of purpose and motivation, which in all cases began redefining who they were as athletes and as people.

### *Redefining*

Redefining is the phase which occurred after the athletes I interviewed had been opened up to the world and where they began to see what existed outside of themselves and sport. As one interviewee put it, with an *“open mind and unburdened heart”*, she began to look for ways to take her new sense of responsibility and put it into action.

Some athletes took this redefined sense of self and got involved with organizations like Right to Play, Team Darfur, Play-it-Cool, and the YES program in Alberta, organizations that advocate for specific social issues.

*“I think the first thing I did was I joined the Yes program – Youth Education through Sport. I started to develop public speaking skills, and I really enjoyed visiting the kids. And you start to realize that people really respect athletes and look up to what they do on a daily basis. You realize that it has an impact on people, and it can inspire and it can motivate people to do something similar in their own lives.”*

Others took new initiatives and begin their own organizations, foundations, and sports camps.

*“I got to thinking about all the athletes that I trained with from all the other sports at Pacific Sport and I thought, ‘everybody here has a journey and everybody here has a story that needs to be told.’ So one of the things I did was I put together an ‘adopt-an-athlete’ program.”*

Often the athletes I interviewed took from their own experiences and gave back in similar ways. For example, one athlete, who had experienced phenomenal giving from the people in his sport, put more importance on giving to the younger athletes, while another athlete, who had received huge support from her community, started a foundation in that community.

*“The reason I felt the need to give back is that when I was 18 my dad passed away and the community really came together and helped me. There was one family in particular, but also the community held a fundraiser, and that’s why I was able to continue skiing, because I sure as hell couldn’t afford it on my own. It showed me that there are people behind you who believe in you and love you. They gave me an opportunity, and I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to succeed. And now it’s my turn to pay it forward. And that’s what I’ve done. I started a foundation that helps the youth of the valley in arts, education, sports, and whatever.”*

No matter how the athletes I interviewed put their newfound responsibility into action, it gave them a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in sport. By becoming more socially conscious and active, many of the athletes I interviewed began to develop a stronger sense of self-identity, outside of their identity as an athlete.

*“It changes you as a person. Instead of going down the path of becoming a self-absorbed and selfish athlete – and I don’t mean that in a negative way, because*



*I'm like that. Fundamentally, to do what I do, you have to be like that sometimes. But I think that people go down that path without an awareness that they're on it, and you start to think that you are entitled. The awareness gets you away from that, and you feel grateful for it."*

Some athletes spoke of being able to connect to who they wanted to be in life.

*"I really didn't like the feeling of being focused on myself. I was really worried about losing my compassionate side because I felt that I was being held off from who I really was. But, what I began to understand is that when you achieve a goal, if you are able to use that for the greater good, there is purpose in that."*

*"I wanted to be one of those athletes that remembered where I came from. I didn't have a lot. I don't think it has changed me as an athlete but it made me aware of paying it forward. I hope that my helping someone will inspire him or her to help someone else."*

*"I found that for people to be excited for what I did physically was great, but I thought it would be more meaningful if I could show them that I wasn't just an athlete and a one-sided person. It was nice to be able to show my other side."*

Not only were athletes' identities and sense of purpose strengthened, but also becoming socially responsible and aware directly and indirectly helped their sport careers. For some, it helped them to stay in sport longer.

*"Everyday we train, we go to the gym, we get on the ice, or we go to the Olympics or the World Championships. Sometimes you can get so focused on what you are doing. So I feel like when you have the time to do these events and talks then it makes you appreciate it more and not to take things for granted and it makes you realize how lucky you are to be in that situation. In addition, it really does motivate me to keep playing, because then I feel like I continue to do this and share moments and hopefully make a difference for others."*

For other athletes it helped them achieve even greater success.

*"I'll never forget it, because it took me outside of myself. And I just[considered] all the devastating things in the human condition and all the suffering in the world. And right now, and for as long as we have existed and for as long as we will exist, it will exist. I just feel like all that came into me and out of me with joy. I won that race because I was ultimately connecting to the human condition and the state of the world."*

A few of the athletes even suggested that, by giving back, they were able to focus even more narrowly on their athletic development.

*“It has allowed me to be more selfish. In that I wasn’t being selfish towards me anymore, I was being selfish in order to help other people. Or, it kind of gives you more of a boost when you make it not about you, you can’t feel sorry for yourself. Having said that, when you fail, you feel really shitty. You feel that it isn’t just about you failing.”*

Athletes spoke about how getting involved with activities outside of sport helped them to find a greater balance in life because it helped them live with both an internal and external focus. This newfound balance enabled them to be their true selves and embrace their true potential.

*“I needed to have a sense of urgency because my career wasn’t open ended, it wouldn’t last forever. I still hadn’t won any races and I just needed to remind myself that every opportunity was important. I needed to seize every opportunity. When I got involved with [name of organization] it gave me greater sense of purpose. It gave me the energy and motivation to go out there and train hard, even when I was tired. I knew that I wasn’t doing it just for me anymore. There was a greater purpose for me to be there and to be successful... It worked.”*

Many athletes spoke about how the process of becoming more socially responsible and aware made them more open to learning things about themselves, sport, and society. One athlete felt that she was more open to taking on challenges, both in sport and outside of sport. Another athlete described how he was better able to focus his energy on sport goals when he had an external outlet. Another athlete described this period as a clearing of the mind—she felt freer to follow her dreams when they involved giving back.

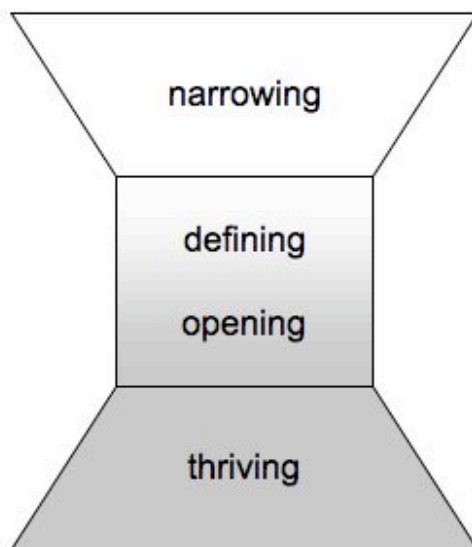
*“I think it helps me, because I feel like when I perform my best is when I have a free mind and an unburdened heart. I’m way too analytical sometimes. So, I think it goes back to what we’ve talked about and why I have such an appreciation for having balance in my life and why it is important that I’m not just an athlete. You do these things and it puts things in perspective and makes me appreciate my*

*situation and enjoy it that much more. It gives it meaning and makes it so special.”*

In summary, the process of athlete social responsibility led to an increased self-awareness, which helped develop a stronger sense of self and confidence, both in and outside of sport. This confidence helped these athletes to engage in positive social action with causes they believed in and felt responsible to support. Many athletes were offered unique opportunities and experiences that helped them to achieve a greater sense of themselves and, subsequently, of life.

#### *The ‘What Could Be’ Model*

While the athletes I interviewed reflected on their own experiences, they couldn’t help but reflect on what they would change if they could do it over. Through these latter reflections, another ASR model emerged, hereafter referred to as the ‘proposed’ Athlete Social Responsibility model (Figure 2). This model demonstrates a vision of what



*Figure 2. The ‘proposed’ Athlete Social Responsibility model*

the athletes I interviewed felt the ASR process could, and should, be. This proposed model offers Canadian sport a way to help athletes in the future thrive in both sport and life.

This proposed ASR model would not only benefit athlete development, it would also benefit the Canadian sport system long-term. It offers a possible solution for how Canadian sport could develop more holistic athletes while becoming more socially orientated.

## **Discussion**

### *Embodied Potential*

The results from this study show that ASR plays a critical role in an athlete's development, especially the latter part, and can have a powerful impact on an athlete's personal development, continued sport participation, and overall sport performance. It suggests that an athlete's cognitive, emotional, and social development is as critical to their athletic performance as their physical development, especially as they mature. These findings are important because they highlight significant deficiencies within the LTAD model, described at the beginning of this article, which prioritizes physical development and contains little information about, or practical applications for, the psychosocial development of an athlete. The following discussion endeavors to demonstrate how privileging physical development over the psychosocial development of an athlete perpetuates the dualistic perspective in sport and potentially hinders an athlete's success in sport and in life.

This study, along with many others, suggest that the dualistic perspective in sport, which treats body and mind as separate entities, is limiting athletes from reaching their true potential (Whitehead, 2007; Reid, 2002, Orlick, 1998, Brown, 2001). Within this study on ASR, the athletes spoke about the evolution of their embodied and dualistic perspectives. While the athletes I interviewed shared stories that reflected embodied experiences in childhood, the more they became engaged in sport this embodiment dissipated and they slowly took on a body-as-machine perspective. It wasn't until the opening and redefining phases, where athletes became aware of themselves in the world and sought ways to act socially responsible, that their perspectives re-orientated back to an embodied perspective. Athletes I interviewed indicated that when they were discouraged from all non-sport activities, brainlessness resulted and seemed almost encouraged.

