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Review

Searching for meaning and purpose in elite sport: A narrative review of sport psychology literature with theoretical insights from psychology

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ABSTRACT

Athletes' stories about their experiences in elite sport inevitably evoke the notion of meaning, a concept, which has appeared in many shapes and forms within sport psychology. Qualitative scholarship, for example, has generated a large literature base on the *meaning of experience* (i.e., implicit meaning) in elite sport. However, the *experience of meaning(fulness)* (i.e., existential meaning) has received less scholarly attention and has rarely been the explicit study object. To assist theorizing and the empirical investigation of meaning and purpose in elite sport in these early stages, we take stock of the emerging body of literature in sport psychology. The article has three parts: Firstly, we distinguish between implicit and existential meaning to delineate our study object. Secondly, we introduce psychological theory to show how existential meaning can be conceptualized (e.g., dimensions, sources, crisis of meaning). Thirdly, we analyzed 23 studies in a narrative review approach to understand how meaning ($n = 17$) and purpose ($n = 6$) in elite sport have been understood, and what we know about these concepts empirically. The current scholarship revealed itself heterogenous in terms of study designs, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and conceptualizations of meaning and purpose. Findings are discussed in eight overarching themes (e.g., moments when meaning and purpose are questioned; as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity) to map the reviewed literature comprehensibly and to provide a foundation for applied work. The article concludes by highlighting unresolved issues and proposing future directions for studying and applying existential meaning in elite sport.

1. Introduction

Her head locked into her arms, knees pulled tightly to her chest, the most successful skier of all times, Michaela Shiffrin, crouched next to the track after surprisingly dropping out in two consecutive races at the Beijing Olympics. When the media later asked what was on her mind in that moment, she explained that she questioned her entire relationship with skiing; something that had always stood for how she engaged with life in a broader sense. Yet, Shaun White, high-profile snowboarder and multiple Olympic gold-medallist, painfully became aware that even the greatest sporting victories failed to provide what he was truly looking for: "From the outside, it looks like you've got everything. (But) win or lose, I felt a dramatic emptiness." (Rapkin, 2020, #0:12:46). Listening to athletes' stories about their lives in elite sport inevitably evokes the notion of meaning, a concept, which has appeared in various shapes and forms in sport psychology over the last few decades. As "flagship indicator of well-being" (Steger et al., 2013, p. 159), meaning has been associated with many positive outcomes for people's physical and mental health, while its lacking is regarded a sign of poor well-being across many sciences (e.g., Steger, 2012). Also in our discipline, theoretical works (e.g., Beckmann, 2023; Horner et al., 2023; Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2019) have suggested that the concept of meaning holds much potential by serving as complementary lens to understand people's engagement in elite sport. Within the applied domain, sport psychologists have emphasized the need to attend to meaning related concerns for many years (Balague, 1999; Diment et al., 2020; Ravizza, 2002) and several case studies document how existential psychology approaches allow to address meaning with clients (e.g., Porter et al., 2021), although in these, existential meaning is not always the primary focus (for an exception see Oblinger-Peters, 2024). Yet, despite this emerging interest, existential meaning has seldom been the explicit study object in sport psychology. In hypothesizing on the reasons for our field's hesitant interest in existential meaning, Beckmann (2023) observed that many literatures resembled a "hodge-podge [sic] of

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different suggestions" (p. 39) regarding its conceptualization. In fact, its elusiveness has been discussed extensively in meaning in life scholarship and led Leontiev (2013) to conclude already a decade ago that although meaning had established its place in psychology,

> it remains a very fuzzy concept, defined in different ways by different researchers. In theory, we have absolute diversity of definitions, in methodology a lack of insight of what it would mean to assess meaning. Until now, meaning remains an insightful metaphor rather than a sound scientific concept (p. 460).

Like in many other disciplines, meaning has consequently been conceptualized in innumerable ways in sport psychology, and it is due to meaning's multiple meanings coupled with our field's rising interest that we will start this article by distinguishing among interrelated understandings.

1.1. The present study

To assist theorizing in these early stages, we deem it important to take stock of the emerging body of literature in sport psychology. This lays the foundation for a more systematic exploration of existential meaning in elite sport, which, as we will show, has been neglected in our discipline to date, but has often appeared as a side issue. To reach these objectives, the article has three parts. In the first part, we distinguish between the "meaning of experience" (i.e., implicit meaning as study object in qualitative research) and the "the experience of meaning (fulness)" (i.e., existential meaning; Reker & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 2). In the second part, we provide an outline of how existential meaning can be conceptualized and how it differs from the related but often indiscriminately used notion of *purpose* by introducing theoretical foundations from psychology. In the third part, we conduct a narrative review of existing scholarship on meaning and purpose in sport psychology. This is important, because as we will show, the multitude of understandings and imprecise use of the concept can easily lead to a fragmented body of literature. The following research questions guided our investigation: (1) How have meaning and purpose been conceptualized in the context of elite sport? (2) In which theoretical frameworks was their empirical study grounded? (3) What was the nature of research conducted? (4) What were main findings regarding meaning and purpose? By revealing overarching themes in the literature our synthesis aims to engage our discipline in thinking in new ways about meaning and purpose from a theoretical perspective and provide a foundation for applied work. We will conclude the article with unresolved issues requiring attention and propose directions to move the study of meaning forward in our field.

2. Theoretical distinction: the meaning of experience and the experience of meaning

First, meaning lies at the very heart of qualitative research (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) which seeks to understand the "implicit meaning" (Reker & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 2) of objects, events, or human experiences. While implicit meanings are actively assigned by people and therefore personal on the one hand (e.g., for Mikaela Shiffrin, 'skiing really well' will have a different meaning than for a less skillful athlete), these meanings are, on the other hand, shaped by cultural forces and context dependent (e.g., mainstream media typically critique athletes who have missed the 'right time' or age to retire; Cosh, Crabb, & Lecouteur, 2013). In line with Bruner's (1990) influential claim that meaning must be at the heart of any psychological inquiry into human activity and mind and his view on language as acts of meaning, narrative inquiry and discursive psychology represent sport psychology research methodologies grounded in articulated theoretical conceptualizations of meaning. Both psychosocial approaches converge in the view that language plays a central role in how humans make sense of their actions, their identities, and lives more broadly, hence focusing on personal stories (in narrative inquiry) and discourses (in discursive psychology) as "entry points" (McGannon & Smith, 2015, p. 81) to human experience in their analyses.

According to narrative theory, creating and sharing stories about their life allows humans to make sense of their experiences by ascribing meaning to them. For this, they draw upon sociocultural scripts as pre-given narrative resources to construct their own stories and self-identities and bring meaning to their lives (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narratives therefore are at once personal and social (Frank, 1995), and their analysis can simultaneously shed light onto the meanings of an individual's inner world and the surrounding sociocultural context (as in stories that are 'out there'). Based on these premises, scholars argue that narrative inquiry lends itself particularly well to the investigation of meaning in sport (e.g., McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) and this methodology has provided several insights into the lived reality of elite sport. Douglas and Carless (2015), for example, demonstrated how the dominant performance narrative, traditionally valuing singular dedication to the sporting pursuit over and above relationships and exploration, rendered alternative meanings of being in elite sport untellable for the athlete. When their subjective experiences misaligned with this dominant narrative, tensions and in some cases, unresolvable wreckage were engendered, threatening athletes' well-being in the long run. Overall, narrative scholarship in sport psychology has produced invaluable knowledge about how implicit cultural meanings are contained within personal stories, how the testing out of personal stories can create different meanings, and how this meaning interplay affects people's lives in elite sport.

On the other hand, discursive psychology approaches hold that discourse is socially constructed and comes into existence through collective acts of language. Words and associated meanings are viewed as expressions of social action and ways to impact on the world. Circulating discourses thus have the power to enable or restrain how self-identities and particular meanings are created, since these result from the interaction of individual, social, and cultural discourses (McGannon & Smith, 2015). In elite sport, discursive approaches have unearthed, for example, how media representations portrayed elite athletes' decision to resume their sport careers after athletic retirement not as a rational choice but fueled by emotion and compulsion (Cosh et al., 2013).

