

6

SALUTOGENESIS

The Foundation for Supporting the Young Athlete

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Introduction

In their International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement, Bergeron et al. (2015) suggest that the goal of sport is clear, to:

Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, whilst attaining wide-spread, inclusive, sustainable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement.

The premise of this book, however, is that talent development programmes usually fail to achieve this goal. Reasons for such failures relate not only to the fallibilities of humans but also to the complexity of human adaptation.

This chapter builds towards an alternative orientation of talent development. This orientation is built upon Salutogenic foundations, which explore the origins of good health and well-being. The underlying assumption of the chapter is that health and optimal sporting performance are so intrinsically linked that they are not separate. You can have poor health and yet achieve optimal performance but when that occurs there is often a 'price to pay' afterwards. Rather, we should be creating talent programmes where good health is as important as optimising performance.

Our discussion of Salutogenics is presented through a **life-course** approach to human adaptation, health, and illness. This approach recognises that the trajectory of development for every individual is unique and that it begins before birth, in which the genetics of our ancestors and the health behaviours of our parents determine what our 'maximum performance potential' is likely

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to be. In addition to promoting good health, our talent programmes should recognise the uniqueness of everyone. In this chapter, I explore the basic concepts in Salutogenics, some thoughts on a Salutogenic approach to stressors in the talent environment before concluding by looking at one special talent development environment through a Salutogenic lens. The text also contains some short ‘reflections’ written by Andy Borrie as editor which opens up his immediate response to the ideas in the chapter as a stimulus for readers’ further reflections.

But, before describing Salutogenics, I wanted to introduce myself. As the author of the chapter, my knowledge, beliefs, and values surrounding talent development have been shaped throughout my life course and thus what I have written. Therefore, I use elements of personal narrative (Poulos, 2021) and storytelling (Maggio, 2014) through my life course to write the chapter. My hope is that by combining my stories with wider exploration of my theoretical influences will encourage you to think deeply about what talent and success means to you.

My Beginnings in Sport... Understanding My Voice

As a child, I was fat, slow, un-coordinated, had ginger hair and was a very slow learner. My experiences at primary school were probably not too different to those of a young chimpanzee who was born runt of the troop. I was in the ‘Yellow Group’ set, where expectations from others for our educational attainment were low. This ‘Yellow Group’ status and my lack of physical ability demonstrated weakness to my fellow ‘chimpanzees’.

I knew very early on, my potential was not to be a world-beating athlete. In fact, it was deemed a major achievement when I learnt to tie my shoelaces as an 8-year-old. I was bullied too. It may seem like a little thing in such context but one of my most traumatic experiences was being left out of an inter-class basketball tournament. I can still ‘see & smell’ the teacher in his 1970s orange polyester tracksuit. Two ‘yellow group peers’ who I perceived to be lower in the classroom hierarchy were selected to play. I was inconsolable, despite my Granny telling me how talented I was. Whilst grannies are meant to say such things, she was talking nonsense.

However, my ‘survival’ instinct has always been strong. On another day I was playing football during break. As always, I was the goalie. The logic of my peers was irrefutable, that I was so fat that I filled up more of the goal than anyone else. This fact was repeated daily. During the game another kid intentionally elbowed me in the face. My experience of the playground was not too different to the island in the book *The Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954): children play dark and hierarchical power games, at least until the bell

rings. I was, and remain, a gentle and sensitive creature. But in this instance, I decided to fight back and won. My stature in the playground hierarchy quickly developed as did my reputation as someone not to pick on. This is because crying was the proxy for defeat, and I simply refused to cry. Others learnt that they could not win, regardless of physical superiority because I simply refused to lose.

Years later at secondary school, the school basketball coach ‘Yogi’ Blair had an equally profound but far more positive effect on me than my Primary teacher. Our team were playing in the Scottish Schools Cup, and ‘Yogi’ brought me on in the second half. I quickly made my presence clear, fighting for every ball and making a nuisance of myself. Whilst we lost, Yogi chose me for special attention in the in the post-game team talk. ‘Andy is no Alton Byrd (the most skilled player in our local pro team) but he got more rebounds than anyone in 50% of the time. His work ethic was amazing’. Such a memory over 40 years later is a constant reminder to me as a coach and teacher that every word I speak has the potential to influence a person’s entire life course, for better or worse. One sentence from Yogi made me feel good about myself.

Finding Cycling...

Although I tried different sports, golf was my first sporting love when growing up. I am from Musselburgh, an important town in the history of the sport. My brother was much better than me, winning a few tournaments, and qualifying for the Scottish Boys. He played at the local championship course, but it was too expensive for both of us to be members. Despite me loving the game, the justification was that I wasn’t good enough for Monktonhall so my sporting ambition needed another outlet.

My sporting identity only truly developed in my late teenage years after becoming friends with a mountain biker. Previously, my recreational time was being spent hanging around the streets, engaged in low-level anti-social behaviour. Smoking, getting drunk at the weekends, and generally making a nuisance of ourselves. There were moments when things got a bit out of control, but we usually avoided the police. We weren’t a bad bunch, but few of my peers considered university and I dropped out of school at 16. The plan was to join the navy, but I remained too fat to pass muster. Rather, my first job was on a government Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in the hotel industry. The government of the time suggested it was to give young people like me a career, but the reality was that YTSs were typically used for cheap labour. Most days I supported the laundry maid, collecting dirty linen over six floors and folding sheets. One day, the hotel manager asked me to go along on a bus tour to assist a group of older American tourists. As a personable kid who knew lots about Scottish history, not learnt at school,

meant I made enough in tips to buy a mountain bike. I soon became obsessed with cycling and the sport began to dominate my life. The weight fell off, I stopped smoking and drinking (as much) and did the odd race too. It was an escape from things at home too, as my mum wasn't very nice after a bottle of vodka. I even went on a training camp with a young sprinter called Chris Hoy, who went on to become one of our most famous Olympians. Cycling had introduced me to a different social circle and healthier lifestyle.