While the LTAD acknowledges the importance of self-actualization and decision making in late adolescence and early adulthood, it contradicts itself by reinforcing a “coach-led structure.” There is no doubt that the athlete-coach relationship is a delicate balance. As one of the athletes puts it *“I would say [name of her coach] is my mother, my sister, my best friend, and my worst enemy, It just depends on the day.”* However, as one athlete points out, if this relationship isn't treated with care there is much at risk. *“He [the coach] did a lot of harm to me as a human being. But he did a good job of making me swim fast.”* The athlete went on to describe what she meant by harm.

*“I think that there are two kinds of coaches. There are coaches that care about you as a human being and your growth as a human being. [They believe] sport is one of the things that makes you a better person, and if they get it right, a great coach will nurture both [your athletic and human development]. You reach your potential in sport, but it doesn't harm you as a human being. It doesn't ever become one or the other. Some of the greatest athletes have nurtured both sides of*

*themselves. [And then there are the coaches that do harm.] When I say harm, I, along with my whole team, had eating disorders, we were weighed everyday like cattle, but it wasn't just that. The coach was someone who exploited our weaknesses, things that were probably detrimental to my swimming too. I was too hard on myself, I didn't enjoy the process, I just wanted to win. I just wanted to beat everybody, and instead of realizing that those things actually would hurt me later in my career, he [the coach] exploited those things and really didn't teach me that enjoying the process and loving the competition for competition's sake would've helped me in swimming and made me a better person, a better human being."*

This quote highlights two very different athlete experiences; one illustrates what can happen when holistic development is achieved and an embodied perspective is encouraged, whereas the other illustrates what can happen when a win-at-all cost mentality is promoted. While coaches are on the front lines developing and implementing the LTAD training plans specific to their athletes needs, it is arguable that the win-at-all cost mentality isn't just a coaching issue but a larger, systemic issue. If sport ever hopes to become invaluable to society, then it needs to show that it is helping to create not only champion athletes but also thoughtful, socially responsible citizens.

The positive youth development perspective, like the ASR model, stresses that adolescence is a time of developing strengths and building reflection competencies that can help avoid pathologies later in life (Jones & Lavalee, 2009, p.159) In a seminal study that looked at the life skill development in adolescence athletes, it was found that sport encourages social skills (e.g., communication, teamwork), but often fails to encourage transferability or awareness of these skills. The researchers in the study made the case for a life-skills program in which adolescent athletes are "encouraged to reflect on their sporting experiences so they can understand how they have developed social skills (and other life skills) through their participation in sport" (p.166). This study supports the ASR model in that it shows that sport would benefit from encouraging athletes to become

more aware of themselves and the world because it would further illustrate the tangible societal benefits of sport.

The other reason Canadian sport might benefit from embracing the ASR model, is that some of the athletes I interviewed suggested that a heightened self-awareness leads to increased potential for peak moments. For example, after the opening phase of the ASR model, athletes I interviewed spoke about being able to free their mind, body, and spirit. What these athletes were describing is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, "a state of optimal experiencing involving total absorption in the task, and creating a state of consciousness where optimal levels of functioning often occur" (Jackson, 1995, p.138). Some have argued that peak moments are only achieved by self-actualizers, in other words by people who recognize their talents and potentials (Maslow, 1970).

In the redefining phase of the ASR model the athletes I interviewed spoke about seeking out ways to better understand themselves as athletes and as human beings. This search for meaning, the great existentialist Victor Frankl argues, is our primary motivation in life (Frankl, 1959). He argues that in youth we tend to conform rather than want the difficult task of stepping out and guiding ourselves in life. However, when we do finally step out in search of meaning we are able to tap into our meaning-motivation, a deep and lasting motivational drive.

For many of the athletes I interviewed the redefining phase brought about new meaning and helped them achieve a greater balance in life and in some cases brought even greater successes in sport. These athletes were in the process of creating a meaningful sport rather than just accepting sport as the meaning. Through the process of finding themselves, these athletes found that meaning is to be found in the world not in

themselves, and definitely not in sport. As sports philosopher Heather Reid (2002) argues in her book *The Philosophical Athlete*, “athletes don’t dedicate their lives to sport, they dedicate their sport to the pursuit of meaningful lives” (p.126).

So far it has been shown that the dualistic perspective in Canadian sport and the LTAD model are not promoting the holistic development of athletes and a more embodied approach to athlete development is required. The following discussion now grounds the ASR model within developmental psychology, specifically Erik Erikson’s eight stage of human development and James Marcia’s identity statuses.

### *Developmental Psychology*

Erikson’s model of human development argues that human beings are in perpetual conflict with society and with themselves (MacAdams, 2000). It also purports that society often provides niches that act as natural resources for development, however such resources often become our source of conflict and can ultimately distort our human development. My research illustrates that sport often acts as a natural *niche* in society that has the capacity to positively or negatively impact athletes’ lives. When an athlete ranks herself as a ten out of ten in terms of athletic performance and as a two out of ten as a human being, a problem exists that needs to be addressed. All the athletes I interviewed suggested that the problem is, in part, a systemic problem. While LTAD is a commendable attempt to develop a comprehensive framework of athlete development and performance in Canada, it is clear that a substantial refocus is needed to incorporate cognitive, social, and mental dimensions of athletic development.



The ASR model provides a tangible framework for the LTAD to ground the psychosocial development within the physical development of an athlete. The foundation of this integrative model is built upon the stories of some of Canada's top athletes and upon time-tested, scientifically-based insights from developmental theory, specifically Erik Erikson's eight stage model of ego identity development and James Marcia's identity statuses. It should be mentioned that, since the athletes I interviewed spoke about experiences that happened from age six onwards, and since I am using Marcia's theory of identity statuses, I only reference the stages of Erikson's ego identity development model that are relevant to my argument.

*Narrowing: Good or Bad?*

The first phase of the ASR model is the narrowing, the process of focusing our minds and bodies towards certain activities to fit the structures and categories of the world around us. Even though our activities are narrowing, our physical bodies are growing as are our cognitive, mental, and emotional capacities. This dichotomy is the main conflict of Erikson's fourth stage of ego identity development – the industry versus inferiority conflict. In this stage, a child begins systematically learning how to use the tools and assuming the roles of adulthood (MacAdams, 2000, p.564). A child also begins to learn proper social conduct and what it means to be a productive member of society.

This phase is a highly formative developmental period in which a child establishes an internalized standard of goodness and badness. In my study many of the athletes internalized this goodness and badness through their sport experiences, especially when it had to do with success or failure. This can put athletes in a vulnerable position in

successive stages of development, because many of the things learned in childhood shape how we respond in the future (MacAdams, 2000). This is in keeping with my interviewees' emphasis that that learning to enjoy the process should be a priority in the developmental periods represented by both the narrowing and early defining stages of the ASR model.

The three seminal themes identified in this phase: play, fun, and social are further supported by research. It has been perceived that competence and social relationships (specifically parental and peer) are the two most important predictors of sport continuation behavior (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). Research has also found that athletes who remained in sport spoke of their clubs' developmental philosophies, coaches' and parents' open communication, friends' support, and siblings' positive influences, compared to athletes who suffered from early peak performances, limited one-on-one coaching, pressuring parents, lack of peers, and sibling rivalries. (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). In other words, athletes who perceive that sport is fun, inclusive, supportive, and above all a social opportunity, will remain in sport much longer than those that perceive it as forced, restrictive, and too competitive.

### *Defining: Heaven or Hell?*

In the defining phase, my interviewees began to learn the meaning of being an athlete. This phase begins with 'the choice', wherein athletes are forced to choose one sport and subsequently commit their lives to it's pursuit. While some athletes I interviewed saw this choice as their saving grace; others felt it was restrictive and imprisoning. While the LTAD makes it clear that athletes should specialize in

adolescence, the ASR model suggests that this defining phase is fraught with conflict from the very start and, like the narrowing phase, needs to be treated with sensitivity and nuance.

The defining phase is in keeping with Erikson's main conflict in stage five - identity versus role confusion. It suggests that in adolescence we move beyond the safety of childhood and are suddenly exposed to many different experiences and expectations, which often can become incredibly overwhelming and difficult. It is a time when "the relationship between self and society in the development of a healthy identity is best characterized as one of dynamic tension" (McAdams, 2000, p.568).