While narrative and discursive, as language-based approaches, strive to go *from text to meaning* (i.e., interpretation), phenomenology, another established methodology within our discipline occupied with meaning, intends to go *from meaning to text* (van Manen, 2017). Rather than beginning with pre-existing texts or concepts and trying to interpret them, phenomenology focuses on the essence of lived experiences as they present themselves. By bracketing a priori assumptions, this approach aims to capture the primary, prereflective meaning of things, seeking to produce an experiential account alone (Nesti, 2004). For example, through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Howells and Lucassen (2018) explored four British female athletes' experiences of the post-Olympic blues after the Rio 2016 Games. The authors found that while the athletes' celebritization negatively influenced their wellbeing, negative emotions and subdued behaviors were also considered a normal response in this phase. Alongside this methodological theorizing on meaning, authors in additional qualitative research strands in sport psychology have addressed meaning through various types of analyses (e.g., thematic or ethnographic content analysis) and data (e.g., media outlets, digital stories), and some have even made it their explicit study object (e.g., Reussner et al., 2024 as the meaning of injury to the elite athlete).

However, while qualitative scholarship in our discipline has generated a large literature base on the "meaning of experience" in elite sport, the "experience of meaning(fulness)" (Reker & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 2) has received less scholarly attention. The latter refers to an existential type of meaning, which, as Shaun White's opening quote suggests, can become lost in elite sport. According to Steger (2012), it is

> the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future, (providing) us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years (p. 165).

Noteworthily, in many qualitative studies on mental health, well-being, career development, or identity in elite sport, a lack of existential meaning seems to be evoked. Investigating the severe spinal cord injury of rugby player Jamie, Smith and Sparkes (2008a) note: "His self and identities are fragmented as their narrative structures break apart to the point where life is deemed to be meaningless and devoid of purpose and hope." (p. 224). Still, these studies treat existential meaning as a side issue, rather than giving it the attention we believe it deserves as an existential concept.

3. Theory on meaning as psychological concept

The scholarship on meaning, typically studied as *meaning in life*, has been grounded in two major schools of thought within psychology, namely existential and positive psychology which each conceptualize meaning through various prisms and justify its research through different functions, (i.e., meaning as an end in itself versus as means to an end; Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014).

Meaning in the existential perspective is most associated with Viktor Frankl, who based his meaning-centered therapy (Frankl, 1963) on the assumption that the *will to meaning* acts as the driving force of human existence and motivation. Several lines of inquiry have delivered empirical support for these claims, demonstrating that meaning is a discrete motive, irreducible from related but distinct constructs. While Frankl held that human life is inherently meaningful (the ultimate meaning of life), ontological assumptions (i.e., fundamental beliefs on whether meaning can be found or must be created) are diverse among scholars, as existentialism is not a unified philosophical or psychological approach but comprises various strands of thought addressing the human condition and the basic givens of existence (Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020). Regardless, existential scholars concur that meaning(lessness) is an ultimate concern (Yalom, 1980), viewing the search for meaning as our basic condition in the world, indispensable to psychological functioning and acknowledging meaning as an end-goal. In sport, meaning as existential notion hence also plays a crucial role in explaining how athletes' relationship with sport and life evolves over the course of their athletic career. In this vein, Stambulova (2023) recently summarized 50 years of athlete-career research in sport psychology as showing "that athletic careers are dramatic and meaningful life experiences contributing (positively or otherwise) to their lifelong careers." (p. 358). Following from this, existential approaches represent athlete-centered and holistic models to sport psychology which scientist practitioners have been advocating for many years (e.g., Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020; Ravizza, 2002). In the existential perspective (e.g., Frankl, 1973), human beings exist in distinct but overlapping dimensions (i.e., physical, psychological, spiritual or meaning-oriented ones). Attending to a person holistically therefore requires addressing all of these, including meaning centered concerns. What is more, the existential view stresses the importance of the cultural context, since meaning cannot be understood when concentrating on the individual in isolation. Proponents of existential sport psychology have hence argued that the broader social and cultural landscape is essential to understanding the lives of people in elite sport (Nesti et al., 2012).

Positive psychology equally considers meaning in life a central resource for human striving, flourishing, and functioning but in line with the salutogenetic perspective focuses on accumulating empirical evidence for the positive effects it entails (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014). According to Seligman (2011), founding father of positive psychology, well-being (i.e., flourishing) arises through the successful pursuit of five endeavors merged in the PERMA model: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. In Seligman's view, people's sense of flourishing is determined by their perception of how successfully they pursue these endeavors. Meaning thus offers one possible pathway to well-being, as "the best approximation of what humans pursue for their own sake'' (p. 97). Surprisingly, despite its popularity in other psychological disciplines, the model has to date received little attention in our field. Also in positive psychology, opinions on the centrality of meaning vary, and some regard it as important only when lacking. As King et al. (2016) noted, meaning in this view represents a "luxury, a prototypical 'first-world' problem" much like "the icing on the cake of psychological well-being - presumably important but too esoteric to matter in any real way to human existence" (p. 211). Taken together, from this perspective, people can live good lives also without meaning, while in the existential view this is impossible.

3.1. What does meaning consist of?

Today, several scholars converge on multidimensional conceptualizations of meaning in life consisting of the components coherence, significance, and purpose: Firstly, coherence represents the cognitive component of meaning in life, describing a "sense of comprehensibility and one's life making sense" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). Secondly, significance as evaluative component refers to a judgement of one's life as inherently valuable and worth living, a sense of mattering to oneself and/or to others. This implies the idea of resonance to our actions, where it does make a difference what we decide and act on since without it, we would feel irrelevant and meaningless (Schnell, 2021). Thirdly, purpose represents the motivational aspect of meaning, implying a sense of directedness and orientation, of having goals to strive towards. Like a compass, it directs people in their decisions and lives more broadly. Noteworthily, empirical support for this theoretically derived tripartite conceptualization of meaning is inconclusive, and studies have indicated that some dimensions might be more central to the experience of meaningfulness than others (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). Some scholars propose an existential sense of belonging, of being connected and part of a larger whole as fourth dimension of meaning. Ways to express this existential experience include assuming responsibility for friends, family, religion, nature, or humanity (Schnell, 2009). Together, these considerations have led the field to progress from treating meaning as omnibus construct to investigating its dimensions separately (Martela & Steger, 2016).

3.2. How is meaning experienced?

The elusive nature of the concept makes an exact definition challenging. According to Schnell's hierarchical model (2021), meaning represents the overarching category within which different qualities can be perceived. Two of these empirically distinguished experiential qualities of meaning are meaningfulness and crisis of meaning.

Meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is the experienced "basic trust that life is worth living" and arises when we (most often unconsciously) evaluate our lives as "coherent, significant, oriented and belonging" (Schnell, 2021, p. 7). Meaningfulness appears to be more stable, while crises of meaning seem to fluctuate across time. Confusingly, in (sport) psychological literature, the notions experience or sense of meaningfulness, meaning, and presence of meaning are often used interchangeably.