From Bike to Dance Floor to Swimming Pool...

Life can change very quickly though. On a Friday night in 1990, I was convinced by friends to go to 'Pure', a legendary dance music club in Edinburgh. Pure attracted an eclectic societal mix of young people, some of the genders yet to be defined, who danced to electronic music. This dance scene quickly took over from cycling. We were a happy, friendly and inclusive bunch of lunatics. However, my dancing stopped after five years of hedonistic and sleepless weekends started to take its toll. Most of us who emerged from this lifestyle, whilst having lost a few braincells, were far more egalitarian as a result. Despite the lost braincells that period of my life was no bad thing.

I never do things in halves and quickly returned to cycling, doing a bit of running as cross-training in winter. As a bet with a running friend, I entered a 10-km race, smashing 40 minutes on a tough course and ended up joining a local running group days later. A fellow runner Scott Balfour, who is still my friend, saw me arriving on a race bike, we got chatting and it transpired he was a triathlon coach. 'Come to swimming on Saturday' Scott said, ignoring the fact that I couldn't swim. Two weeks later, I was 'press-ganged' into the club 400 m time trial in the pool. I got a special clap for finishing exhausted, in a time of 12 minutes and 3 seconds. The National Record for 13-year-old girls is 8-min faster. It felt like being in the 'yellow group' again and I cried in frustration when I got home. Obsessive training soon followed in which I vowed never to get a sympathy clap again. Whilst never becoming a world beater, a few years later I completed my first Ironman event, crossing the line in the national champs in the top 10%. My emotions in the final mile were a mix of 'f**k you' to all those who had doubted me and a developing belief in myself.

From Competitor to Coach and Onwards...

I was now in my late 20s and working as a bank administrator. I hated it. This was not helped by the fact that I was usually exhausted from training >20 hours a week. However, a serendipitous chat with Dr Darren Smith, a

world-leading triathlon coach from Australia changed my life direction. Darren's justification for coming to Scotland was that if he could support a group of athletes who were not obviously the most 'talented' in the world to success, then he would know he was a good coach. He was blunt about my prospects as an athlete, but his demeanour changed when I said I was thinking of being a coach. Within a few minutes, he convinced me that I needed to go to university and study sport science. So that's what I did. My journey in sport science set me on a path where I subsequently worked as an applied sport scientist in performance sport, did a seven-year stint as a coach educator at British Cycling and coaching in triathlon. I then entered academia as a Lecturer in Sport Coaching. Whilst many of my professional experiences in sport have been profound, earlier experiences probably shaped my views on long-term development and performance more. Salutogenesis is an orientation that explains many aspects of my own development.

My Life Course...

Progress in my life has always been a slow and struggling one. School was not a positive learning environment and getting into university without the requisite qualifications was hard. I have been exposed to inequalities and unfairness in society but such a **life course** has determined who I am today and my beliefs surrounding sport. I have a strong sense of justice and deep empathy for people regardless of their sporting abilities, seeing potential in most, given the right circumstances and a bit of luck. I have never felt the need to belong to a 'tribe'. As someone who couldn't keep up at school, I disappeared into my own little world to work things out for myself and at my pace. I have always had a deep inquisitiveness, wanting to understand 'why' and not accepting answers from others without independently verifying them for myself. I found this was an advantage at university and prospered there. My Ph.D. study and subsequent work as a sport scientist was much harder because I struggled to 'stay in my lane'. 'Disciplinary' ways of thinking have typically provided inadequate answers for me.

I have told these stories in the hope that it will help you understand my perspective on talent development. My stories emphasise the impact that the early life course has on the emerging adult. To think about talent development without considering the life course is wrong. Salutogenics is the frame I have found linking talent and the life course.

As we move on to explore Salutogenics, I want to be clear my thinking is not unique and in building my thinking I have taken inspiration from many great thinkers who have helped me understand how multiple theories, biological, psychological, and social, should all influence how we 'do' talent

development. I hope that the chapter encourages you to think more deeply about talent systems.

The Salutogenic Model: An Orientation Towards Re-imagining Talent

When I first started working in academia I struggled to find a path that reflected my life experiences, my divergent and non-conformist ways of thinking. Eventually, this path was provided by Aaron Antonovsky, a medical sociologist, in his theoretical orientation called Salutogenesis which explores the relationship between health, stress, and coping (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017). Learning about this orientation helped the world, and my experiences, make more sense to me.

Importantly, Salutogenesis is not a precise model for ‘how to do’ talent development. It’s more a way of thinking about human development in its broadest sense that can be applied to sport. What it does do is provide an overarching framework that can encompass within itself a range of more prescriptive, sport-specific theories, models, and constructs.

At the core of Salutogenesis is the question: ‘What makes and keeps people healthy?’

This seems like an obvious question to ask when we design talent systems. If we aren’t asking it, then what are we asking of systems? However, human cognition is profoundly influenced by a negativity bias. Negativity bias is our tendency to want to stop bad things happening rather than promote good things to happen (Corns, 2018). This negativity-biased thinking is reflected in the ‘pathogenic orientation’ sport in the West has taken to the issues of mental health and well-being in athletes. We raise awareness of mental health, encourage help-seeking behaviours, and offer treatment interventions. However, we do it from the point of view of how we might reduce the risks of ill health, or better support their recovery, through addressing the ‘pathogens’, that cause ill health. A Salutogenic approach starts from a different place by asking how we can help athletes to be healthy rather than wait for ill health before we act. Antonovsky’s Salutogenesis did not seek to dismiss the importance of pathogenic orientations but rather wanted to shift us from the negativity biases that limit our thinking.