James Marcia takes Erikson's fifth stage of identity development and expands on it (Bilsker, 1992). His model, which sees adolescence as a period of exploration, experimentation, and commitments, offers a good explanation of what happens if identity development never occurs. In his model, the most developmentally advanced status, what he calls identity achievement, occurs when people go through a period of exploration and experiment, before making well-defined commitments (MacAdams, 2000). These well-defined commitments most often refer to occupational and ideological goals and positions. Comparatively, the two least developed stages in Marcia's model are called foreclosure, which refers to people who remain rooted to childhood-based values, and identity diffusion, where people are uncommitted to any definite direction in their lives (2000). One might mistakenly think an athlete would be an identity achiever, however the ASR model suggests how the athletes in my study remained in the foreclosure stage.

From a young age these athletes learned from their sporting experiences – and subsequently came to believe – that to be a champion, their whole focus had to be sport

with no distractions. Ultimately their identities became entrenched in sport, and they never had the chance to explore or experiment and thus never had the chance to develop their identities. Their coaches served as the authoritative persons in their lives who guided their success. Structural foreclosure is a term that Marcia introduces to refer to those people who remain entrenched in foreclosure (Bilsker, 1992). As he explains, these individuals tend not to question authority, even if the authority asks them to do things that seem wrong, for risk of uncertainty in their success (MacAdams, 2000). As a result, many of the ideology, beliefs, and values from childhood are transported into adulthood intact and unsullied.

The narrowing and defining phases in the ASR model are pivotal years in an athlete's identity formation. The athletes I interviewed suggested that they received little to no encouragement to explore, experiment, or discover their identities outside of sport. However, within the proposed ASR model, the athletes I interviewed suggest an integrative approach that encourages the pursuit of excellence alongside the pursuit of identity. They suggested that sport would benefit from adopting an ASR perspective because it could serve as an outlet for athletes to explore and pursue different passions they have outside of sport.

Many of the athletes I interviewed wished they had been encouraged to enjoy the process of being an athlete versus always focusing on winning. As one athlete suggests,

*“If you can learn to enjoy the process, learn to enjoy your sport and to be happy, if you can learn that early on, you're in a much better position to keep your career longer, to go longer in sport, but also to set yourself up for the rest of life.”*

Many of these athletes attributed the positive role models they had growing up, who helped them to realize the value of being both a good athlete and a socially responsible person. These role models included parents, siblings, friends, and Canadian icons like Silken Lauman and Terry Fox. Conversely, many of them felt that sport often focuses too much on winning which becomes detrimental to performance. As one athlete explains,

*“I think when there is pressure to perform we lose creativity, we lose the ability to try new things. Athletes excel when they can be creative and push themselves. Not have somebody else push them.”*

This further emphasizes the importance of process-orientation. An athlete who understands what they are doing and is motivated as an athlete and a socially responsible human being is going to be much stronger than an athlete who is a lost human being.

#### *Opening and Redefining: Finding Your True Potential*

If sport were truly to integrate the defining and opening phase, as seen in the proposed ASR model, the results of my interviews suggest that we would have more athletes thriving and realizing their true potential, which could incidentally result in more winning athletes. However, my data also indicates that if sport development remains focused purely on performance it will continue to harm athletes and turn people away, as also indicated by the 2008 True Sport Report (CCES).

The final stage of the ASR model is the process of identifying one's role and responsibilities as an athlete outside of simply competing and training. As can be argued, this is similar to the final stages of Erikson's identity development, defined by the

conflict between generativity versus stagnation. A generative adult is one that acts on “the desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (MacAdams, 2000, p.577). MacAdams (2000) presents generativity as a personal commitment (which itself is a product of demand, desire, concern, and belief) to act and to help provide for the future generations. Reid (2002) argues that this tension is a natural process of our intellectual maturity when we become acutely aware of our finitude, stare death in the face, and begin to soul search about purpose and meaning.

My results show how the LTAD could benefit from integrating opportunities within its model for athletes to explore and experiment with their identities, especially as they mature. Rather than seeing such exploration and experimentation as a distraction from performance, sport should see it as a way to help athletes achieve balance in life and sport. In his book, *Finding Your Potential*, Terry Orlick identifies two different states of being, or as he puts it “zones.” In the gold zone, we are freed to excel in our performance, whereas in the green zone, we are freed to excel at living the rest of our life. In other words, Orlick sees human potential as the intricate dance between performance and the rest of life. As he puts it:

“The balance of green and gold allows us to become the best we can be in our work or performance domain while continuing to bring purity, joyfulness, and harmony to the rest of our life. If we focus only on gold, at the very best we are living only half a life. To live fully we must respect and embrace both halves of life.” (Orlick, 1998, xiii)

One of the athletes I interviewed brought Orlick’s model to my attention, stating that it offered her a vision for which to strive. But as the ASR model illustrates and Marcia’s model further supports, sport is actually stifling athletes’ development by not allowing them to explore their green zones. In the beginning, athletes are totally

engrossed in sport, but as they age and mature they will eventually outgrow this adolescent obsession and seek ways to explore and experiment with their identities.

Opening, the final stage of the ASR model, explicates a deep desire to know oneself and one's purpose in life. The athletes I interviewed spoke about the fact that, once they found a better balance in life, they were able to embody their true potential. Rather than wasting energy fighting the growing interest in social responsible action among its athletes, the Canadian sport community would do well to harness this energy and work with athletes to create a stronger value-based sport system. It doesn't make sense to have Canadian elite athletes fighting for the rights of children in foreign countries, when they are not encouraged to do the same within their own borders. With sport participation on the decline and obesity on the rise, sport needs strong ambassadors. And who better to inspire a country than its best athletes?

It has been shown that the ASR model is grounded in Erikson's and Marcia's models of identity development, and follows the natural process of human development. As the athletes suggest, ASR encourages reflection and a high degree of awareness. Many of the athletes in this study suggested that the opening experience helped them to become aware of their role and responsibilities in society. This opening is what led them to take action and to become engaged in social responsibility. By promoting a culture of self-reflection and awareness, more athletes might realize their impact and influence on society, therefore making positive choices and changing potentially destructive behavior.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of the athletes whom I interviewed show that athlete social responsibility is a process of identifying one's role and responsibilities beyond competing and training. Athlete social responsibility (ASR) is the process of developing a strong sense of responsible citizenship in sport. Generally, it is not until adulthood that social responsibility is well understood, but my interviewees emphasized that foundations can be laid in earlier developmental stages. Childhood and adolescence are marked by a tendency to conform due to the security to be found in allegiances and loyalty. However, as my interviewees matured, they underwent a period of enlightenment, characterized by the recognition of their humanity. Having gone through this maturation, these athletes were no longer satisfied with just doing sport and sought external pursuits to satisfy their growing social conscience. Just as social responsibility is manifested in behavior, it also grows through behavior, and my interviewees' sense of social responsibility further grew through engaging in extra-sport activities.

Society is demanding that social institutions, such as sport, demonstrate how they can contribute to societal goods and services. Despite Canadian sport's slow reaction in adapting to this changing societal climate, individual athletes have responded and are showing an increased desire to use their voices to make a difference. They believe that they can help contribute to a better world. These factors are leading them towards social action.

The long-term athlete development model (LTAD) has made important strides in addressing the shortcomings and improving the efficacy of the Canadian sport system. However, the LTAD is an ever-evolving model that must adapt to changing contexts. Sport, like other social institutions, needs to demonstrate that it is accountable,



responsible, and worthwhile in order to ensure its place in society (Zeigler, 2007). We, as a society, invest in education because we believe it confers a societal good because it develops responsible citizens. So too, if sport is to continue to receive societal support, it must show that it is a societal good and not just another form of entertainment and commerce. The LTAD would benefit from incorporating the concept of athlete social responsibility within its framework, to aid athletes not only in developing a sense of their role and responsibility in society, but a sense of themselves as human beings.

## Chapter 4

# TIPPING THE SYSTEM: THE COMPLEXITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE CANADIAN SPORT SYSTEM

### Introduction

On January 22, 2009, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that the international humanitarian organization, Right to Play, would not be welcome in the Olympic Village, or in any other Olympic venue, during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games (Canadian press). While the president of Right to Play told Canadian Press that the IOC gave him no reason for the exclusion, it was later leaked that the reason had to do with conflicting car sponsorships (Starkman, Globe and Mail, 2009). Right to Play, which started as a part of the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics, has grown into an international development organization advocating on behalf of every child's right to play ([righttoplay.com](http://righttoplay.com)). The controversial decision to ban Right to Play from the Olympic Games sends conflicting messages to society about the principles of sport.

