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## The Early Sport and Play Experiences of Elite New Zealand Hockey Players From Rural and Regional Communities: A qualitative descriptive study

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## The Early Sport and Play Experiences of Elite New Zealand Hockey Players From Rural and Regional Communities: A qualitative descriptive study

### Abstract

The foundation of an athlete's development is formed through their early developmental experiences. Thus, in this study we explored the early sport and play experiences of elite New Zealand hockey players from rural and regional communities. In our examination of how smaller communities contribute to the development of New Zealand's top athletes, this research has a particular focus on the athletes' early sport and play experiences and the influence of people around them during their growth and development. In this qualitative descriptive study, we employed semi-structured interviews to gather data from eight current and former elite New Zealand hockey players. The study's findings contribute to the ongoing debate regarding whether early specialisation positively or negatively influences young athletes' development. Furthermore, it provides evidence supporting the benefits of a developmental and delayed specialisation pathway to elite performance. Surrounded by a physical, social, and cultural environment that supported freedom and responsibility alongside unstructured, outdoor, risky play experiences, the participants of this study benefited from their early developmental experiences, which supported their pathways to elite level.

### Keywords

early specialisation, deliberate play, family support, semi-structured interviews, developmental model of sport participation

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### Acknowledgements

Hockey New Zealand, Elite male and female hockey players involved in the study

# **The Early Sport and Play Experiences of Elite New Zealand Hockey Players From Rural and Regional Communities: A Qualitative Descriptive Study**

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The foundation of an athlete's development is formed through their early developmental experiences. Thus, in this study we explored the early sport and play experiences of elite New Zealand hockey players from rural and regional communities. In our examination of how smaller communities contribute to the development of New Zealand's top athletes, this research has a particular focus on the athletes' early sport and play experiences and the influence of people around them during their growth and development. In this qualitative descriptive study, we employed semi-structured interviews to gather data from eight current and former elite New Zealand hockey players. The study's findings contribute to the ongoing debate regarding whether early specialisation positively or negatively influences young athletes' development. Furthermore, it provides evidence supporting the benefits of a developmental and delayed specialisation pathway to elite performance. Surrounded by a physical, social, and cultural environment that supported freedom and responsibility alongside unstructured, outdoor, risky play experiences, the participants of this study benefited from their early developmental experiences, which supported their pathways to elite level.

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## **Introduction**

Development pathways to elite sporting performance have consistently attracted the attention of researchers and sport organisations. Until recently, the notion of 10,000 hours of practice being the optimal pathway to elite sporting success, popularised by Gladwell (2008), was widely accepted. This was a key driver of intense, specialised training, referred to as "early specialisation," at an early age. Athlete development, however, is multifaceted, dynamic and includes several domains (i.e., physical, cognitive, etc.), phases and stages through which athletes progress. There is increasing evidence that sampling a range of sports benefits athlete

development (Côté et al., 2009; Goodway & Robinson, 2015). Unstructured play (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012) and risk-taking (Dietze et al., 2013) also complement early sport experiences by supporting healthy development. The role of significant people such as friends and family and the community surrounding athletes also impacts their motivation to engage and continue participating in sport (Storm et al., 2014).

Ankersen (2012) identified several geographical areas/regions (“goldmines”) that consistently produce elite athletes. Many of these areas/regions were small, isolated communities with limited equipment and facilities. Small communities often produce athletic success (Balish & Côté, 2014), which has been linked to having opportunities to participate in a broad range of relatively unstructured youth-led activities. These activities often occur in community-supported environments built on deep family roots (Balish & Côté, 2014).

Despite literature highlighting potential relationships between small communities and sporting success, and regular media stories (e.g., Howell, 2017) linking elite New Zealand athletes to rural childhoods, scant research of this nature exists in New Zealand. Furthermore, there is limited research in New Zealand drawing upon elite athletes’ voices to examine their pathways to success.

The aim of the study was to answer the research question: What are the early sport and play experiences of elite New Zealand hockey players from rural and regional communities? Specifically, this study focusses on early sport and free play experiences, and the environment and people surrounding athletes during their development.