Whilst Antonovsky did not specifically write about sport, his work is reflected in many of the psychosocial constructs used in sports psychology as shown in the Salutogenic ‘Umbrella’ of Eriksson and Mittelmark (2017) in Figure 6.1. In Figure 6.1, we can see many concepts that appear in sport psychology research and practice. Salutogenic theory does not seek to ‘reinvent the wheel’ but offers an approach which can be inclusive of theories and concepts where the orientation is towards understanding how to support people to prosper.

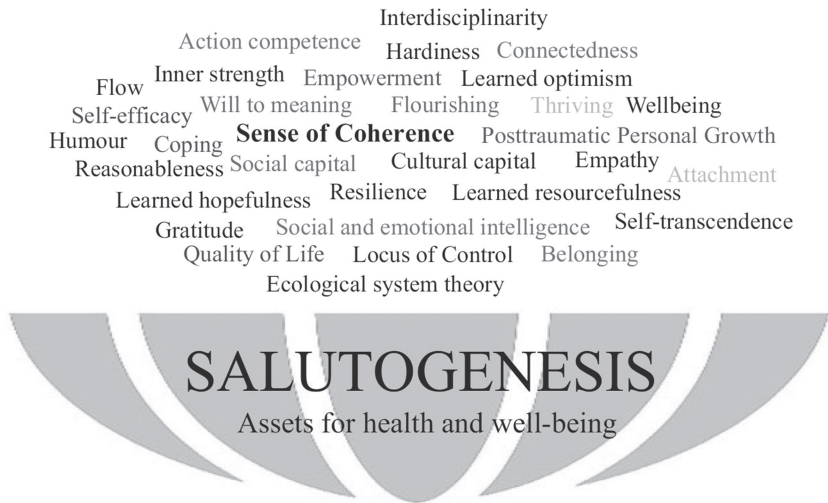


FIGURE 6.1 The Salutogenic umbrella. (Reproduced from Eriksson & Mittelmark, 2017).

Core Components of Salutogenics

Antonovsky defined two foundations of Salutogenics which are useful to consider in relation to sport. The first foundation of Salutogenic theory is Sense of Coherence (SOC), a concept that explains people’s health and well-being. The strength of a person’s SOC is determined by their response to life experiences, irrespective of whether those experiences have been positive or negative ones. The existence of a strong SOC enables people to cope with stress and stressful situations. SOC has three core factors: meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability, as defined in Table 6.1. These dimensions are reflected in many sport psychology constructs so it is possible to find sport-specific models and processes that can guide the development of these three factors.

TABLE 6.1 The dimensions of sense of coherence (SOC)

Dimension	Definition
Meaningfulness	Meaningfulness is the motivational factor. It reflects an individual’s orientation towards tasks and the source of satisfaction they gain from performing them.
Comprehensibility	Comprehensibility is the cognitive factor. It describes the ability of an individual to appraise and understand (stressful) situations & challenges they may encounter in life.
Manageability	Manageability is the instrumental factor. It describes the degree to which individuals feel that they have adequate resources at their disposal to support them in dealing with challenging or stressful situations in life.

The second foundation of Salutogenesis was termed ‘Resistance Resources’ (RRs), ‘the characteristics of a person, a group or a community that facilitate the individual’s abilities to cope effectively with stressors’ (Idan et al., 2017, p. 57). Higher levels of RR contribute positively to the development of the individual’s level of SOC. Many complex factors are associated with the development of RRs are shown in Figure 6.2.

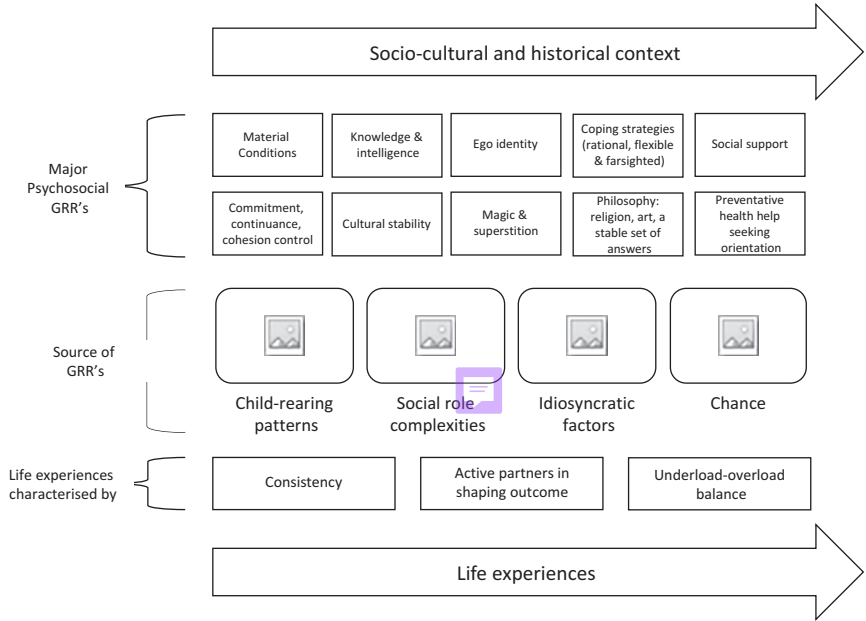


FIGURE 6.2 Complex factors that influence resistance resources. (adapted from Antonovsky, 1979).