Meaninglessness and Crisis of Meaning. Meaninglessness is experienced when personal meaning is lacking and can amount to a crisis state for some people. During an existential crisis or crisis of meaning, people judge their lives as "frustratingly empty, pointless and lacking meaning" (Schnell, 2021, p. 8) while longing to reestablish a sense of meaningfulness. People in phases of crisis become acutely aware of existential questions, feel disoriented, lost, and challenged in their most fundamental beliefs about themselves and the world. Interestingly, in this state of disruption people become highly attuned to meaning in their life (or more precisely, the lack thereof). A crisis of

meaning can be engendered by external events (e.g., failing at a major event for an elite athlete), or if internal contradictions between expectations and the experienced reality become unbearable (e.g., realizing that winning an Olympic gold isn't the answer to one's questions in life). Crises of meaning are often accompanied by depression, anxiety, pessimism, negative mood, and even suicidal tendencies while positive affect, life satisfaction, hope and self-efficacy are strongly diminished (Damásio et al., 2013; Schnell, 2009). Notwithstanding many shared features, crises of meaning and clinical depression are not equivalent, and a crisis of meaning is not necessarily pathological. It has, however, been shown to be an important predictor of suicidal tendencies in young people, in male adolescents an even stronger one than depression and stressful life events, emphasizing the crucial role of (lacking) meaning for mental (ill-)health (Schnell et al., 2018). Albeit crises of meaning being highly unsettling, they bear potential for people's growth in the existential perspective. Existentialists stress how moments of experienced discontinuity enable people to assume novel points of view and gain self-knowledge through reflections on the relationship they hold with the world (Frankl, 1973). Although the concept of crisis transition is well established in sport psychology (e.g. Stambulova, 2023), the notion of crisis of meaning has not yet been explicitly associated with this work.

Presence of and Search for Meaning. The most widely used questionnaire for assessing meaning, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) measures how much meaning people perceive in their life (i.e., the presence of meaning in life) and whether they are looking for it (i.e., the search for meaning in life). While the presence of meaning refers to a state, the search for it stresses the process as the active and dynamic aspect of meaning. Inconsistent empirical findings have characterized this line of research for decades and the relationship between these dimensions still engenders debates about the implications for people's well-being and (mental) health in the wider literature. Experiencing presence of meaning has been linked to various positive physical and psychological outcomes (e.g., mortality, health, well-being; Czekierda et al., 2017). It correlates positively with hope and optimism, feelings of competence, self-determination, social integration, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills (Damásio et al., 2013; Kashdan & Breen, 2007), with motivation and attention regulation skills, as well as the ability to cope with adversities, such as fatal disease (Linley & Joseph, 2011; Sørensen et al., 2019). In sum, scholars convene that the presence of meaning is a psychological resource, conducive to subjective wellbeing when existent but a potential threat for (mental) health when lacking (Li et al., 2021). Empirical evidence for the search for meaning, on the other hand, is ambiguous. It seems that the search for meaning, often elicited by its lacking, can become a double-edged sword, rendering people resilient in response to negative life events when meaning is found, but causing additional burden and evolving into a symptom of maladaptation itself when remaining unsuccessful (Linley & Joseph, 2011; Park, 2010). Ironically, it might just be this overly narrow focus of "searching doggedly for 'that one thing' that will fill the emptiness or 'scratch the itch'" (Mascaro, 2014, p. 282) which hinders people to find meaning.

3.3. Where does meaning come from?

Sources of Meaning. Sources of meaning represent basic orientations that animate us to move in certain directions and fuel our commitment in various life domains (Schnell, 2009). Frankl (1973) originally claimed three sources of meaning: (a) creative (through engaging in work or a deed); (b) experiential (through encountering someone or something); (c) attitudinal values (through choosing one's attitude towards inevitable suffering), all bearing relevance for human lives in elite sport (e.g., Giffin et al., 2023, 2024; Oblinger-Peters, 2024). Several additional sources have been identified through qualitative and quantitative methods, and despite meaning being a subjective experience (a person's meaning system provides a certain perspective on the world), evidence is accumulating that it is grounded in some universal sources such as human relationships (Lambert et al., 2010), personal development, growth, spirituality, and creativity (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). Multiple, balanced, and varied sources of meaning have found to be conducive to well-being and multiple identity development (Schnell, 2021; Thoits, 2003). While younger people predominantly engage in sources of meaning that can provide fun, personal development, achievement, growth, and self-knowledge allowing for self-actualization (Grouden & Jose, 2014; Prager, 1996), middle-aged adults become more interested in sources that imply self-transcendence, such as religiosity and spirituality, social commitment, generativity, and nature relatedness, as well as sources that represent order (e.g., tradition, reason, morality; Schnell, 2021). Relating this to sport, the elite sport arena seems most suitable to provide sources of meaning that young people preferentially engage in (e.g., fun, growth, achievement, challenge, development), thereby functioning as a domain that can give meaning to athletes' lives (Luzzeri & Chow, 2020).

Pathways to Meaning. A more recent line of inquiry is interested in establishing pathways to meaning. As such, scholars have linked satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to the experience of meaning and these connections have recently entered the discourse on mental health in sport (Beckmann, 2023). In line with evidence for the well-being promoting effects of beneficence (i.e., contributing towards something larger than oneself), Martela et al. (2017) demonstrated that this could act as additional pathway to meaning independent of the other psychological need satisfactions. Beneficence constitutes a central part of Frankl's original understanding of a meaningful life, and the notion of self-transcendence (i.e., going beyond one's own needs) is an integral part of various theoretical models and measurements of meaning. Taken together, it thus seems that meaning requires an inward and an outward component: one must feel connected to oneself (autonomy in choosing the ways one's life goes) and to others (by contributing, giving back, and belonging somewhere) to perceive life as meaningful.

3.4. Meaning versus purpose

Unfortunately, researching the concept of meaning is much complicated by its conflation with the concept of purpose in life. Tellingly, Frankl (1963) himself used the terms indiscriminately and the MLQ (Steger, et al., 2006) employs the term purpose to assess meaning in life. The neighboring research line on purpose overlaps to a certain extent yet is distinct from meaning scholarship. Today, consensus seems to be growing that meaning and purpose are related, but distinct constructs (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; George & Park, 2013). While purpose is future-oriented, encompasses a vision and goals to strive for, thereby functioning as the motivational dimension of meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016), meaning in life is regarded as an overarching concept by meaning scholars. However, analogously to the aspect of self-transcendence central to the concept of meaning, recent conceptualizations of purpose have also started to consider the beyond-the-self component (e.g., Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Gilbert, 2021). As such, Damon et al. (2003) for example define purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). Complicating matters further, the authors, located within purpose research, purport that personal meaning resides within the individual, while purpose implies a social component, transcending the individual. Differently yet again, meaning scholar Schnell (2009) uses purpose to depict sources of meaning. Taken together, it appears that meaning scholars argue for meaning as the broader concept, while purpose scholars claim the same to hold true for purpose. Unfortunately, knowledge integration from these parallel strands hasn't been attempted within (sport) psychology which is why this review synthesizes stimulating findings from both areas.

4. Narrative review of the meaning and purpose scholarship in sport psychology

4.1. Methodology

In their commentary article, Furley and Goldschmied (2021) argue for the value of narrative reviews to constructing a compelling argument based on published primary evidence, thereby enriching our understanding of a subject and assisting theory development. In line with this, we also adopted a narrative review approach to best assemble quantitative and qualitative empirical studies from sport psychological literature on the topic of meaning and purpose in elite sport. Although our objective was not to systematically list all available studies on the topic, we strove to include the most comprehensive body of literature possible. While there is as much value in conducting a systematic review to achieve the aforementioned objectives, we agree with Furley and Goldschmied (2021) that quality is not brought about by pitching one approach against the other. Instead, as we will show, while a systematic review was discussed at an earlier stage in the research process, the dearth of empirical studies focusing on meaning and purpose as delineated study object made such an approach impossible. In her review of research on meaning making, Park (2010) encountered similar difficulties, leading her to conclude that due to its "nebulous contours" (p. 267) an exhaustive review of all pertinent literature on the topic was impossible. We therefore opted for a narrative review as a scholarly report of a body of literature aiming to advance our discipline's understanding of meaning and purpose in the realm of elite sport. To go beyond a "meandering narrative stroll" (Hulland & Houston, 2020, pp. 352–353), in our review we interpret and link the reviewed studies to higher-order frameworks (e.g., underlying theories and methodologies) to map how empirical findings interrelate and thereby best illuminate the area of interest. Through this, we seek to contribute to a more coherent knowledge base and to generate novel and engaging insights into the topic for academic and applied sport psychology. Furley and Goldschmied (2021) note that narrative reviews do not necessarily adhere to systematic search methods with predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria. And while our literature search might appear conceptual rather than systematic in nature, we will provide more detail on our study selection to increase the transparency and quality of the conducted approach. We started our literature search by identifying primary empirical research articles published in English in peer-reviewed scientific journals whose study object was related to meaning or purpose and/or manifestations thereof (e.g., existential crisis) in the context of elite sport. Here, we searched for the experience of meaning(fulness)/-purpose in the existential but not for the meaning of experience in the implicit sense, based on the distinction introduced in the opening of this article. As such, we included studies in our review in which authors mention that the existential concern of meaning/purpose in life arose in their interpretations, abstracts, or key words (e.g., master athletes for whom sport became meaningless when cultural narratives of performance ceased to provide interpretative resources; Ronkainen et al., 2013). Regarding the definition of elite sport, we included studies in which participants (had) competed at the highest national and/or international levels, including junior, senior and para sport categories.