Pierre de Coubertin established the modern Olympic Games in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an effort to reverse the spiritual and moral decline he, and others, attributed to the industrial revolution (Beamish & Ritchie, 2004). He envisioned the Games to be a character-building, educationally-orientated program, one that wasn't corrupted by commercialism and an overly competitive zeal. However, as the Olympics grew and began to receive ever-increasing commercial and media attention, countries and corporations began to see the podium as a vehicle for propaganda (Zirin, 2005). The recent car sponsorship controversy surrounding Right to Play suggests that, contrary to

Coubertin's founding intentions, the Olympics has continued to allow propaganda and competitive zeal to override moral principle.

In a the prominent Canadian newspaper, *Globe and Mail*, the president of the Commonwealth Games Canada Foundation, George Heller (2008), wrote that amateur sport is “long on passion, short on vision, and adversarial in its dealings.” As a result, he argued, amateur sport is failing to convince Canadians of its public benefits. In doing so, it has sacrificed potential financial gains. Heller emphasized that the future success of the Canadian amateur sport system (hereafter ‘Canadian sport’) hinges upon athletes and coaches who can “make amateur sport real and personal by telling their stories, building pride, and selling the benefits [of sport for society].” With the eyes of the world upon Canada over the next year and with the promise of long-lasting Olympic legacies, it is now imperative that Canadian sport consolidate, collaborate, and communicate in order to make positive changes for the future (Heller, 2008)

While it is easy to write about change, the process of institutional change is complex. Those institutions that have persevered over decadal time-frames, have become weathered and shaped by their own unique histories. They have also become entrenched in society and an integral part of many peoples' lives. As institutions accumulate and steward increasing amounts of resources, they form increasingly rigid bureaucratic structures and social norms (Westley, et al., 2007). Over time, institutions become resistant to change, and while the individuals who depend upon them may advocate change, they are reticent to accept the potential turmoil and “dis-organization” that such change inevitably entails. So our institutions chug along, increasingly unable to respond

effectively to the needs of their constituencies, but bound by the ongoing needs of these constituencies to increasingly dysfunctional patterns of operation.

A 2008 Canadian report highlights, that while people believe sport should play a fundamental role in building social capital in Canada, fewer than one in five Canadians actually believe that it is performing this task (CCES, 2008). Some have argued this gap is because Canadian sport is failing to adapt and grow in today's increasingly ethically-conscience nation (Zeigler, 2007). Sport, like other social institutions, is confronted with the need to demonstrate to society that it is worthwhile, accountable, and responsible. Research is urgently needed that offers practitioners tangible solutions as they seek to serve in the ethically conscious climate of today's world.

Through fourteen in-depth interviews with some of Canada's top athletes, this study sought to understand the movement of athlete social responsibility and explore ways this movement could help Canadian sport create a more value-based sport system. Chapter 3 explored the individual process and context of athlete social responsibility and grounded it in developmental psychology. This chapter seeks to explore athlete social responsibility (ASR) within an organizational framework in order to understand it from a broader systems perspective. To meet the above objective, this study was based on the following objectives: 1) to explain how ASR emerged in the current Canadian sport context using social innovation and diffusions of innovation theoretical paradigms and 2) to explain the potential opportunities it offers sport leaders, administrators, and coaches for achieving broader system change.

*Collapse and Renewal*

One core area of research in modern sociology that continues to fuel critical theory, and post-modern theory, is the topic of social and individual disintegration, known as psychosocial fragmentation. Psychosocial fragmentation is built upon the following three assumptions: 1) that we are in a period of big social change, 2) that changes are interpreted in terms of loss, and 3) such a loss is considered in terms of an interrelated social and psychological impact (Adams, 2007).

One of the seminal works on psychosocial fragmentation is Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone* (2000). While Putnam's focus is American civil society, the issues that he raises have been accepted as global. Between 1960 and 1990, Putnam identified a steep decline in civic involvement and political activity that had a dramatic impact on the social capital of the nation. Putnam defines social capital as the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p.19). Putnam attributes the decline in social capital to an unusually civic generation followed by a number of significantly less civically inclined generations.

A number of studies have explored the role of social capital in sport. In 2003, Jarvie Grant published a study about the Scottish assumption that sport is the basis for communitarianism. Her research demonstrated that, although "it is unrealistic to expect sport to be totally responsible for sustaining a sense of community or citizenship or even reinforce notions of social capital" (p.152), sport can make a valuable contribution to society and civic engagement. In another study, H. Thomas R. Persson (2008) argued that due to increased pressure on Danish sport associations to focus on health and other

societal issues, (corporate) social responsibility could offer a potential solution for Danish state sport policy and a way of building social capital.

Some have argued that psychosocial fragmentation and social capital decline have led to an increase in research on reflexivity, which eventually gave rise to the post-colonial perspective (Adams, 2007). Reflexivity is defined as “the act of an individual subject directing awareness towards itself; reflecting upon its own practices, preferences, and even the process of reflection itself” (Adams, 2007, p.43). The concept of reflexivity gained interest through Giddens (1991) book, *Modernity and Self Identity*, which presented a vision of an emerging process of identity in the global context. Reflexivity forms the foundations for the post-colonial movement wherein scholars seek to “examine, understand, and ultimately undo the historical structures that created, maintain, and continue to reproduce the oppression of the colonial experience” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p.343). Post-colonialism invites a unique consciousness about place and power, which encourages one to be reflective of the hegemonic structures in their lives and in the world.

Consider now the argument that has been presented. Psychosocial fragmentation led to a certain kind of collapse in our society. In response to that collapse, a renewed focus on change is emerging that evokes renewed reflexivity and an ever-deepening consciousness of selfhood within society. A person’s sense of self is not created entirely by culture and context, rather she/he gives meaning to the self by being selective in her/his decisions, priorities, and life circumstances. However, this brings new doubts, risks, and uncertainty.

*The Paradox of Agency*

Given the nature of our institutions, complexity science offers a way researchers can understand and explore large systemic change. Complexity science is a way of understanding the patterns of relationships within systems by providing language, frameworks, and theories to describe how systems work (Zimmerman, et al., 1998). The process of science and its disciplines are often too narrowly focused on understanding the intricacies of specific parts of the system. Complexity science suggests that many systems are defined by properties that emerge through the inter-workings of these various parts. These key system properties cannot be understood through study of the parts in isolation, but only through studying the relationship between the parts. Put another way, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Social innovation is an interdisciplinary field of research that is emerging under the complexity science umbrella. Westley (2008) defines social innovation as “an initiative, product, process or program that profoundly changes the basic routines, resources, authority flows or beliefs of any social system. This paradigm argues that social systems are complex and to survive they must be ever-evolving to adjust to the emerging changes within the system. At the heart of social innovation is the idea that human beings are highly dependent on each other for the making and preservation of the world (Westley, 2008). This has led to what she calls the *paradox of agency*—while we are dependent on the social systems we have created, we are also responsible for the ongoing maintenance of these systems and capable of altering them

Social innovation is increasingly being applied to address all manner of complex problems facing Canada and the world (Westley, 2008). With carbon emissions rising

and fossil fuel supplies waning, obesity epidemics and food shortages, economic crashes and flu pandemics, there is a growing need to understand and address the overlapping drivers and consequences of these disparate crises. Social innovation suggests that for change to happen “agency must coincide with opportunity” (Westley, 2008). In other words, for a phenomenon like athlete social responsibility (ASR) to be adopted, the bigger system must recognize a need and demand for that innovation within the greater system. In this study, I integrate the insights of some of Canada’s top elite athletes through the social innovation approach to help explain how the phenomenon of ASR, introduced in Chapter 3, can lead Canadian sport through the moral and societal crisis it currently faces.

## Results

While the athletes I interviewed shared their own experiences, both within and outside of sport, they were also very reflective of Canadian sport and concerned for its future.

*“In the long term what are we trying to do? We want our athletes to win Olympic gold medals, but how many of them are actually going to win? Maybe 2 in this generation of swimmers, maybe 3 are going to stand on the podium in 2012. But, what about the other swimmers? All those thousands of kids who go through the pools in Canada. How do we want to create them? How do we want them to leave their mark or be affected by sport?”*

This athlete, and a number of the other athletes, spoke about the power of sport and how sport needs to see its role as much larger than just focusing on podiums. The fundamental underlying question to their reflections seemed to be – does Canadian sport want to continue to create “*selfish, self-centered, self-absorbed athletes*”, or does it want to create socially aware and responsible athletes? Through qualitative analysis of



interview data, three dimensions arose that describe how the barriers and opportunities described by athletes have the potential to influence systemic change within Canadian sport: leadership, communication, and organization.

### *Leadership*

#### Barriers

Many of the athletes I interviewed felt that sport leadership is the biggest barrier to encouraging athletes to engage in ASR. One athlete I interviewed said decisively that social responsibility is not encouraged because it is “*not what sport is about, it isn't ingrained in the culture*”. Many of the athletes shared their frustrations with Canadian sport's bureaucracy and its lack of understanding of the benefits of the ASR activities.