Before exploring the literature pertinent to this study, it may be useful to provide some context around field hockey. Field hockey is a global sport (Watson, 2015). New Zealand hockey teams have participated in the Olympics since 1954 (Hockey New Zealand, 2016). Currently, both the New Zealand men’s and women’s teams are ranked in the top eight in the world, a position they have held for several years (International Hockey Federation, 2021). Field hockey traditionally lends itself to both an early specialisation pathway and an early sampling experience and in New Zealand is equally popular for boys and girls (Hockey New Zealand, 2020). Therefore, hockey was deemed suitable as the sport of focus for this study.

## **Background Literature**

This review examines literature on a range of topics associated with athlete development, including early non-sporting experiences.

### **Athlete Development**

There are several athlete development models, including Bloom’s (1985) Developing Talent in Young People Model; the Long-Term Athlete Development Model (Balyi & Hamilton, 2010; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014); and the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté, 1999; Côté et al., 2012). According to Bruner et al. (2010), the DMSP is the most prominent conceptualisation cited in the literature and identifies two major pathways to elite performance. Firstly, “early specialisation,” characterised by high volumes of deliberate practice (sport-specific structured practice), low volumes of deliberate play (e.g., backyard football) and participation in one sport from an early age. Secondly, “early sampling,” which has three distinct developmental stages: (1) the sampling years (childhood; 6–12 years); (2) the specialising years (early adolescence; 13–15 years); and (3) the investment years (late adolescence; 16+ years). There is an additional category of the recreational years (adolescence; ages 13+ years; Côté et al., 2012). The DMSP is the basis for substantive work examining holistic athlete development pathways (e.g., Côté & Hancock, 2016). Ford et al. (2011) suggests that, irrespective of the model used, athlete development should be holistic, as it

involves complex interactions encompassing multiple issues impacting athletic opportunity and progression.

The notion that humans are complex dynamic systems, inseparable from and reciprocal with their environment is central to athlete development (Chow et al., 2015; Davids et al., 2008). Humans learn and develop best in an implicit discovery manner, and the literature has focused on holistically developing adaptable, resilient athletes who make effective decisions (Brymer, 2010; Davids et al., 2008; Gorman, 2010). Additionally, Davids et al. (2017) stated “a range of personal, task and environmental constraints impinges on performance and learning during athlete development at different, related, timescales” (p. 192). Therefore, the environment within which athletes grow and develop, and their experiences, are key to their development, and are certainly not linear.

The benefits of unstructured early sport experiences comprising unstructured play (Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Côté & Erickson, 2015; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012), sampling a range of sports (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Côté et al., 2012; Goodway & Robinson, 2015) and risk taking (Dietze et al., 2013; Niehues et al., 2015; Rosin, 2014; Spencer et al., 2021) are regularly highlighted. The “motivational climate” surrounding a young person’s early development is also important, and encompasses significant people, relationships and the surrounding environment (Bebetsos et al., 2014; Curran et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2011; Poux & Fry, 2015).

### **Early Specialisation vs. Early Sampling**

A major point of contention within athlete development is early specialisation versus early sampling/diversification (for example, see Larson et al., 2019). Côté et al. (2012) define early specialisation as a deliberate practice model focusing on specialising in one sport from an early age. Early sampling/diversification has been defined as participating in a variety of sports with lower levels of deliberate practice and higher levels of deliberate play, with specialisation occurring later (Côté et al., 2012). Over the past twenty years, athlete development has predominantly followed an early specialisation pathway (Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Côté et al., 2012), which is a proven pathway for athlete development (Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Helsen et al., 1998), particularly in sports where peak performance typically occurs pre-physical maturity (e.g., gymnastics). Adult models of elite-level professional performance dominate youth sporting practice and advocate early specialisation (Bergeron, 2010). However, early specialisation has several disadvantages, including physical and emotional decline (Smucny et al., 2015); failure to reach full adult growth (Goodway & Robinson, 2015); burnout; reduced enjoyment (Côté & Hancock, 2016); increased injury rates (Ahlquist et al., 2020); loss of motivation and dropout (Fransen et al., 2012; Goodway & Robinson, 2015).

Conversely, diverse early sporting experiences (sampling pathways) have numerous advantages. Hodge et al. (2012) found that engaging in a wide range of sports and physical activities at an early age was beneficial to elite New Zealand athletes’ development in specific sports. Sampling pathways also enhance development of essential fundamental movement skills (Goodway & Robinson, 2015; Thomas & Wilson, 2014); increased enjoyment (Côté & Hancock, 2016); access to a range of sports (Goodway & Robinson, 2015); motivation to remain physically active later in life (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Goodway & Robinson, 2015); reduced injuries (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Cuff et al., 2010); higher levels of self-determination (Moesch et al., 2013); and improved fitness (Fransen et al., 2012).