Galderisi et al. (2015) in their definition of (mental) health talk of a ‘dynamic state of internal equilibrium’ mediated by social influences, which is consistent with Salutogenics. To help a young person maintain a dynamic equilibrium in life we need to support the development of their SOC by ensuring they have the requisite RRs. Systems need to consider what RRs are available from an early age to help develop the young person’s SOC so that they can live a positive and healthy life. In essence, we need to adopt a life-course approach to health and performance, focussing on the young athlete as a whole biopsychosocial person. Whilst this may seem overwhelmingly complex, posing questions on how systems develop RR and SOC into adulthood are foundational. The Salutogenic Model in Figure 6.1 also prompts us to consider the sociocultural

system in which our talent systems reside. To fully embrace a salutogenic approach, we have to see talent systems within the broad cultural influences that impact the life of the young athlete. We cannot see them as independent creations that exist apart from sociocultural context in which the young person lives. Salutogenics also requires us to recognise the pivotal role that coaches and support staff can have in guiding young people through life.

‘Life Is a River’... A Salutogenic Perspective on Life Challenges

Whilst Salutogenics is focussed on the positive, it is an approach that does not seek to wrap the athlete in ‘cotton wool’. Rather it is one that embraces risk and accepts negative experiences are part of normal life. Pathogenic approaches that seek to remove or control them make things worse. Salutogenic environments prepare young people to gain satisfaction in life but ones that recognise that hard work and commitment offer no guarantee of success. They are environments that help the young person to comprehend and manage the challenges they will face in life and that we all need others to prosper too. Therefore, young athletes need to encounter a broad range of helpful experiences, positive and negative, in order to actively adapt and grow into a healthy adult.

Antonovsky used a ‘River of Life’ analogy to describe the processes of **active adaptation** he proposed in Salutogenics. The river analogy, reflective of a dynamic state of internal equilibrium, reflects a belief that we are in a continual state of ‘biopsychosocial’ flux throughout our lives. In early life, where much of our sporting potential is determined, the ‘river’ contains the biological, neuro-developmental, and psychological processes which determine rates and limits of learning, skill-acquisition, and physical development. As we progress in life the flux is determined by the interaction of factors ranging from genetics to the socio-environmental factors that influence us every day. In any given moment, the precise state of flux is also influenced by thoughts, feelings, emotions, and social interactions. The analogy reflects the need for people to manage a vast number of ever-changing complex stressors encountered as they move through life (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006).

Rapids and Bumps

In Salutogenics, Antonovsky argues that we should see life’s flux as offering the opportunity for us to learn how to ‘swim’ and successfully navigate the *rapids* that we encounter in the ever-changing flow of the river. However, without developing RR and SOC, athletes may drown or wish to avoid going anywhere near the river after struggling to cope with its demands before they were equipped

to do so. In talent programmes, our aim should be to help talented young people actively adapt to their ‘rapids’ experiences. Rather than limit, constrain or control a young athlete’s life experience we should help them manage the dynamic state in which they find themselves. Through this active adaptation they develop the ability to navigate the river of their life as a whole and live a healthy life. Whilst there have been some difficult experiences in my life course, they were a necessary part of my personal growth and contributed to the development of my RR and SOC. To be clear, Salutogenic is not a licence to tolerate abusive behaviour or stressors that can be pathogenic in the long term, *that is*, excess training load.

Whilst Salutogenics as an orientation in talent development is a new thing, many of the principles of the theory are not. Using the analogy of ‘bumps in the rocky road’ Collins et al. (2016) posed key questions surrounding how to generate optimal benefit in talent pathways. They persuasively argue we should be actively considering how much stress is appropriate, of what kind, when should we apply it and how do we help young people to deal with it? Webb et al. (2016) suggested that we need to help young athletes cope with high levels of incoherence, variation, and unpredictability (Webb et al., 2016) by developing adaptability, independence, resilience, and help-seeking behaviours when appropriate. They advocated a philosophical bandwidth approach that:

- a Facilitates the desired levels of adaptability, independence, and resilience.*
- b Offers resistance to damaging rhetoric, politics or personal agendas, and*
- c That the approach is understood and followed by all coaches (and parents/guardians).*

Seeking to provide safe and stable environments for young people through removing all potential harms and risks is counterproductive. This is because the conditions for active adaptation are not met in relatively sterile environments. By creating environments that seek to overly control stressors we create young athletes who are ultimately less likely to cope with the high levels of incoherence, variation, and unpredictability associated with life in general and sport specifically.

Through my life experiences, and then subsequent work as a coach and applied sport scientist, I have developed my three laws of: 1) ‘S**t happens’, 2) ‘Life is not fair’, and 3) ‘The goalposts change’. You can argue that these don’t seem particularly positive or athlete friendly yet they are particularly pertinent in sport and young people need to be prepared for such truths. Relating theory to my own life course, I suggest that I have a strong SOC, specifically because of the challenges I have faced throughout my life course. In this chapter, I have

focussed on telling the story of my early life but some of my later life experiences in high-performance sport have also been profound. Unfortunately, my high-performance experiences are reflective of many of the stories we hear about problems with athlete and coach well-being. However, sport reflects wider society where bad things happen and, whilst I wished that they didn't, my negative high-performance experiences further enhanced my SOC and thus adaptation processes.

Limited Perspectives

Unfortunately, in sporting systems, we don't embrace the full complexity of the 'river of life'. The blueprints for talent programmes assume they are more like canal systems, which go from A to B in as direct, linear and safe a route as possible. In doing so, young people are deprived of the opportunity to learn and grow. This error is compounded by a failure to see the holistic nature of the athletes experience. We don't even try and build one large 'canal', we build small ones running in parallel as coaches and support practitioners each see the athlete's response to life's stressors through their own narrow disciplinary lenses.