*“A lot of amateur athletes want to [give back] but they just don't have the voice to do it—which is sad, because in my opinion, a lot of amateur athletes I've met are working as hard if not harder than professional athletes.”*

Another athlete I interviewed suggested that sport leaders do little to model social responsibility behavior.

*“The government puts so much money into sport, but they don't utilize what they fund. Essentially everything is run like a business and those in leadership positions closely guard their interests, positions, and status. I don't have any faith in the system. I don't have faith that [leaders within] the system believe in or want to improve it. I just don't think people really care unless it's going to make them look good.”*

In fact some athletes told stories about how their national sport organizations discouraged athletes from getting involved and giving back.

*“When I went to [president of NGO] I told him what I was doing and how it would be good to our [NGO's] image and how we could be the first team to go carbon neutral and the benefits in terms of exposure. He was really resistant and*

*even discouraged me from partaking...He definitely didn't help advance the cause. In fact, he was really putting up road blocks."*

### Opportunities

The athletes I interviewed spoke about the need for ASR leadership within Canadian sport. These leaders could be instrumental in helping athletes navigate the system and encouraging others to get involved.

*"I think the power is through our leaders of today, of the people in sport like Beckie Scott, Clara Hughes—you know, people like that who have done it, who have inspired. They inspired me, you know. I think that is where the power is, when you know these people and then they go out and do something special. There's an incredible power in that."*

Mentorship was identified as an integral part of ASR leadership. The athletes I interviewed suggested that mentorship can be a powerful way to diffuse a message and model behavior.

*"Whether it is at the provincial level or the national level, having mentorship is key... [it would be helpful if] sport centers hand out information to athletes so that they know what options are out there."*

Some of the athletes I interviewed spoke about having strong mentors outside of sport, but many also spoke about powerful mentors within sport. They shared stories of how they had learned from positive role models. This in turn inspired them to be positive role models themselves.

*"When I was in grade 9, Mark Tutsbury came to speak at a soccer tournament that I was in. I knew who he was and hugely admired him. He was so inspirational when he spoke, and I left half in tears. I was so inspired...I also remember that because, if I'm going to speak at events, I always think 'if I can affect people a tenth the amount he affected me that day!'"*

Many interviewees spoke about being unaware of the powerful impact they have on society. Often athletes who do engage in social responsibility activities never see the

tangible difference that they are making in society. One athlete reflected on the fact that athletes who are giving back often don't know if they are, in fact, making a difference.

*“You ask yourself, ‘am I making a real difference?’...but you just need to make one difference, one life, and it will be a huge accomplishment. I now have the chance to make a difference, and so I’ll do everything I can to give back.*

Not only does the concept of ASR have a lot of credibility when coming from one's peers, but it connects athletes and has the potential to develop a greater sense of team both within one's own sport and among Canadian athletes as a whole.

*“Whenever I have an event going on, I am always calling my athlete friends to get involved. I definitely try to get more [people] involved, I think it helps with crew unity, because I think it helps to have another place where we can put our energy together.”*

*“I also think that the great thing it does for athletes is that, athletes always want to meet other athletes, and so you have the chance to meet other athletes. We're so involved with our training programs that it is really hard to meet other Canadian athletes.”*

Lastly, mentorship could play a role in helping athletes navigate society as they adopt ASR activities. One athlete talked about having a key person, a mentor, who helped her tailor her ASR activities and helped her to figure out which causes would best fit her passions.

*“One thing [name of mentor] really stressed was to find something that really means something to you and do as much as you can with that charity because you'll get so much more fulfillment with one or two organizations that you will with doing a little bit with twenty organizations.”*

This athlete went on to express concern for other athletes who don't have such a mentor. Her fear was that they don't know what they are getting themselves into and have a fifty percent chance of having either a positive or a negative experience.

*“I'm at the point where I can pick and choose and I know what events are good and what events are going to turn out to be 14 hours on your feet standing in the*

*cold. I think initially, when an athlete gets to the elite level, they don't know that. They don't know the ins and out."*

Development of an ASR mentorship program within Canadian sport would/could help inspire more athletes to engage in ASR, promote positive role modeling in sport, and help promote a value-based sport system.

### *Communication*

#### Barriers

The athletes I interviewed identified communication, or lack thereof, as the second major barrier to ASR. As one athlete suggested, *"maybe they [Canadian sport] just don't know how it would benefit them."* Another athlete further illustrated this point when he said:

*"I think at the national team level they are concerned with having their athletes doing too much extracurricular stuff. So they don't really encourage this sort of thing, which is unfortunate. For me, it was really powerful in terms of how it helped me perform better. I think that is what they need to realize. If you can give an athlete a greater purpose, it can motivate them and inspire them to be even better."*

Some athletes suggested that, often, the sport culture communicates the notion that only the most successful athletes can give back and make a difference.

*"Unfortunately depending on your results you are encouraged to give back or not... but the fact is that the journeys and lessons are the same—everybody at Pacificsport has a story that needs to be told."*

Another athlete felt that athletes at all levels of the sport system have the ability to communicate the benefit of sport and are in positions to be role models.

*"Whether you competed at the Olympics, you were part of team Canada, or you were part of your provincial team, [you are in a place] that kids aspire to get to. Kids look up to [these athletes] and revere them and want to listen about how*

*they got there and what they did. It is then that you can get positive messages across.”*

Another athlete pointed to a lack of communication among athletes as to what social responsibility actually entails.

*“A lot of athletes say they don’t have money, but I tell them that time is invaluable. You can do a lot without money...I think that we are given a lot, we’re given everything, and you need to appreciate that and you need to understand that it does come at a price.”*

Many of the athletes I interviewed felt that Canadian sport’s overemphasis on winning and performance discourages athletes from engaging in ASR. Many shared that the win-at-all costs attitude leads athletes to believe that any involvement outside of their sport might jeopardize their performance. As one athlete said, *“I think the one thing that people get concerned about is giving energy and time or anything they feel is going to be detrimental to their performance on a day-to-day basis.”* However, as another athlete explained, lack of time and energy are weak excuses for not engaging in ASR.

*“I think people don’t really know what the time commitment is, and I think that part of that is coaches telling them they don’t have time, managers and agents getting into it and saying you don’t have time. The federations telling you that you don’t have time. I mean, I always wanted more sleep, but going to some kind of event on a Sunday afternoon or talking to a class one day a month after you do your morning practice is not going to kill you. That fact is, you are probably going to get so much out of it. Those kids are going to inspire you. You’re probably going to go back to practice that night and swim great.”*

### Opportunities

As the athletes I interviewed indicated, communication could play a critical role in promoting ASR in Canadian sport. One athlete’s statement reveals a huge untapped gap in Canadian sport communications.

*“For two weeks every two years during the Olympics, people are captivated by sport in this country. And I feel like that’s been [Canadian sport’s] main struggle*

*for years now. How does it make the magic last a little longer? ... How do we get Canadians to know about athletes outside of just the Olympics? I feel like their roles can only grow through giving back to the communities and inspiring more people to get involved in sport and lead healthier lives.”*

This athlete, and many of the other athletes I talked with, believed that Canadian sport could do itself a favor by encouraging and empowering all athletes, at all different levels, to adopt ASR and to share their stories in order to inspire others. They suggested that sport has yet to realize the power of ASR and how it could help the reputation of both athletes and sport in society.

*“I definitely think acts of social responsibility would help the way the public views athletes, which would in turn promote healthier lifestyles within the country—which is, I think, a huge thing that needs to be taken care of, especially with child obesity and that sort of thing. It would allow athletes to show their other side... It definitely would help public perception, and a larger goal would be to get everybody active. I think that is my ultimate goal, to see how many people I can get going, get active.”*

This athlete went on to point out that ASR would, in fact, help Canadian sport communicate a value-based sport system. He pointed out that athletes engaged in ASR could help communicate the benefits of sport and help get more people active.

*“To get people started in sports, it needs to be a fun learning environment that everyone can take part in. I think programs such as Right to Play play an essential part in getting people started... The more people who are doing sport, the more top athletes there will be, which would translate into more medals, which would translate into more people wanting to be like them.”*

Another athlete emphasized that social responsibility could play an important role in educating society about the Paralympics. This athlete, who had been born with a disability, shared that even though he participated in organized sports growing up, it wasn't until he saw the Paralympics games on television that he knew such a thing existed.

*“For us [the Paralympics], it is a lack of knowing about it and lack of integration....we need to give coaches a better idea of what the Paralympics are because most of the coaches aren’t prepared to deal with athletes with a disability.”*

Many of the athletes mentioned the role of communication with regard to educating younger athletes about their role in society. As one athlete indicated, while the system is built upon a performance-centered approach, the system would benefit from expanding its focus to include social dimensions.