4.2. Findings

Table 1 shows the review findings in response to our research questions. In the following, we will offer a grouping of studies to structure the currently heterogeneous scholarship within sport psychology. The aim of this classification is to assist the reader in navigating the complexities of the concept and the fragmented body of literature.

Study Characteristics, Methodological Approaches and Theoretical Frameworks. In total, 23 studies were found (n = 17 on meaning, n = 6 on purpose). Studies were diverse in terms of topics investigated in relation to meaning and purpose, conceptualizations, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and design. Depending on the study design, sample sizes varied from one to 1544 participants. Three studies investigated meaning and purpose among coaches, all others elite and/or parasport (n = 13), student (n = 5) or youth (n = 2) athletes. Regarding methodology, nine studies employed a quantitative design and statistically analyzed questionnaire data, while 14 studies using a qualitative research approach collected data through interviews as well as reflective writings and performed thematic, phenomenological and/or narrative analyses. From a theoretical perspective, several authors positioned their studies in the existential or positive psychology meaning scholarship, albeit only Giffin et al. (2023, 2024) based their investigations explicitly on a meaning specific framework by drawing on Frankl's (1963) meaning enabling value categories in their data analysis.[1]

Conceptualizations of Meaning and Purpose. The reviewed studies were characterized by a multitude of conceptualizations of meaning and purpose in elite sport. To present the material in an insightful way for the reader and map the reviewed literature comprehensibly, we derived eight conceptual themes from the studies. Although the themes are not exclusive since several studies could be sorted into multiple themes, this structuring allowed tracing how findings interrelate across studies. In the following, we present selected exemplars, because these offer particularly stimulating findings for further explorations of meaning and purpose in elite sport (for full details see Table 1).

(1) ***Meanings Assigned to Athletic Careers.*** Underpinned by an existential perspective on athletes' career development, several studies (Mortensen et al., 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2013, 2015), investigated the meaning that athletes assigned to their athletic careers, thereby acknowledging the existential depth of their sporting engagement. As noted by Stambulova (2023), elite athletes can experience their careers in sport as dramatic and evaluate these against the backdrop of their entire lives which is why for them, meaning in sport and life are intricately intertwined.

Ronkainen et al. (2015) found that these assigned meanings changed considerably over the course of the sporting careers for ten internationally competing elite athletes. While in the early stages their engagement in sport was experienced as highly enjoyable and fun, in the later stages, their relationship with sport became more complicated. For some, competitive sport became a site of existential challenges, threatening their sense of authenticity, inducing fear of failure and anxiety, leading them to disidentify from elite sport. Others keen to maintain their love for competition, drew on ideas of learning and spirituality in their justification attempts. The types of meaning provided by athletic careers was also examined by Mortensen et al. (2013) who asked eight Danish youth elite athletes to envision their future journeys in elite sport. Through an existential lens, the authors found that the accounts contrasted with the ways in which accomplished elite athletes talk about their careers retrospectively, since the young athletes' career meanings were characterized by lightness and optimism, opposed to the often-expressed hardships and existential challenges experienced by more mature athletes. In their study on Finnish endurance master athletes, Ronkainen et al. (2013) investigated from an existential-narrative perspective how aging as existential challenge required some of these athletes to revisit and alter their sources of meaning in sport. In this endeavor, narrative resources and discourses acted as constituents of the cultural horizons of elite sport, depicting aging as decline. For "Risto", this made it difficult to interpret the experiences that aging engendered for his running abilities, because he only knew to draw on the

[1] Unfortunately, in both publications, the authors refer to these as attitudinal, creative, and *existential* values while Frankl termed the later *experiential* since they describe meaning found through mindfully experiencing.

Table 1
Reviewed studies on meaning and purpose in elite sport.

Authors	Developed themes	Study topic and sample	Conceptualization of meaning/purpose	Research design	Main findings
1 Duda (1989)	• Purpose in elite sport as its role for the greater good	Relationship between athlete's goal perspective and the purpose of sport in 321 US high school athletes	Purpose of sport	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Task orientation linked to beliefs about intrinsic (skills mastery, personal improvement) and cooperative purposes of sport (teach being honest, decent citizens). Ego oriented student-athletes saw sport as means to an end (outperform others, have competitive success, become famous, bend the rules).
2 Day (2013)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity	Seven athletes' (London 2012 Paralympic Games hopefuls) lived experiences of reengaging in sport after acquiring a disability, and their posttraumatic growth	Meaning (processes: searching for comprehensibility, significance; outcome: meaning in life)	Qualitative (life history interviews; observation of sport participation; holistic content analysis)	Three main themes indicated posttraumatic growth through sport: Recognizing possibilities and acknowledging limitations, responsibility for choice and consequences, thereby re-establishing and enhancing meaning. Posttraumatic growth was achieved when athletes' meaning making was successful (i.e., searching for meaning as significance versus as comprehensibility).
3 Day and Wadey (2016)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity • Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Participation in sport and its potential to assist two parasport athletes with acquired disabilities in working through physical trauma thereby enabling growth	Meaning (processes: assimilation versus accommodation)	Qualitative (life story interviews; instrumental, collective case study; narrative analysis)	Athletes established previous and new life meanings through sport. Two narrative types informed by growth following adversity literature were identified: Positive accommodation enabled mastery experiences, improved relationships, corporeal understanding, and enhanced life philosophies through sport. Assimilation linked to resilience in contrast to growth, focusing on re-capturing previous life meanings and creating an identity using past definitions of self and sport.
4 Mortensen et al. (2013)	• Meanings assigned to athletic careers	Existential meaning assigned to envisioned careers in sport in eight talented Danish junior athletes	Meaning	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews; narrative analysis)	Three narratives of imagined athletic career paths and assigned meanings (future goals, dreams, aspirations, fears and concerns) were identified: The naïve athlete who knows all the right words, but does not fully understand their meaning, The uncorrupted athlete motivated by the sport itself, The want-to-do-it-all dreamer.
5 Ronkainen et al. (2013)	• Meanings assigned to athletic careers • Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Existential (personal) meanings brought to the aging experience in competitive sport by 10 Finnish, male, elite endurance athletes	Meaning	Qualitative (life story interviews; existential-narrative analysis)	Four major narrative types were identified: The end of an era, Putting things in perspective, The attitude has to change, Winning was never the only motive. Ways of bringing meaning to the aging experience varied, confirming and resisting the cultural master narrative of decline.
6 Tamminen et al. (2013)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity • Meaning and identity in sport are intertwined	Experiences of adversity and perceptions of growth following adversity among five female elite athletes	Meaning (processes: searching for comprehensibility, significance)	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews; interpretative phenomenological analysis)	Adversity experiences (e.g., sexual abuse, negative performance) led athletes to scrutinize their identities and search for meaning. Through reflecting on the role of sport, their identity as an athlete, and social support, some found meaning in the experienced adversities leading to perceived growth (i.e., personal strength,