Figure 6.3 shows a more holistic perspective of life stressors in sport, the kind we should adopt when considering how to build talent programmes. However, as a sports scientist, my research and applied practice reflected just the biophysical milieu of endurance sport and the stressors on the right of the diagram (Kirkland & Cowley, 2023). My professional practices, as a physiologist, were built on the flawed assumption that physical stress is a biologically mediated phenomenon so I only considered issues such as training load and sleep (Selye, 1983; Kiely, 2018). When venturing outside this interpretation I was regularly reminded to 'get back in my lane' and that psychosocial stressors were for psychologists to deal with. Similarly, psychologists have tended to consider stress as simply a cognitive event (Kiely, 2018). This is reflected in the taxonomies of stressors developed by sport psychologists which focus on organisational and competition stressors (Mellalieu et al., 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). In contrast, Antonovsky's Salutogenic focus was on the interplay between psychosocial and biophysical stressors. Our taxonomies of stress in sport ought to reflect the biopsychosocial nature of adaptation as shown in Figure 6.3. Seeing stress-coping responses as biopsychosocial is fundamental to preparing young people for the specific demands of sport and life in general. We need to recognise that maintaining a dynamic equilibrium as a sports performer is a non-linear consequence of the complex interaction between physiological, organisational, competition stressors, life stressors, and an athlete's ability to cope with them.

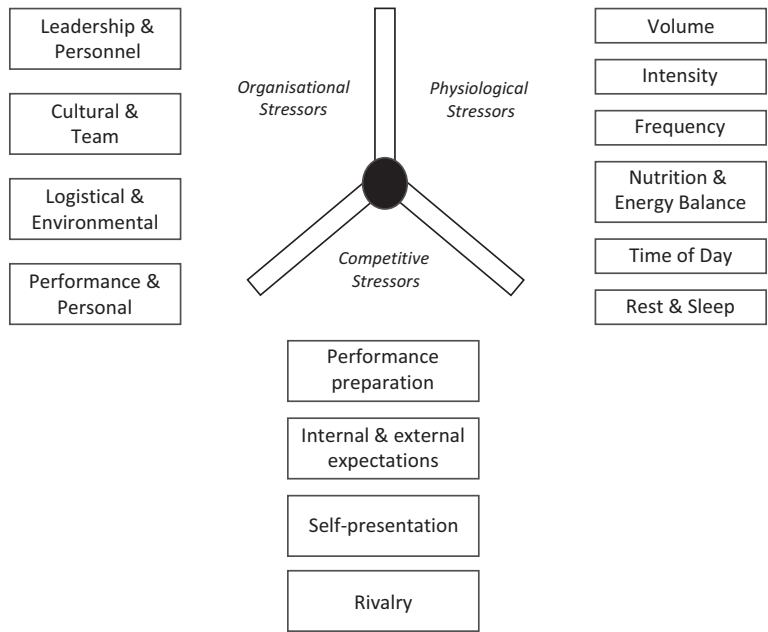


FIGURE 6.3 Stressors associated with sport. (The organisational and competitive stressors are taken from Mellalieu et al., 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

A holistic and integrative perspective of stressors is arguably more important for adolescent athletes in talent pathways than senior elite athletes. Adolescence, an important period of athlete development, is an unstable time of life when the flow of hazards in the Salutogenic ‘river’ is particularly high. It is a period of profound adaptation and development resulting from the convergence of rapidly changing physical, neurological, psychological, and social factors (Blakemore, 2012). Social-identity, self-categorisation, and peer relationships (Steinberg & Morris, 2001) are particularly important in adolescence but changes aren’t confined to the psycho-social. Neurological growth is also a critical factor as the adolescent brain experiences rapid change. Change in the pre-frontal cortex, the area of the brain associated with executive function, emotion regulation, working memory, and self-control is driven by hormonal changes during adolescence. The pre-frontal cortex is also structurally and functionally vulnerable to environmental stressors and sleep disruption during adolescence. The neurological adaptations experienced by adolescents profoundly influence their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and thus behaviours. Adolescents do not think the same way as adults and the changes they experience, whilst often disruptive to dynamic equilibrium, are normal and very

important to the adaptation process. However, coaches and other practitioners will not necessarily see the rapids or the bumps if they view athlete development through too narrow a lens, with predictable consequences.

Life Inside and Outside Sport

Using too narrow a lens means failing to recognise young athletes may be developing characteristics and traits through sport that are disruptive of life away from sport. Recent meta-analysis shows that youth sports performance is uncorrelated or negatively correlated with senior performance and it can be argued that many athletes in performance pathways and elite academies are often unfairly ‘sold the dream’ (Barth et al., 2023; Taylor and Collins, 2021). So, what are we doing to their lives if we then fail to notice the development of maladaptive personal coping mechanisms or traits that severely disrupt equilibrium in life outside of sport?

The fact that talent programmes can magnify and place new stressors on young people is not necessarily a bad thing. However, if whole stress levels are beyond the level a young person can cope with, then the long-term implications on mental health can be serious, and the likelihood of anxiety and depression in later life is increased. Change and stress are necessary elements in the growth and development of talented adolescents but they need to be managed holistically. Otherwise, we risk overwhelming the young person’s coping mechanisms and fail to develop them in ways that support good health over the life course.

Unfortunately, the wider milieu in many sports promotes sociocultural practices that are not salutogenic or sufficiently holistic. Factors such as poor coach education, short-term performance goals, and the separate conceptualisation of bio, psycho, and social stressors converge in ways that are unhelpful to young athletes. Therefore, increased stress in one area of life, as shown in Figure 6.3, can manifest in problems in other areas of life, including performance, because they go unnoticed. For example, excessive training load may result in disrupted sleeping patterns. Whilst short- to medium-term performance may not be affected, poor sleep in adolescence influences adaptation in the pre-frontal cortex in the brain. The outward signs and symptoms may be mental health related, including poor emotion regulation, motivation, concentration, anxiety, and depression, which can be long-lasting. A pathogenic orientation may lead to cause being attributed to the individual in need of psychological support. However, using a Salutogenic orientation, the solution would be to prescribe a healthier training load and address the coaching practices that resulted in it.