*“A lot of [sport] organizations are performance centered because they have to be. When their athletes get results, they get more funding and they get more attention and they get more potential sponsors. They are really driven by results most of the time. Yet, they could really do with broadening their horizons and opening up the doors to their athletes to give back and make more of a contribution and be involved with something bigger than themselves. Sport can be an all encompassing arena. There is a lot of opportunity for athletes to get involved and make a difference.”*

Other athletes pointed to obvious ways ASR could be instrumental in addressing bigger social issues.

*“Why doesn’t our government use athletes more to motivate the public to be active and to try—maybe people wouldn’t be as fat. The government puts so much money into sport and then they don’t even utilize what they fund.”*

A number of interviewees spoke about sport as their savior. They shared how sport had given them a focus in life, how it had kept them out of trouble, and how it had helped them to focus in school. For instance, one athlete shared the following.

*“If it wasn’t for sport I have no idea of what I’d be doing. Sport has given me the confidence and the opportunity to travel the world and basically opens up so many doors for the rest of my life. I’m indebted to sport. I think that sport saved me. I probably would’ve been into drugs. I have no idea what I would’ve done. I wasn’t motivated in school until I got into sport.”*

However, as the ASR model in Chapter 2 indicates, as athletes mature they seek motivations beyond just winning. In other words, if ASR were adopted by Canadian

sport, it would offer mature athletes opportunities to remain engaged while passing their passion on to younger athletes. My interviewees were adamant that Canadian sport needs to understand that the role of its athletes extends beyond performance; athletes can play a pivotal role in humanizing sport and communicating positive social change.

### *Organization*

#### Barriers

Many of the athletes I interviewed identified organization as the third major barrier to ASR. They felt that, even with leaders communicating about the importance of ASR, the lack of ASR-specific programs would prevent a majority of athletes from actually engaging. As one athlete said *“If the program had been there already, I would have become involved earlier. No questions.”*

One of my interviewees’ main concerns was that, without a structured system of ASR in Canada, athletes are approaching it blindly, which could be harmful to performance. As one athlete indicated *“an athlete standing alone doesn’t always know what to be involved in or how to get involved, but they’re going to get involved anyways.”* In other words, ASR will continue to grow, whether sport likes it or not. A structured ASR program could help athletes make more informed choices and help athletes to find causes that would best suit their interests and passions.

#### Opportunities

A number of my interviewees offered ideas of about how to facilitate this kind of structured ASR system within Canadian sport. *“There’s a lot that can be done. It can be done at all levels.”*



Some of the athletes I interviewed referred to the idea of planting a seed and indicated that they wished such a seed had been planted in their own development. Many of the athletes described the process of becoming engaged in social responsibility activities as a multistage process. For example, first they heard about it, then they saw someone doing it, then they tried it, and finally, they discovered that a whole new world had opened up. One athlete spoke about how this process can start with a simple suggestion and eventually move towards a normative set of shared cultural values.

*“It is hard to demand an athlete to look at the big picture, but on the other hand you can still suggest it...I think if we start suggesting to athletes in Canada that they are part of the sport culture in our country and if we [Canadian sports] get to a place where we can agree upon it... agree that one’s contribution to sport is important and leaving a footprint long after a race is finished is important and agree that part of developing happy athletes is helping them to realize that it is the journey and not the destination...only then can it be made into a rule rather than a suggestion. ”*

While some athletes advocated for a suggestive approach, some athletes spoke about a more formal institutional approach that enforced social expectations on top of performance expectations.

*“Equipe Quebec runs a school program, but the thing is you don’t get paid for that school program. I do at least 20 presentations a year with that program, and I still only get \$6000, the same as someone who does no presentations. When you think about it there are approximately 500 athletes receiving that extra funding and if you do at least 1-2 presentations a year all over Quebec you would be able to fill all the requests [schools might have] for a year.”*

*“I think setting up school programs and having ways that athletes can easily access these programs and even be encouraged to or make it part of their national team contracts [is a good idea]. To get carding [referring to national team benefits], their primary objective is to try and win medals, but they also have to do this other stuff as well.”*

Some suggested creating a central organization or delegating a current organization with the task of helping facilitate ASR in Canada.

*“Ideally if you had a hub organization that every single charity organization had to go to and would filter out the ones that could best utilize athletes, and every single athlete had to do ten events but would limit it at ten. Something like that would be great. If there was a maximum and minimum then some athlete wouldn’t risk overextending themselves and it would give the opportunity to other athletes.”*

Athletes also spoke about the need for ASR tools and resources, and an easy way to share and swap experiences.

*“Ideally, I would put together a template with suggestions for how you could help within a community, how you could help nationally, how you could help internationally. Give them the tools to do that and give them the resources, as in education, not money. Maybe, get athletes together who are giving back so that they can share what they’ve done... I just think that athletes need to know what things they can do.”*

One of the athletes I interviewed summarized it well when she said:

*“Whether it is at the provincial level or the national level, having mentorship and having sport centers handing out information to athletes so that they know what options are out there is important. It’s also about awareness, maybe its connecting sport with various charities, contacting those various charities, and then asking how can athletes get involved.”*

**Discussion**

*Social Innovation and Sport*

My results reveal barriers and opportunities to change within the following three dimensions: leadership, communication, and organization. Each of these dimensions

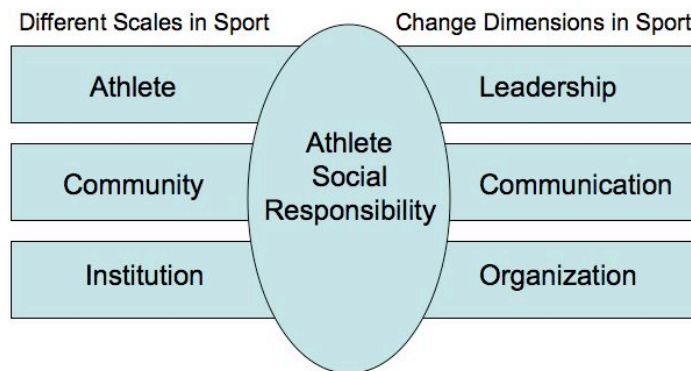


Figure 1. *The different scales in sport as they refer to the change dimensions in this study*

could have a profound impact on ASR as it relates to all scales within sport (Figure 1). The following discussion will outline how, to date, sport has approached the dimensions with a general thinking approach but, as I will argue, what is needed is a social innovation approach, supported by the well-established fields of resilience and diffusion of innovation, to promote tangible change at all levels of the system.

### *Leadership: Social Entrepreneurs in Sport*

My interview data illustrates that ASR is a growing phenomenon driven by athletes with little support from Canadian sport. The early adopters of ASR are what social innovation literature call *social entrepreneurs* (Westley, 2008). *Social entrepreneurs* are defined as individuals who initiate or create innovative programs, products, or processes and who bring that innovation to fruition (Westley, 2008). Interviews indicate that the main barriers to ASR are institutional in nature. They show that social responsibility is not currently part of the sport culture. Rather, within Canadian sport there is an overall lack of awareness of, and mistrust for, social responsibility. While a few independent organizations are supporting socially responsible activities, sport as an institution has done little to encourage this growing movement.

Some sports sociologists argue that ASR has existed for years. There have always been athletes advocating on behalf of athletes and social issues (Wolfe & Kaufman, 2009; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). It is true that, between the 1980's and early the 1990's, athletes, inspired by human rights legislation, increasingly asserted their rights as both human beings and high performance athletes (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). Then, in 1988, following the Ben Johnson doping scandal, athletes expressed frustration about how the process of decision-making often did not include athletes. As part of this reaction, a group of

Canadian athletes came together in 1992 to form the first ever global independent athletes association, the Canadian Athletes Association, which later became AthletesCAN.

The Canadian Athletes Association advocated for increased funding, formalized athlete representation and leadership processes, and increased education about the roles of athlete leaders, and ultimately worked to create programs to support the issues and rights of athletes (acan.ca). In an interview, Ann Peel, one of the organization's founding athletes, said "our original vision was quite a radical one going from nothing to creating something different" (acan.ca). Within the social innovation framework, this group of radical thinking athletes is called the *institutional entrepreneurs* (Westley, 2008).

*Institutional entrepreneurs* are defined as individuals who actively seek to change the broader system through changing the political, economic, legal, or cultural institutions, in order to allow innovation to prosper. These athletes felt frustrated by the lack of change within the institution and took action to change it. They saw the need to separate themselves from the institution of Canadian sport in order to stand together as a collective, independent voice. As I will later argue, this original group of institutional entrepreneurs played a different role in bringing about systemic change than did the athletes in this study. The first group demonstrated radical leadership in order to politically distance themselves from the system. This second group is demonstrating innovative leadership as it attempts to diffuse the idea of ASR into society.