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Authors	Developed themes	Study topic and sample	Conceptualization of meaning/purpose	Research design	Main findings
					gaining perspective, desire to help others).
7 Howells and Fletcher (2015)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity	Adversity- and growth-related experiences of eight swimmers (Olympic medalists)	Searching for meaning as mechanism for growth	Qualitative (autobiographies; narrative analysis)	Following adversity, athletes tried to maintain a state of normality by non-disclosure and developed multiple identities. When these assimilation strategies became maladaptive, a quest narrative was adopted, leading athletes to search for meaning and to regard their sport as a sanctuary.
8 Ronkainen et al. (2015)	• Meanings assigned to athletic careers	Existential perspective on athletic career development of 10 international athletes	Meaning	Qualitative (reflective writings with follow-up; existential-narrative analysis)	Four major storylines: Struggle for authenticity, Continued love for the performance sport, Sport as experiencing and expressing through the body, Sport as a spiritual journey. During challenging career moments and changes, athletes needed to (re-) construct the meaning of their sport.
9 Howells and Fletcher (2016)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity	Four Olympic swimmers' experiences of constructive and illusory adversarial growth	Search for meaning (comprehensibility versus significance) as mechanism for growth	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews, timelining; interpretative phenomenological analysis)	Indicators of illusory growth (i.e., meaning in terms of comprehensibility, cognitive manipulations through assimilation, derogation of experiences) and constructive growth (i.e., enduring distress, meaning in terms of significance, accommodating cognitive schema, philosophical change) were identified among athletes. Constructive growth requires positive accommodation of cognitive structures and searching for meaning as significance.
10 Ronkainen and Ryba (2017)	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Life meanings of career threatening injuries and their impact on well-being and career construction of two professional Finnish ice hockey players	Meaning	Qualitative (life story interviews; existential-narrative analysis)	Injuries were experienced as boundary situation containing social and temporal breakdown and re-evaluation of sporting life projects. Narratives included existential themes of loss of meaning, loneliness, search for authenticity. Injury represents a relational rupture due to the loss of shared meaning with others (teammates, coaches, managers, families).
11 Houltberg et al. (2018)	• Meaning and purpose as an attitude towards sport • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource	99 US elite athletes' profiles (self-narrative indicators) were compared for psychological well-being	Purpose in life	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	A purpose-based narrative identity profile (high sense of self-worth, purpose, positive view of self) was linked to higher psychological well-being compared to a performance-based identity profile (high concern over mistakes and personal standards, fear of failure, contingency self-worth).
12 Luzzeri and Chow (2020)	• Clarifying the concept of meaning and purpose • Meaning and identity in sport are intertwined	Validation of the Meaning in Sport Questionnaire (MSQ; presence of and search for meaning in sport) with 329 and 402 US collegiate athletes	Meaning in sport	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Meaning in sport correlated with meaning in life, athletic identity, athletic burnout, sport commitment type, and satisfaction with last performance.
13 Ronkainen et al. (2020a)	• Meaning and purpose as an attitude towards sport	Craftmanship as approach to perceive sport as meaningful; 258 UK based competitive student athletes	Meaningful sport	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Craftsmanship and religion were independent predictors of meaningfulness in sport. Meaningfulness in sport is related to intrinsic (how athletes approach their sport) and extrinsic factors (their overall framework of life meaning, and

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Authors	Developed themes	Study topic and sample	Conceptualization of meaning/purpose	Research design	Main findings
					values derived, e.g., from religion). Craftmanship has the potential to facilitate meaningful experiences for athletes.
14 Ronkainen et al., 2020b	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned • Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Case study of female elite youth skier Pilvi retiring from sport	Meaning	Qualitative (six semi-structured interviews, visual data; existential-phenomenological analysis)	Retirement demanded the athlete to realign herself with the sport world, search for new meanings in it, when cultural horizons of elite sport offered limited resources. Leaving the elite pathway can entail the renegotiation of meaning that movement and sport had provided.
15 Trainor et al. (2020)	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource • Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity • Meaning and identity in sport are intertwined	Global and sport psychological well-being of 12 injured female varsity athletes during their recovery stage	Purpose in life as part of global and sport psychological well-being	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews, reflexive thematic analysis)	Four themes were developed: My life is chaos and out of control; Pressures shaping response to sport injury; Maybe I can: adaptation from the disruption of sport injury; Sport injury growth. In the initial recovery stages athletes reported a loss of purpose in sport and life alongside their identity as an athlete. Rebalancing their well-being happened through negotiations between sport and global psychological well-being. Through expanding the self in other life domains, athletes (re-) discovered a purpose in life and reappraised injury as an opportunity for growth.
16 Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Gilbert (2021)	• Clarifying the concept of meaning and purpose • Purpose in elite sport as its role for the greater good	Scale development: Coaching purpose of coaches (CAPS) measuring athlete-centered coaching outcomes in 1347 US intercollegiate coaches	Coaching purpose	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Purpose in coaching related more to character development in athletes for head coaches than for assistant coaches. CAPS measures whether coaches support holistic development and overall well-being in their athletes.
17 Tian et al. (2022)	• Meaning and purpose as psychological resource	Meaning in life as mediator between belief in a just world and mental toughness in 1544 adolescent Chinese sport school athletes	Meaning in life (search for and presence of meaning)	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Meaning in life could be a resource to increase mental toughness in athletes. Age was negatively associated with presence of meaning, and mental toughness. Elite and more experienced athletes had a higher level of search for meaning. Male athletes scored higher in meaning in life and mental toughness than female.
18 Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2022a)	• Purpose in elite sport as its role for the greater good	Relationship between general purpose orientations in life, coaching purpose, and coaching identity in 380 US collegiate coaches	Purpose orientations in life; domain-specific purpose	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	When a coach's purpose orientation in life is to help others grow, their coaching purpose in line with their coaching identity will be focused on developing well-rounded athletes who possess life skills that extend beyond performance sport. General life purpose translates into concrete coaching practices in elite sport.
19 Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2022b)	• Clarifying the concept of meaning and purpose • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource	Purpose in life as predictor of subjective well-being through passions for coaching in 379 collegiate coaches	Purpose in life	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Life purpose plays a crucial role in promoting coaches' harmonious passion for their work and their subjective well-being. Purpose predicts passion: awakening to purpose engendered harmonious and obsessive passion for work in coaches.

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Authors	Developed themes	Study topic and sample	Conceptualization of meaning/purpose	Research design	Main findings
20 Giffin et al. (2023)	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource	Social contexts enabling and constraining meaning (i.e., psychological mechanism facilitating adaptive cultural transitions) in the transition of 14 elite refugee athletes to the Canadian sport system	Meaning as psychological mechanism; Will to meaning and value categories (Frankl, 1963)	Qualitative (arts-based conversational interviews; reflexive thematic analysis; polyphonic vignettes)	Context as interplay of personal, relational, and cultural factors (i.e., age and formation of identity prior to migration, social support, structure of sports system in the receiving country), and connection with their creative, attitudinal, and "existential" [sic] values influenced athletes' (in)ability to find meaning. Lack of meaning was hypothesized as a barrier for adaptive transitions, potentially resulting in crisis transitions.
21 Giffin et al. (2024)	• Meaning as mechanism and indicator of growth following adversity • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource • Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Fourteen elite refugee athletes' abilities to find meaning and experience growth following their cultural transition into the Canadian sport system	Will to meaning and value categories (Frankl, 1963)	Qualitative (arts- based conversational interviews; reflexive thematic analysis; polyphonic vignettes)	Athletes experienced different phases of growth at the time of the interviews. Growth was enabled by the responsibility to find and pursue meaning as internal, and through trust and belonging as external factor. Elite refugee athletes' growth took place at the intersection of individual responsibility, trusting relationships, and inclusive sport environments.
22 Haslam et al. (2021)	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource • Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned	Social identity pathways to retirement adjustment in two athlete samples and potential mechanisms (athletic identity, social group memberships), psychological resources (meaning in life, control), and adjustment (life satisfaction, depression, physical health)	Meaning in life (presence of meaning in life) as psychological resource for transition adjustment	Quantitative (questionnaire data)	Loss of athletic identity undermined adjustment by reducing meaning in life and perceived control. Social group memberships counteracted the negative effects of athletic identity loss, especially for Chinese athletes, with memberships in new groups influencing meaning in life. Findings stress the importance of social identity processes to athletic retirement and the mechanisms (i.e., meaning as resource) through which they impact on athletes' adjustment
23 Haslam et al. (2024)	• Moments when meaning and purpose are questioned • Meaning and identity in sport are intertwined • Meaning and purpose as psychological resource	Identity negotiations of 21 international, elite athletes during athletic retirement informed by social identity model of identity change	Meaning as resource provided through social identity	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews; reflexive thematic analysis)	Social groups can provide a sense of meaning and purpose as resource when athletes identify with them, but access can be lost when membership is impossible after athletic retirement.