Hardy et al. (2017) explored the psychosocial ‘life course’ experiences of British super-elite athletes (who had won multiple medals at major championship) and elite athletes (who had won medals in international competitions but had not medalled at major championships).

The findings of this study suggested that early negative life events, which presumably substantially disrupted the dynamic equilibrium, plus positive sporting critical events were important psychosocial discriminators between super-elite and elite athletes (Figure 6.4). These events could include gaining recognition, glory, self-esteem, and escape (Hardy et al., 2017).

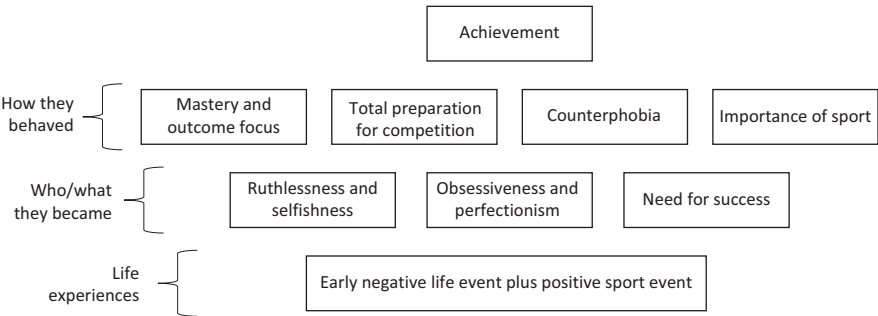


FIGURE 6.4 Most important psychosocial discriminators between super-elite and elite athletes. (adapted from Hardy et al., 2017).

In other words, a level of trauma at a young age was important in achieving athletic potential. Out of those formative experiences the athletes developed a series of personal traits which, when applied to sport, created the behaviours that gave them a pathway to the podium (ruthlessness, obsessiveness, and perfectionism). These traits and characteristics are ‘alpha’ behaviours that I have regularly observed in high-performance sport. Systems that value medal outcomes often seem happy to accept such traits. But they come at a cost.

I have been in ‘Win at all Costs’ environments where more humble behaviours are seen as weakness and questioning, or scrutiny is viewed as an unconstructive challenge. Leaders justify practices by believing that they are simply uncompromising in their quest for excellence and value athletes who exhibit behaviours that align with this vision. However, such environments are often sorely compromised through abusive behaviours, poor practices, and capability deficits in being able to differentiate for individual athlete needs.

Yet, outside of the elite sport environment are ‘obsessiveness’ and ‘perfectionism’ positive behaviours? They are also double-edged swords (Stoeber, 2012) which can lead to overtraining and burnout. Especially in times of illness, injury, periods of underperformance, or athletic transition obsessiveness and perfectionism can create significant mental health challenges. With Hardy’s study, it’s interesting to reflect on what would have been found if the work had explored what happened to the medallists’ equilibrium in life away from sport?

The psychosocial cost of our current approaches can be seen in many of the recent press stories surrounding athlete well-being and duty of care such as those reported in the Whyte Report or Dame Grey-Thompson's Duty of Care report (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Whyte, 2022).

Talent environments need to shift perspective to good health across the life course as enshrined in the Salutogenic approach to human development. Our talent approaches need to embrace the twists, turns, and bumps in the road that young athletes experience to allow them to develop their RRs and SOC. Young athletes need to experience disruption to the dynamic equilibrium in their lives so that they actively adapt and grow as people. Focus on short-term performance outcomes may mean that long-term performance, participation levels, and health suffers. Of course, winning is important in sport. We cannot escape from this fact. Yet, systems often encourage the development of behaviours and traits that promote winning at the cost of good health. It also means they are not meeting the goal set by the IOC, noted at the outset of this chapter, to ensure we develop healthy athletes as well as successful ones (Bergeron et al., 2015). It doesn't have to be this way. I strongly believe the best we can do for young people in sport is to create Salutogenic environments. The role of coaches supporting young athletes should be to foster environments where RR and SOC can develop. The role should also be about maintaining a dynamic equilibrium in their life rather than 'feeding' unhelpful or socially undesirable behaviours and addictions. Emphasising the development of psycho-behavioural skills and holistic talent development programmes (Taylor and Collins, 2021) may lead to more success in the long-term.

Talent Development through a Salutogenic Lens: Lessons from Kenya

Recently, I began a research journey directed towards Kenyan runners and their mental health. I wanted to use the stories of Kenya's greatest national asset, its runners, to see if these stories could be used to influence policy surrounding mental health in sub-Saharan Africa. My research colleague, Dr Fred Changwony, who is from the Eldoret area, was very clear that in order to 'understand' Kenyan running I needed to immerse myself in his country. What I found in Kenya has had a profound effect on my understanding and conceptualisation of talent development.

Most of the research into Kenyan running has focussed on trying to identify the 'secret of success' for continuing to produce a stream of world-class runners. Simple answers to such complex questions do not exist. Furthermore, from a Salutogenic perspective, considering 'deviant cases' where the phenomenon of interest does not 'follow the rules' are important. Western models of

effective high performance and talent development such as the S.P.L.I.S.S. model (de Bosscher et al., 2015) are wholly inadequate for explaining the success of Kenyan running. Arguably, the Kenyan system is poorly developed in terms of training facilities, financial support, and functioning sport policy. The only foundational pillar for success is 'participation' within a relatively small geographical area around the city of Eldoret and the small village of Iten.

Prior to visiting, I had done my homework by reading about Kenyan history and wider sociocultural factors as advocated by Antonovsky. However, this did not prepare me for the material conditions I found in Nairobi. Kenya is one of the most prosperous countries in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Africa but the levels of poverty and inequality I observed were extreme. The fact that taxi drivers were quick to mention political corruption and food insecurity was telling. As a *Mzungu*, a person with white skin, I sensed I was being treated differently too. Such treatment was usually respectful. But I wondered how much the colour of my skin, perceived wealth and Kenya's colonial past influenced interactions too.