Diffusion of innovation theory argues that one of the strongest methods of seeding an innovation in a social system is to have influential people model or talk about the innovation to potential adopters (Singhal & Dearing, 2006). The athletes I interviewed

corroborated this idea in suggesting that mentorship could play an influential role in promoting ASR within Canadian sport.

*Communication: Diffusion of Innovations*

Diffusion is defined as “a social process by which an innovation is communicated over time among the members of a communication network or within a social sector” (Singhal & Dearing, 2006, p.33). While the traditional approach to diffusion sees receivers as passive adopters, newer approaches position receivers as active participants in the process of innovation adoption. My interview data supports this latter view—athletes are actively framing ASR. As discussed in Chapter 2, they are doing this, not only through their influential roles in society, but also through passion and morality, two elements that accelerate and extend diffusion (Green, 2004).

The athletes I interviewed offered many tangible ways ASR could promote positive change within sport. For example, athletes talked about ASR as a bridge between sport and important societal issues such as health, education, and crime. While sport claims it bridges all three (CCES, 2008), athletes could help communicate the legitimacy of these statements. Knowledge is often communicated via one-way communication, however diffusion of innovations suggests that informal two-way communication dialogue is a much more powerful communication medium (Singhal & Dearing, 2006). Thus, having athletes dialoguing about their experiences and sharing their stories, for instance how sport saved one of my interviewees from drugs and helped him get onto the honor role, is a powerful communication vehicle for social change.

Some argue that taking an evolutionary perspective is important in order to see how the opportunity for innovation is made possible by its context (Singhal & Dearing,

2006). Since the athletes I interviewed neglected to make any mention of the social context outside of sport, other examples were taken into consideration. There is evidence of a reawakening of social consciousness around the world, from famous musicians like Bono and Bob Geldolf, to young philanthropists like Craig Kielburger, who at age twelve started Free the Children, which has now become the world's largest network of children helping children through education ([freethechildren.com](http://freethechildren.com)). One study that looked at the similarities between social innovators, found that their most notable quality was that they trusted their intuition and learned through action (Bornstein, 2004). It is arguable that the current context in which ASR is taking place is supporting its further development.

*Organization: Applying Systems Thinking*

The athletes I interviewed provided many tangible ideas for how Canadian sport could incorporate ASR, such as providing ASR with tools and resources, creating an ASR hub, and implementing social expectations on top of performance expectations. While these are all tangible ideas, they are only band-aid solutions to a larger problem in sport. As I will argue, resilience theory provides a good foundation for explaining the institutional crisis facing sport.

Resilience theory, which derived from ecological systems and later was transferred to social systems, suggests that resilience is the key property of healthy systems (Westley & al., 2007). Resilience “is the capacity to experience massive change and still maintain the integrity of the original” (2007, p.65). Healthy systems allow the continuous and simultaneous flow between change and stability in what has been called

the adaptive cycle (Westley & al., 2007). The adaptive cycle within resilience theory contains four stages: release, reorganization, exploitation, and conservation.

Release refers to the period after a phase of growth and after a time in which that growth is conserved. Forest fires are a common ecological example which show that, while fires “destroy existing structures, they also release trapped resources and nutrients for new life” (Westley & al., 2007, p.67). After a release, there is a time of reorganization in which new opportunities arise. After a time, one idea is chosen from the rest and the real work begins in making this idea come to fruition.

The adaptive cycle suggests that resilient systems go through cycles of collapse and renewal while maintaining their integrity. While people often try to avoid change, fearing the upheaval it brings, it is humans that dampen the dynamic variability of natural systems. Trying to prevent this natural cycle leads to a trap and makes the fall “longer and harder” (Wesley & al., 2007, p.69). Two critical points have been identified in the adaptive cycle at which systems run the risk of getting trapped. The rigidity trap happens between the conservation and release stages, and the poverty trap occurs between the reorganization and exploitation stages. These traps are particularly pertinent to social systems, which have tended to embrace stability and reject change. It is extremely difficult for systems to let go of what they have been doing for years, especially if they have achieved a high degree of success.

Arguably within resilience theory, Canadian sport is suffering from the rigidity trap. Over the last century, the Canadian sport system has experienced exponential growth and has become an elaborate system with many different national, provincial, and regional associations. To date there are 33,650 sport and recreation organizations in

Canada, and 71% of them are local (CCES, 2008). With such an elaborate system, one might be led to believe that sport is prospering. But the numbers suggest otherwise. People within education claim it helps develop world-class citizens who make a difference, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. And the numbers support this claim showing a positive increase in university and college enrollment in Canada over the last ten years ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Compare this to the 2008 True Sport Report which claims sport to be a societal benefit, but sport participation in Canada is declining (Active Healthy Kids, 2008).

While it has been argued that Canadian sport is stuck in the rigidity trap, athletes have broken free and entered into their own adaptive cycle. In resilience, such cascading cross-scale dynamics, for instance from the individual to the institution and back again, are called panarchies. Resilience theory argues that, to achieve impact and sustainability, it is important to have a variety of actors that work together or independently of one another at different scales (Westley, 2008). Earlier, it was argued that the athletes interviewed in this study are part of the group called *social entrepreneurs*, the individuals who are driving ASR, whereas the athletes who in the early 1990's actively sought to change the broader system through political action were the *institutional entrepreneurs*. Both are key change agents and will help lead sport into the future.

### **Conclusion**

Sport has become an established institution within Canada, but over the last century has lost its resilience and is now more resistant to change. The True Sport Report highlights key ways that different stakeholders could play a part in helping to promote the



change society wants to see in sport. The challenge of Canadian sport is to take these recommendations and put them into action. My research shows that there is a movement of athletes engaging in socially responsible activities. However, analyses of interviews with these athletes highlight key ways in which Canadian sport must change if it is to support the ASR movement.

Today, more organizations are espousing the values of change and flexibility within their core values and vision statements (Cheney, et al., 2004). If sport hopes to compete with other societal sectors, it will have to do the same. However, Canadians involved with the sport system must accept that, when we pursue change, we lose stability, control, and permanence. It has also been shown that a top-down approach to change is often unsuccessful, whereas a bottom-up approach to change is much more successful (Cheney, et al., 2004). ASR is a bottom-up approach to change. I have demonstrated that ASR is emerging as an athlete-driven concept and has broad system implications. ASR provides a real opportunity for Canadian sport to escape from its current trap.

## **Chapter 5**

### **A Narrative Perspective: My Story**

#### **Research and Story Value**

What is research? In many ways, I think this simple question plagued me throughout my Masters Degree and throughout most of my research project. I grew up believing that research was something that had to be tested beyond reasonable doubt, had to have a control sample, and had to use big words at least ten letters long. Then one day, at my request, I sat down with Arvind Singhal, a visiting professor at Royal Roads University, to explain the research project and the struggles I was having at integrating my initial findings with where I wanted to take the project. After explaining my dilemma he asked me a simple question – “How does it relate to your own story?” What he was essentially asking me to do was relate the research to my own story as an athlete. I found myself thinking, “Is that allowed - can I do that?” It went against everything I knew about ‘how’ to do research. This was my awakening.

For the first time in my life I came to understand research. That conversation made me realize that I had been approaching research in completely the wrong way. Suddenly, research went from being something out of Alien II, where I was transported to a foreign world with a different language, to a home where I felt like I could be myself. The change was night and day. Once I allowed myself to relate research to my own experience I gained a much richer understanding of the concept of athlete social responsibility and was able to use that understanding in my interviews and subsequent

analysis. However, I also knew that in doing so, I would need to make it clear how much I was a part of the research itself, but I still wasn't sure how I wanted to do that.

As I started to write my thesis, I still was unclear how I would 'write' myself into the study. Would my thesis, like many studies, include a little piece at the beginning that discussed the role that my experience as an athlete had played in informing me about the concept of athlete social responsibility? It didn't feel like enough. I thought back to Singhal's question and thought about how this project related to my own story. It was part of my story; it was the continuation of the work I had started as an athlete in helping to promote the value of sport to society. It made me think about the nature of stories.

Stories are powerful because they connect people. Through stories, we see ourselves, our friends, our family, and our lives. Oral stories have, for centuries, been ways that societies passed down information about the world, but they have also contained powerful messages about how to live. With the advent of technology, the oral story was lost. Stories are now told in different ways using different media, and in many ways how we tell stories is now just as important as the story itself. As Marshall McLuhan once said, "the medium is the message."