performance narrative: "I have no more passion to put myself to the limit … It is anyway far from what I have run before. It has no meaning anymore." (Ronkainen et al., 2013, p. 392).

(2) ***Moments When Meaning and Purpose are Questioned.*** The most common theme was a transition or moment when meaning in life became scrutinized and contested, leading to experienced meaninglessness and even crisis of meaning for some athletes. As Horner et al. (2023) noted, sport-related events with the greatest potential to arouse the existential concern of meaning for athletes are death, injury, retirement, career change, failure, and success. In our sample, meaning was studied in the context of injury (Day & Wadey, 2016; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017; Trainor et al., 2020), athletic retirement (Haslam et al., 2021, 2024; Ronkainen et al., 2020b), and career change (cultural transition in Giffin et al., 2023, 2024; elite-master transition in Ronkainen et al., 2013).

In an existential-phenomenological case study with youth alpine skier Pilvi, Ronkainen et al. (2020b) demonstrated how building a new relationship with sport (i.e., meaning in sport) was complicated by the often-restrictive cultural horizons of elite sport, constructing retirement as being about leaving sport entirely. Psycho-social negotiations forced Pilvi to search for new meaning in sport (e.g., being active for instrumental reasons of weight control) to allow realigning herself with the sport world. Giffin et al. (2023, 2024) studied how 14 refugee elite athletes migrating to the Canadian sport system were forced to negotiate meaning during their cultural transition and how they searched for meaning. While interacting factors of the context such as the culture of the novel sport system made it challenging for these migrant athletes to

experience meaning in their new sporting lives, successfully connecting with their values enabled them to find meaning. Day and Wadey (2016) examined how sport could provide two para-athletes with acquired disabilities with new meaning and purpose in life. Reengagement with sport led both men to overcome the physical trauma of becoming severely injured, to see value in life again, and revise their life philosophies (i.e., re-evaluate what is important in life). As "Chris" noted: "I had no ambitions or goals but now I've got a purpose. Now I can believe my life is important. There's so many obstacles but you can get over them one at a time … it makes you wake up and realize that life is actually too precious and too short." (Day & Wadey, 2016, p. 136).

While elite sport offers many external events that can lead people to question meaning in sport and life, these *critical moments* can also originate internally, when previously stable assumptions about oneself and the world become challenged. Critical moments "can range from something to nothing, can be large or small, intended or unintended, and may have a negative or positive effect on a person's sense of self" (Nesti et al., 2012, p. 25). In elite sport, they can thus arise through a major win or loss but also through a casual comment from a coach or team member which the athlete experiences as disruption because it initiates a search for new meaning in sport and life. Importantly, it is in these moments in athletes' lives that changes in their identity can induce anxiety and require them to find different or new meaning to progress.

(3) ***Clarifying the Concept of Meaning and Purpose.*** Meaning and purpose were investigated in relation to various psychological constructs by Luzzeri and Chow (2020) and Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al. (2021, 2022b) in the intent to validate psychometric scales. Luzzeri and Chow (2020), for example, established links between meaning in sport and sport commitment types. The authors highlighted the crucial role of the satisfied need for autonomy for people to experience well-being, growth and meaning in life (Martela et al., 2017) by demonstrating that athletes who feel that they have to do their sport (i.e., constrained commitment) were more likely to search for meaning in it than athletes who engage in their sport because they *want to* (i.e., enthusiastic commitment). The long-term frustration of this need, for example when athletes feel obliged to persist in sport instead of wanting to stay engaged on their own terms, can ultimately lead them to regard their sport as less meaningful and possibly engender the search for meaning in it. The authors also provided first evidence for links between subdimensions of athletic burnout and presence of meaning in sport, indicating that burnt out athletes who devalue their sport and feel that they accomplish less, also perceive less meaning in it. In addition, presence of meaning in sport correlated positively with athletes' satisfaction with their last performance emphasizing accomplishment as important source of meaning in elite sport.

(4) ***Meaning as Mechanism and Indicator of Growth Following Adversity.*** Several of the reviewed studies (Day, 2013; Day & Wadey, 2016; Giffin et al., 2024; Howells et al., 2015, 2016; Tamminen et al., 2013; Trainor et al., 2020) were located in the growth following adversity literature in sport psychology where meaning plays a key role. Many studies reverted to Park's (2010) distinction between meaning making processes (meaning as mechanism for) and meanings made (meaning as an outcome of growth), which we will briefly outline here. In her integrated meaning making model Park (2010) synthesized theorizing from influential meaning scholars. Their basic tenets assert that people dispose of global meaning (i.e., basic orienting systems providing a general understanding about how the universe functions, beliefs regarding self-identity, goals, and a sense of meaning and purpose) allowing them to interpret their experiences of the world (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997). When the appraised meaning of a situation (situational meaning) threatens the global meaning, people need to engage in meaning making to dissolve the discrepancy. According to Park, various meaning making processes intended to restore peoples' "sense of the world as meaningful and their own lives as worthwhile" (p. 258) are known from literature. Two of these have featured prominently in the growth following adversity literature in sport psychology as underpinning of various growth models and theories: (a) *assimilation* versus *accommodation*, and (b) searching for *comprehensibility* versus searching for *significance*. (a) While assimilation of cognitive schemas consists of changing the situational meaning to fit the existing global meaning (closely related to cognitive manipulation), accommodation requires an extensive change of one's global beliefs or goals. (b) Searching for meaning in terms of comprehensibility depicts a person's motivation to understand *why something happened*, while searching for meaning in terms of significance attempts to answer the question *what this means* for one's life. According to Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997), searching for comprehensibility intends to make the event make sense or "fit with a system of accepted rules or theories" (p. 91), often tied to ideas of causality. In contrast to this, the search for significance is aimed at determining the "value or worth" (p. 91) and hence the philosophical, spiritual world view implications of an event. The authors argue that although survivors of adversity may initially be concerned with questions of comprehension, over time they come to ask questions of significance. By definition, finding meaning as significance requires successful accommodation. When their fundamental beliefs are shattered, people must alter their assumptive world to integrate new trauma related information (e.g., recognizing that judges can unintentionally destroy one's Olympic dream). Ultimately, successful meaning making processes can result in better adaptation to the stressful event (i.e., adversity) and yield multiple outcomes (e.g., the sense of having made sense, growth, change in identity, a restored or changed sense of meaning in life; Park, 2010).