Many of the people I met in relation to my project were Kalenjin, the ethnic group from which most Kenyan champions have emerged. It was very clear how important endurance running was to their cultural identity. Manners (1997, 2007) suggested that sociocultural factors, such as ritual circumcision and cattle raiding, were historically important in allowing the Kalenjin to become particularly well-adapted to the demands of distance running. Furthermore, during colonialism and the emergent period from independence 'Plantation owners...used running to assist in social control, to keep the locals busy and out of mischief' (Bale, 2007, p46). The simplicity of running fitted well into such a context where the need for infrastructure and equipment is limited. Running was a central part of the cultural landscape, not simply a specialised activity that sat separate from everyday life.

I spent most of my time in Eldoret, 'The City of Champions' and in the village of Iten 'The Home of Champions'. This is where most runners live. One of the people I met was Fatwell Kimaiyo, who acted as my driver. Despite being nearly 80 years old, Fatwell was still a potato farmer and a coach. It transpired that he had been a 110 m and 400 m hurdler who competed at the Olympics, winning gold at the African Games and Commonwealth Games. Fatwell explained that some of his records still exist, not because Kenyans are not fast enough to win over shorter distances, but because it is harder to make money doing so. He gave me deep insight into Kenyan running culture, explaining that people do not run for fun. They do so in the belief, that God willing, they can make a living by following in the footsteps of other champions.

Most of the people in Iten appeared to be subsistence living. In a bar one evening, a group of farmers had explained that the recent rainfall was unprecedented

so it hadn't been a good year. In a primarily agricultural area, this was having a profound effect on people's ability to make a living. Within a stone's throw of the market in Iten was St Patrick's school, whose alumni represent some of the world's greatest distance runners in history. In a dip below, the school was a dirt field resembling a 400 m running track where a group of very fast-looking runners were doing running drills in unison.

On the other side of the village was Lornah Kiplagat's High-Altitude Training Centre. This was a luxury resort that brings economic benefit to the village, where typically Western elite & recreational runners come to train at altitude in the 'magic' air. The differences in what I observed between St Patrick's and Kiplagat's were stark. Runners were training in small groups or individually, focussing on lap splits, heart rate, and other quantifiable data. I could have been at my local track in Scotland. But there was a greater sense of collective energy in St Patrick's training field. There the runners appeared to be members of a social network rather than a group of individual runners. The Kenyans were performing complex and interactive joint behaviours, such as drills, which evolved into slow then fast running. Hasson et al. (2012) describe such phenomenon as 'synergy through joint action' in which movements are more accurate and faster when performed with others.

The more time I spent with Kalenjin people in Kenya, the more I experienced an unsettling feeling of belonging that I did not feel at home. I felt part of a wider community network and less of an individual. People were always willing to help, especially by introducing me to influential family and friends. In reading Michael Crawley's book *'Out of Thin Air'* (Crawley, 2020), he captured a similar phenomenon with runners in Ethiopia when he said:

The majority of runners in the West tend to think of athletic potential of an individual as self-contained, and as bound within one body, energy in Ethiopia is seen as trans-bodily. It can flow between people, it can be shared and it can even, on occasion, be stolen.

Such synergy through joint action was the closest I came to explaining the secrets of success of Kenyan runners. Of course, it is far more complex than that. Success has come at a price too, with a high prevalence of what Western medicine would call mental health issues and doping. However, juxtaposing my experiences in the United Kingdom, I believe we have a lot to learn from Kenya. That is not to say that Kenya could act as a blueprint for talent programmes in the West. Nothing could be further from the truth. But reflecting on what I had seen and experienced in Kenya I found that a Salutogenic lens helped make sense of the experience (Table 6.2).

TABLE 6.2 Perceptions of Kenyan running through a salutogenic lens

Andy's perceptions		A salutogenic interpretation
Sense of coherence	Meaningfulness	<p>Running is culturally very important to many Kenyans, with the belief that, God willing, they can win on the world stage.</p> <p>Success is defined by winning and the prize money that it brings. Success allows athletes to support extended families, develops local infrastructure, and drives economic growth through tourism. Material conditions of the runners and the consequences of failure drive their need for success. The sheer number of runners, who are motivated by this need, in part explains the levels of performance in Kenya.</p> <p>Runners are viewed as important role models within their local communities and internationally.</p>
	Comprehensibility	<p>The Kenyan sociocultural milieu, including language, clearly influences life-values, motivations, comprehensibility of the world, and thus stress appraisal.</p> <p>The 'Will of God' is viewed as more important than talent. Such belief is intertwined with the belief they were running in the footprints of other champions and that chances of success were realistic.</p> <p>Runners rarely come from 'educated classes' and often leave school prematurely to run. Furthermore, living in rural Kenya reflects a very narrow, but challenging, bandwidth of experiences. Such bandwidth may be ideal to learn to run fast, but it does not prepare them for winning on the world stage and the financial benefits that can bring.</p> <p>Unlike Hardy et al. (2017) the runners I met were all very humble and did not appear to be selfish. There was tacit comprehension that they needed each other, which reflected in how they trained together.</p>
	Manageability	<p>Material conditions of the runners and the consequences of failure drive their need for success. The sheer numbers of runners who are motivated by this need, in part explains the levels of performance in Kenya.</p> <p>Morphological factors, diet, sociocultural, and historical context converge to explain why (primarily) Kalenjin are well adapted to the demands of running. Educational attainment levels and the demands of transitioning into international competition mean that some athletes are not well equipped to cope with success. Rather, they are susceptible to exploitation, doping practices, poor financial management, and other factors that can impact career longevity and, on their health, and mental well-being.</p>
		<p>Kenya is a country of contrast, contradiction, and profound inequality. Severe resource constraints mean that societal resistance resources are low. However, there are also salutogenic factors that those of us from high-resource settings can learn from. SOC emerges from necessity in which a better sense of community, more efficient use of collective and personal resources are apparent.</p> <p>A strong collective identity, moral strength and spiritual/religious good fortune are more explanatory for success than individual talent. People tended not to expect anything from wider society, and I perceived that there was no sense of entitlement amongst runners.</p> <p>Training adaptations emerged through synergy between the environment, training partners, efficient use of energy during training, and a strong moral imperative. Diet was simple but sufficient to meet the energetic demands of training.</p> <p>This contrasted with my experiences in higher-resource talent systems. There appears to be a greater sense of expectation from athletes and their families on what the system has to offer, a greater sense of self as an individual, with the collective identity and moral strength often lacking. This is not to suggest a deficit in young people at an individual level. Rather, resistance resources and SOC grow by focussing on all people within the system, not just individuals who appear to be the most talented.</p> <p>Talent systems in high-resource systems presumably exist to provide RR for athletes, specifically social support. However, the lack of coherence in these systems and the need to continually measure things can detract from SOC. In Kenya, the system is coherent because it is relatively simple. The only measurements that matter are race results and times.</p>