In thinking about storytelling in the context of research, I experienced another 'aha' moment. I realized that research is like storytelling. We use models to explain a phenomenon, theories to frame a story, and research to tell the story. It was in this 'aha' moment that I had my one and only regret in this study. In complying with my early definition of 'research' I had gone along with the conventional way of approaching participants with the promise of anonymity and confidentiality. While I could not break this promise, it made me realize how much it left the story feeling empty. To simply

frame a phenomenon without the human connection of names was to lose the humanness of it. Was there a way to do both? What if I told my story? I could use the stories of the fourteen athletes to create the model, frame it in today's context, and then use my story to humanize it. But in contemplating this idea, I was struck with the Canadian complex—who am I to think that I have earned the right to tell my story, when there are so many amazing stories out there? But, with regard to athlete social responsibility, there aren't that many stories being told. Why? For lack of a storyteller? This thesis not only tries to build tenable theory, but it also tries to build a communication medium in which to share the theory and tell a story.

### **My Experience in Sports**

Adolescence is an important time for exploration, growth, and development. However, in adolescence we move beyond the safety of childhood and are suddenly exposed to many different experiences and expectations, which often can become incredibly overwhelming and difficult. This is my story.

I grew up on in a small French farming community in the Canadian prairies. My parents created an environment that encouraged activity, promoted creativity, and rewarded learning. From incubating chicken eggs in my room to collecting maple syrup in the spring, I developed a strong sense of wonder and curiosity for the world. With an adventurous spirit and high degree of energy, I discovered sport and pursued it with vigor.

My first love was figure skating. I began competing at age eight and by age thirteen was skating approximately twenty hours a week. I hated school, but I loved skating. It was where I felt free to do what I wanted, to skate as fast as I wanted and as

slow as I wanted. School had become a confining and confusing place, whereas sport became a place where I received affirmation and felt that I could be myself.

I poured my heart into figure skating and competed until I was seventeen. I had my fair share of ups and down—from suffering injuries and frozen fingers, to feeling the thrill of mastering a jump and the excitement of choreographing a new program. There, of course, was drama – infidelity, intent to cause harm (I experienced my own “Tanya Harding” story), and judgment. Figure skating has come a long way in the recent years, trying to make the sport more objective. I look back on those years fondly, as I was balancing skating and other sports and extracurricular activities. I still, to this day, love trucking down to the frozen river, lacing up the skates, and making first tracks across the ice.

At age thirteen, I started cycling as a means of cross training in the summer. I liked the idea of a finish line and the fact that it was a male-dominated sport. Little did I know I would spend the better part of the next fifteen years dedicated to cycling. My rise to the top in cycling was quick; in my first year of national competition I finished on the podium in almost every National Championship race. I didn’t know much about bike racing but had developed the leg power and will power to battle with the best in the country through my years of figure skating. I loved cycling at first, the sweat and the success, but somewhere along the line that started to change.

Early on I was told that I had the talent to be a great cyclist someday, and I believed it. I believed it so much that I accepted, and later even came to desire, the negative and harmful feedback that I got from some of my early coaches in cycling. I endured being yelled at, being called fat or pumpkin, and compared to an elephant on a

bike. But worse than yelling and name-calling was being ignored. When I didn't win or succeed I was ignored and even shunned. I was hard enough on myself, but to disappoint others was almost too much to take. It was a time of extreme highs, when I was winning, and extreme lows, when I wasn't winning. All I did was sport, and all I was was sport.

Erik Erikson believed that adolescence was the period in the human life cycle during which the individual must establish a sense of personal identity and avoid the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion (MacAdams, 2000). He believed that identity is a dynamic process and, if not made a priority, can result in alienation and a sense of isolation and confusion. He considered adolescence as a Moratorium, a place to explore, experiment, and commit to an identity. In reflecting upon this process, I feel as though I did commit to an identity, but it was before I really had a chance to explore and experiment, which meant I wasn't committing to my real identity, but one fabricated by the culture of sport. I was so fixated on becoming an athlete that I lost all sense of who I was as a person. I didn't discover my real identity until well into my twenties.

I wish that I had known then what I know now. I wish I could have avoided the alienation of friends, destruction of body image, and diminished self-esteem. It wasn't until I was faced with a debilitating injury in my mid-twenties, that I truly began the journey of understanding myself as a human being. I don't regret or begrudge my experience in sport because there were also many positives. However, I do feel passionate about helping develop a sport system that nurtures an athlete's true potential—both as an athlete and as a human being, rather than as merely winning machines.

### **Connecting My Story and This Study**

The more sport stories we have, “the more potential opportunities and flexibility we may have to live in different and more meaningful ways” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 2). My story, like those of the athletes I interviewed, has continued to unfold throughout this study. I have included my story into this study because it provides another perspective upon which athlete social responsibility can be drawn. As a past high-performance athlete I bring experiences, insights and beliefs about sport and its place in society. In my own career, I struggled with some of the most common challenges and difficulties athletes face, such as stress and burn-out, identity issues, coach-athlete relationship issues, body-image issues, and retirement (Brown, 2001; Stirling, 2007). I also fought for most of the latter part of my career to establish ways to share my experiences in sport, even moving back home in the middle of my career so that I could empower my home community to actively join in my journey instead of passively reading about it in the papers. I felt passionate about helping amateur sport become more accessible and relevant to the public and not just morph into an entertainment medium akin to professional sports. But I didn’t know what I could do or how to do it.

It wasn’t until after a number of years of competing, studying, and volunteering in sport, that I began to notice a change in the athlete population. This change is what inspired me to pursue this study. When I began the study I didn’t anticipate how much of an effect it would have on me. With every interview, there was a little part of the athlete’s story that resonated with my own story. In many ways, the interviews in and of themselves became a sort of existential counseling session for both the athletes and me.

Many of them expressed excitement and appreciation after sharing their experiences because they gained a better understanding of themselves through the interview process. I mirrored their excitement and appreciation.

This study addresses the urgent need for sport researchers to develop theories and models that are relevant to “the behaviorally orientated environment of today’s world” (Zeigler, 2007, p.297). It also takes True Sport Report’s (2008) suggestions for what elite athletes can do (section titled What You Can Do) and makes it action orientated. To create change, it isn’t enough to list suggestions in a document; the kind of change that this study and True Sport is advocating for is complex and multidimensional. However, as mentioned in the introduction, one of the places to start is with stories, especially the kinds of stories that emphasis the change we want to see (Heller, 2008).

This study examined the stories of fourteen athletes, stories that demonstrated a high propensity of moral character and values. Andy Rudd (2005) argues that sport’s “win-at-all-cost” mentality promotes social values, such as teamwork, self-sacrifice, and perseverance, but it fails to develop moral values, such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect (2005). This study argues that ASR is a way for sport to start changing that story. The athletes’ stories in this study also demonstrated a high propensity for humanizing their sport careers, something Hughson (2009) argues few have been able to do. ASR offers a way for sport to help more athletes humanize their careers in order to show that sport is and can be authentic and personal. Lastly, this study argues that athletes need to stop being considered passive illusory objects (Feezell, 2009), but rather active change agents who offer sport a window into changing societal values (Crepeau, 1981).



### **Conclusion: Creating a Better Future for Sport**

I believe in the power of sport. I believe that we are physical beings and sport has a role in our global world to absorb our physicality. But we will need to change our current system in order to adapt to the changes in society. We need to start over. Sport began as an outlet for the British-elite, grew into a global forum for peace, and now is on a trajectory to become just another Hollywood fixture - something to watch, but not be a part of. We need to ask ourselves not only what kind of sport do we want and what can sport do for us, but what kind of athletes do we want and what can the athletes do for sport? As social innovation suggests, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Rather than trying to understand the parts of sport in isolation, we need to consider complex solutions in order to solve the complex problem facing sport. In this thesis, I have endeavored to demonstrate ASR as one possible complex solution.

In Chapter 2, I outlined how ASR is a process for putting meaning back into sport and for helping athletes find meaning in life and find their identities, not by sport, but through sport. It is a process where we become aware of our humanity and seek ways to connect sport experiences with our humanity. In Chapter 3, I outlined how the Canadian sport system is stuck in the rigidity trap, unwilling to change or release. On the contrary, Canadian athletes have been able to break free from the cycle, mainly by revolting and fighting for their rights in sport, and have been in a time of reorganization. Now athletes are pushing the cycle into the exploitation phase with the emergence of ASR. Currently, athletes and the sport system are at opposite ends of the adaptive cycle.

Sport is fighting to maintain the way things have been done for years, while athletes are pushing the system to grow. As my interviewees suggested, the barriers

preventing sport from growing are institutional, and the opportunities for change lie with the people. It is up to individual people in sport—athletes, coaches, leaders, and administrators—to collectively start not only talking about the change they want to see, but being that change. As Mahatma Gandhi, a true leader of democracy has said, “Be the change you see in the world”.

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