In a qualitative study, Day (2013) explored how engaging in sport assisted overcoming the trauma of acquiring a disability and led to psychological growth in seven Paralympic athletes. Sport was found to be important in two ways for these athletes: it enabled them to re-establish meaning (reminding them of what had been meaningful in their lives pre-trauma), and it allowed to create new meanings additional to those that existed pre trauma, indicative of growth. Tamminen et al. (2013) examined how experiences of adversity (e.g., sexual abuse, injury, negative performance, bullying) initiated the scrutiny of their identities and search for meaning among five female elite athletes competing internationally. For these athletes, growth indicated by realizing personal strength through adversity, gaining perspective, and a growing desire to help others, was enabled through reflecting on the meaning of sport in their lives.

Importantly, in their study of growth, many authors described how participants tried to "make sense" of the experienced adversity. Here, the distinction between searching for meaning as understanding why something happened (comprehensibility) versus as grasping the wider implications and existential importance (significance) becomes especially relevant. As Howells and Fletcher (2016) noted in their study with four Olympic swimmers: "Although meaning and comprehension were often sought as part of the growth process (as an aspect of illusory growth), it was the finding of meaning and appreciation of the significance of an event that was indicative of constructive growth." (p. 183).

(5) ***Meaning and Purpose as an Attitude Towards Sport.*** In a study among 258 UK based student athletes, Ronkainen et al. (2020a) explored whether a craftsmanship approach, defined as "the desire to do a job well for its own sake" (Sennett, 2008, p. 9), was related to experiencing meaning in sport. The authors found that athletes who approached their daily sport practices with a focus on informal learning, tacit knowledge, intrinsic motivation, flow,

holistic understanding, practice and honing of skills - all characteristics of a craftmanship approach - perceived sport as meaningful work. Emphasizing the process instead of the result, might hence allow athletes to perceive more meaning in their sport. The study also revealed that athletes who identified with a religious belief experienced their sport as more meaningful, supporting scholars' long-standing observation that religion represents a powerful source of meaning for some athletes and should therefore receive more attention from academic and applied sport psychology (e.g., Balague, 1999; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2019).

Houltberg et al. (2018) statistically distinguished three different self-narrative profiles among 99 US elite athletes that differed significantly in well-being. Athletes in the purpose-based self-narrative profile (high purpose, global self-worth, positive view on self after sport) showed high levels of well-being, whereas those in the performance-based narrative profile (high perfectionism, fear of failure, and contingent self-worth) demonstrated higher levels of psychological disruptions (highest degrees of depression, anxiety, and shame; lowest degrees of life satisfaction). The authors concluded that purpose may represent an important resource for athletes by allowing them to develop self-views extending beyond the sport domain. Interestingly, the authors employed the MLQ as measurement for purpose, exemplifying once more, how these notions are used indiscriminately by many scholars.

(6) ***Purpose in Elite Sport as its Role for the Greater Good.*** Three studies' (Duda, 1989; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2021, 2022a) understandings of purpose in elite sport can best be described as the role that sport can have for the wider society or the benefits that it can generate. Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2022a) investigated the relationship between general purpose orientations in life (career-focused, others-growth, and self-growth), coaching purpose (fostering of sport-specific competence, sport-general competence, confidence, connection, and character in athletes), and coaching identity (winning-centered, holistic development-centered) in 380 US collegiate coaches. The findings suggest that if a coach's purpose orientation in life is to help others grow, their coaching purpose in line with their coaching identity will be focused on developing well-rounded athletes who possess life skills that extend beyond the realm of performance sport. In turn, the coach will be interested in athletes' holistic development and growth instead of overemphasizing winning. Taken together, findings exemplified how general life purpose translates into concrete coaching practices in elite sport.

(7) ***Meaning and Identity in Sport are Intertwined.*** As visible in many studies, particularly during critical moments and career transitions, questions of meaning and purpose, and identity can go hand in hand for elite athletes (Haslam et al., 2021, 2024; Luzzeri & Chow, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2020b; Tamminen et al., 2013; Trainor et al., 2020). As "Samantha" described when struggling with an eating disorder: "Everyone knew me as 'the runner'. When I don't have running, I'm like, 'who am I … and what's my purpose? Like do I even have a purpose? Am I of any value?'" (Tamminen et al., 2013, p. 31). This is understandable, since athletic identity may provide a powerful source of meaning for athletes (Luzzeri & Chow, 2020), especially when things in sport go well, but can become highly problematic when this is not or no longer the case (Ronkainen et al., 2016).

In two consecutive studies, Haslam et al. (2021, 2024) sought to understand how social identity related processes affect athletes' adjustment during their retirement transition and also examined the role of meaning in life. Findings from three athletes' samples revealed that the loss of athletic identity negatively impacted athletes' health and well-being by limiting their access to key psychological resources, such as meaning and purpose, which the identification with sporting groups had provided. New and maintained membership in social groups could counteract these negative effects by enhancing meaning in life and perceived personal control, especially for Chinese athletes. In their qualitative exploration of how athletes negotiate these identity changes, it became clear that sporting groups could continue to provide meaning and purpose for the retired athletes when these were able to connect with the realm of sport in new ways, for example by staying close with former teammates but putting sport performance in perspective (Haslam et al., 2024). Additionally, upon retirement many of the athletes realized that their lives encompassed more than just sport, leading them to explore new identities, and, presumably, novel sources of meaning to engage in.

(8) ***Meaning and Purpose as Psychological Resource.*** Another common conceptualization was that of meaning and purpose as psychological resource or indicator of well-being (Giffin et al., 2023, 2024; Haslam et al., 2021, 2024; Houltberg et al., 2018; Tian et al, 2022; Trainor et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022b).

In a study among 379 US collegiate coaches, Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2022b) examined the role of purpose in life in predicting subjective well-being through harmonious and/or obsessive passion for coaching. Overall, their results stressed the importance of purpose in promoting coaches' subjective well-being and harmonious passion for their work. Interestingly, however, purpose also engendered obsessive passion in coaches, hinting at a more complex relationship between these constructs from positive psychology. The authors hypothesized that it might be a coach's longing to actively discover their purpose which pushes them into an obsessively passionate quest, resulting in overcommitted work. In line with the search for meaning component, awakening to one's life purpose could engender negative consequences when coaches focus all efforts on finding meaning and discovering their purpose in the sport domain.

In Tian et al.'s study (2022), meaning in life emerged as mediator between the belief in a just world and mental toughness for 1544 Chinese student athletes. The authors concluded that increasing the meaning athletes perceive could allow them to better navigate the hardships inherent to performance sport and ultimately protect their mental health in this pressured environment.

In a qualitative study, Trainor et al. (2020) explored purpose in life as one component of 12 female varsity athletes' global and sport psychological well-being in the context of serious injury. While in the early stages the athletes struggled with a loss of purpose in life and sport, closely aligned to the perceived loss of athletic identity, their injury led them to ponder how their global and sport psychological well-being were linked (e.g., independent, as foundation or part of the other). When the athletes were able to engage in other life domains than sport, their well-being was rebalanced and with this their experienced purpose in life. Ultimately, this led many to feel that they had grown by being able to overcome their injury experience.

5. Discussion: promoting existential meaning in sport psychology research and practice

In the reviewed studies, meaning and purpose were researched in the context of various phenomena in elite sport. The resulting diversity of conceptualizations has led to a currently heterogenous scholarship in sport psychology. Because meaning and purpose were the explicit study object only in some of the reviewed articles, it was difficult to create discriminant themes, as the overlap in themes in Table 1 shows. Nevertheless, we feel that this classification allows to map the literature base comprehensibly. In the first part of the article, we demarcated the concept of existential meaning as our study object and elucidated on its

many subtleties known from psychological inquiry (i.e., existential and positive psychology perspectives, dimensions, sources, pathways, crisis of meaning). While these aspects offer diverse footholds for the concept's exploration, the analysis of the extant scholarship revealed that our field has thus far not investigated them explicitly. This is unfortunate since tapping into meaning's multiple dimensions and pathways one by one could allow research participants, for example, to become more easily aware of what enables or hinders the experience of meaning in elite sport. In an applied elite sport context, this has been shown to benefit meaning related work with clients (Oblinger-Peters, 2024). Equally, although it can be argued that in many of the reviewed studies athletes experienced an existential crisis (e.g., studies grouped under the theme 'moments when meaning and purpose are questioned'), the notion of crisis of meaning has yet to be more clearly addressed in sport literature.