Kenya is a country full of contradictions and this was reflected in the Salutogenic nature of the environment. In terms of RRs, material conditions were poor. However, Kenyan runners were part of a collective endeavour that was rooted in cultural and community. Running is a relatively simple endeavour that requires few resources which is essential in a society that is economically impoverished. Training groups tended to be relatively informal and heuristically constructed, based on the ability to 'keep up' rather than on formal selection criterion or oversight from an outside organisation. There was a collective, albeit tacit, understanding that any given athlete was part of a greater whole and that they needed each other. Due to its simplicity, the 'system' has minimal variety and is relatively stable (Beer, 1974) within a relatively narrow bandwidth which serves to create system longevity embedding it further into community and culture. I found that the Kenyan's appeared to have strong SOC about the way that they engaged in their running, a coherence that came from multiple influences.

Conclusions: Winning without Unnecessary Costs

My hope in writing this chapter was that it would encourage you to think about what talent and success means to you, perhaps shaping your actions in the future. If you are a student or academic, I encourage you to think about how your life course has influenced your thinking. My overarching conclusion that governs all my practice is that everyone has great potential. The foundation for this belief is that if I can be relatively successful in sport, then with the right support and material conditions, anyone can. Ruthlessness and selfishness have not been part of my journey. This is not virtue signalling. Rather, not being the fastest, most enduring, or strongest chimp in the troop has meant I have had to develop different strategies to adapt and prosper. I have a realist perspective on life. It is an irrefutable fact that we live in a social world in which ruthlessness, selfishness, and irrationality can dominate over more humanistic and rational behaviours. The 'ideal' will never exist. It has been and will always be thus. Sport exists within and reflects the wider social world. We all have the potential to make this world better too if we direct our energies in the right direction.

A wider question is how do we direct this energy to achieve the goals of Bergeron et al. (2015)? The simple answer is through efficient and well-functioning talent systems. However, the laws which explain effective organisation of systems tell us that as a system becomes more complex, more resources are required to attain and maintain system stability. Children do not necessarily need 'professional' set-ups of academy directors, programme managers, sport scientists, and a wider talent entourage to support healthy adaptation. Rather, they need to develop a strong SOC ~~within and because of the sporting community, they exist within.~~ Recognising that not everyone can be a winner

in sport that life is often unfair and that people can often be horrible is part of growing up and developing a strong SOC.

In Kenya, because few material resources are available for formal talent development, such informal systems remain relatively simple, stable, and allow athletes to focus on goal attainment. However, sporting systems to support talent development in the United Kingdom have become too complex, incoherent, and lack focus towards attainment of realistic goals. The interwoven influences of political rhetoric, conflicting agendas and survival instincts dictate collective behaviours more than evidence of efficacy. The collective energy of people within these complex social networks is used inefficiently and people within them often lose sight of what their purpose is. In short, I'd suggest that many talent development systems and thus interventions to purportedly support them are self-perpetuating energy hungry systems that rarely achieve what they are meant to.

Sport needs people with a strong SOC to prosper; capable administrators, coach educators, coaches, referees, volunteers, and so on. Their collective energy should be harnessed to support active adaptation and help athletes maintain a healthy relationship with sport throughout their life course. Earlier in the chapter, I explored negativity bias as defined by Corns (2018). I am guilty of such bias, believing that most talent development pathways and models which support them are failing. They have traditionally focussed on transitioning children to elite sport, selling the belief that the odds of success are far better than the <0.01% that the data demonstrates. The odds are typically far less for those from disadvantaged communities. The effects on youth athletes from parental expectations and the energy used by the systems to manage such expectations reflect gross inefficiencies and no one wins. Sport in the United Kingdom has been set the task of widening the remit of sport, to address health, well-being, and inequality agendas. However, this has simply added variety to the system, without the necessary resources or structures to have an impact beyond the short-term. Of course, there are some community-level successes, but these are generally because of the investment of energy from local people, usually independent of wider systemic influences. Having a Salutogenic orientation is not about complaining about what is wrong though. It is about exploring how we create healthy and adaptive environments in which people can prosper.

To conclude, the facts remain that many people are attracted to sport because they love winners and take great joy in winning, and winners cannot exist without losers. Most funding would disappear overnight if this was not the case. However, success in all its forms is created through the flow and sharing of energy between people. Much of this energy is 'stolen', representing unnecessary social and financial costs within overly complex and incoherent systems. 'Winning at all Costs' mentalities usually means winning with unnecessary and undesirable costs. Focussing on all people in the system and harnessing their collective energy through coherent and Salutogenic systems is part of the solution.

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