Our review illuminated that meaning was researched from diverging perspectives; some adopting what Smith and Sparkes (2008b) termed "a 'thick individual' and 'thin social relational'", and others "'a thin individual' and 'thick social relational' view" (p. 5). These perspectives vary in the emphasis they put on the individual and/or the social in creating meaning. Studies focusing on the individual were often rooted in natural science approaches, implicitly conceiving of meaning (and purpose) as measurable variable, as psychological resource or capacity that resides within a person and lends itself to manipulations targeting its augmentation. In this view, a maximization of meaning and purpose represents the goal. In contrast, the concept's relational nature was stressed by the social focus perspective, more associated with the human science paradigm. Here, meaning was understood as positioned at the interface of the individual and the cultural. Authors argue that because humans do not live in a vacuum, they draw upon shared cultural horizons to assign meaning to their experiences. Since "sport becomes meaningful in a context" (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2019, p. 43), what athletes (and coaches) perceive as meaningful might differ greatly depending on their cultural background, past experiences, and available sociocultural resources to make sense of themselves inside and outside of the sporting world. This was visible, for example, in the migrated refugee athletes for whom the changed cultural context enabled and restricted their ability to find meaning in sport and life (Giffin et al., 2023, 2024). Many studies revealed that personal meaning is dynamic and subject to constant (re) negotiation within wider sociocultural frameworks and meaning systems. The search for meaning is engendered when a mismatch between what is personally and culturally deemed meaningful in elite sport (e.g., suffering when losing) is perceived. This was the case for some athletes who struggled to justify their engagement in sport when progressing from recreational to competitive levels and when not improving further in the later stages of their athletic careers. Athletes, who discovered additional sources of meaning, however, were able to relate to their sport in alternative ways, regarding it, for example, as spiritual practice or route to self-discovery (Ronkainen et al., 2013, 2015).

Following from this, we can argue that there is value in diverse methodologies to capture the layered nature of meaning and that its cultural situatedness would evade exclusively intrapsychic approaches in its inquiry. Yet, this brings us back to the opening part of this article and the difficulty of distinguishing between the *meaning of experience* (i.e., implicit) and the *experience of meaning* (i.e., existential meaning). In their attempt to clarify the nature of existential meaning, Reker and Chamberlain (2012) concluded: "Both implicit and existential meaning are important constructs in fully understanding human experience. They can be interrelated insofar as experiences requiring the realization of implicit meaning can often initiate and enhance the search for existential meaning." (p. 1). This interrelatedness might explain why especially in many language-based research approaches, different meanings of meaning are intertwined. Here, the borderline becomes even less clear when scholars regard it as narrative's core function "to integrate a life, to provide an adult with some degree of meaning, purpose, and unity" (McAdams, 2005, p. 122).

However, our review unearthed how particularly in times of personal struggle, the necessity to attend to meaning as existential concern needs no further justification since meaning related questions arise naturally in those moments. In this regard, important insights were gathered from the study of adversarial growth in elite sport, where the distinction between meaning as comprehensibility versus as significance allows to better understand whether athletes experience genuine growth (i.e., constructive growth) or whether they convince themselves to simply perceive it this way (i.e., illusory growth). Meaning scholar Wong (2020), positioned in existential and positive psychology, poignantly explains why this distinction is an important one: "A little reflection would tell us that the existential suffering inflicted by the absurdity of life cannot be explained away by rational thinking." (Wong, 2020, p. 568). Therefore, seeking meaning in terms of a causal explanation why, for example, an athlete failed to qualify at a major event, might not be enough for them to move forward in sport and life. Instead, they might benefit more from recognizing the need to ask more fundamental questions.

Owing to its elusive and complex nature, scholars might argue that it is impossible to define precisely what meaning in elite sport consists of and even hold that the concept should stay immature. However, while this immaturity can be valued in the academic realm, applied practitioners interested in meaning centered work might be less at ease with it. After all, in their influential definition of mental health in elite sport, Küttel and Larsen (2020) describe this as

> a dynamic state of well-being in which athletes can realize their potential, see a purpose and meaning in sport and life, experience trusting personal relationships, cope with common life stressors and the specific stressors in elite sport, and are able to act autonomously according to their values. (p. 253).

Enabling practitioners to assist clients in living up to this definition, requires a clearer formulation of what meaning and purpose in elite sport entail for the individual. As could be gathered from the examples of Mikaela Shiffrin and Shaun White in the opening of this article, elite athletes' deep-rooted questions engendered by a faulty split-second decision and the experienced inner void despite or because of reaching their sporting goals are difficult to explain in terms of dominant sport psychological concepts. Consequently, issues like these might easily be misdiagnosed as mere motivational challenge. This is unfortunate since in some instances, athletes might be better served by meaning-focused interventions than traditional sport psychology approaches (Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020; Oblinger-Peters, 2024). Our discipline should pay more attention to meaning-related questions since for one, investigating elite sport through the lens of meaning could afford research with more in-depth understandings of people's lived experiences. For two, it may enable practitioners to address more profound issues with their clients, thereby validating their whole-hearted dedication to the sport domain. Through the concept of meaning, athletes' commitment to sporting life-projects may become acknowledged in its existential sense, allowing practitioners to engage responsibly and competently in well-being and mental health promotion in elite sport.

5.1. Future research directions

Since in these nascent stages sport psychology might venture into many directions when researching existential meaning, we propose the following lines of inquiry due to their potential for elite sport: (a) In line with Luzzeri and Chow (2020) we argue that to facilitate meaning-centered sport psychology work in the applied field, a definition of meaning in elite sport is needed. Empirical studies centralizing existential meaning should assist in this endeavor with more explicit conceptualizations of meaning. (b) Inquiries into sources of meaning in elite sport could offer a more differentiated understanding of where athletes derive meaning from and could explore, for example, whether and how the depth, breadth and variety of an athlete's sources of meaning could prevent an exclusive,

monothematic focus and allow to view sport as meaningful in more than one way. (c) The dynamic nature of meaning should be explored longitudinally to better comprehend how athletes adapt during career transitions. (d) Detrimental effects of a lack of meaning for people's well-being and mental health are well documented in neighboring disciplines. Meanwhile, the notion of crisis of meaning has not yet been thoroughly theorized and researched in sport psychology. Integrating knowledge from the research strands on crisis transitions might be a valuable way forward. (e) Evidence on the effectiveness of meaning-centered practices is steadily growing in neighboring fields, such as therapeutic and counseling research (see Vos & Vitali, 2018 for a review) and offers many readily transferable practices for work in the elite sport domain (e.g., crafting life narratives, true self writings, mental time travel).

6. Limitations

Four studies from sport psychology literature which investigated the meaning-related construct of sense of coherence could not be included in our review due to the restricted scope of this article. Future work should also integrate knowledge on this construct. Further, study selection was complicated by the fact that when meaning and purpose were mentioned by research participants but not addressed by the authors, studies were not detected in our literature search, because we only included studies that reverted to explicit notions of existential meaning and purpose in their analysis or even made these their study object.

7. Concluding remarks

The objective of this article was to help sport psychology become aware of the potential that the existential notion of meaning and purpose might hold. In bringing together the fragmented body of literature without claiming completeness in the gathering of evidence, our narrative review demonstrated how existential meaning and purpose in elite sport have been researched from different scientific traditions employing various methodologies and understanding the concept in multitudinous ways. We hope that the provided synthesis and future ideas can serve as platform from where to promote the study and application of meaning in sport psychology further, and ultimately enable people to experience meaning in elite sport and life.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Violetta Oblinger-Peters: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kristoffer Henriksen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Noora J. Ronkainen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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