## **Play**

Play is engaged in primarily for its own sake (Eberle, 2014; Huizinga, 2002), is largely unstructured and self-led, and, in New Zealand, is closely linked to freedom and creativity (White et al., 2009). Benefits of play include learning societal roles, norms, and values, developing physical and cognitive competencies, and enhancing creativity, self-worth, and efficacy (Brussoni et al., 2012; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Play also enables children to learn through cooperation, imitation, and trial and error (Fatai et al., 2014), and facilitates development of decision-making skills (Berry et al., 2008). Furthermore, outdoor play supports development of motor fitness capabilities, environmental awareness, and navigation competencies, and promotes creativity (Bento & Dias, 2017; Brussoni et al., 2012; Taylor & Kuo, 2006).

## **Risk Taking**

Risk taking is an essential element of play. Sandseter (2009) provided a template of “risky” play categories, including great heights; high speed; dangerous tools; dangerous elements; rough-and-tumble; and disappear/get lost. Despite some inherent dangers such as injuries (Brussoni et al., 2015), risky play is important for children’s development, learning, mental and physical health (Brussoni et al., 2012; Engelen et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2021); building confidence (Rosin, 2014); and developing critical thinking skills, physically active lifestyles, and self-regulation skills. This leads to improved self-confidence and self-esteem (Dietze et al., 2013), happiness, well-being, and resilience (Niehues et al., 2015). Enabling children to take risks helps them develop important risk-assessment skills and take responsibility for their own safety (Bourke & Sargisson, 2014).

Recently, risky play, particularly outdoor play, has declined in western societies (Brussoni et al., 2012; Clements, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2015), resulting in less opportunities for children to experience and learn from taking risks (Bento & Dias, 2017; Bourke & Sargisson, 2014). This has been attributed to multiple factors, including the influence of technology, changing ways of life (Barlow, 2015; Neely et al., 2015), health and safety rules (Jelleyman et al., 2019) and risk-averse parenting. For children and youth, overprotective parenting in low-risk environments can negatively impact psychosocial development (Ungar, 2009) and reduce self-confidence and development of crucial life skills (Brussoni & Olsen, 2013; Çelik et al., 2012).

The strongest link between play and athlete development appears to be “deliberate play” (Côté, 1999), which refers to modified, unstructured versions of sport or “pick up” games. Bowers and Green (2013) note that adults typically perceive unstructured sport as play with no real value despite its benefits, such as comfort and confidence to be creative and take risks. Likewise, Balish and Côté (2014) identify participation in youth-led unstructured sport as a contributing factor to athletic success.

## **Motivation**

Enjoyment is an important aspect of sport that motivates adults and children to participate (Bailey, 2012; Bailey et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2011). Increased or decreased enjoyment is linked to early sampling or early specialisation pathways, respectively (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Côté et al., 2012). Phillips et al. (2014) found maintaining enjoyment during early development is important for elite cricket players. Bailey et al. (2013) identified fun and enjoyment as one of five primary factors mediating children’s participation in sport. Therefore,

it appears young people are more likely to continue playing sport if they perceive it as enjoyable.

## People

In addition to athletes' wider communities, the socio-emotional environment, also termed "motivational climate," created by coaches, parents, siblings, and peers is essential to holistic athlete development (Becker & Solomon, 2009; Curran et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2016; Storm et al., 2014).

Evidence internationally and here in New Zealand supports the importance of the motivational climate and the influence of coaches, parents, siblings and peers on the athlete's developmental experience, including work with Malaysian student athletes (Ibrahim et al., 2016), elite Danish athletes (Storm et al., 2014), British elite junior slalom canoeists (Knight et al., 2016), US division one athletes (Poux & Fry, 2015), Hungarian elite hammer throwers (Benczenleitner et al., 2013), and New Zealand elite athletes across a range of sports (Hodge et al., 2012). According to Phillips et al. (2014), coaches are integral to athlete development. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) found that certain coach behaviours positively affect athlete development, such as believing in the athletes, making good connections, and communicating well with them, providing constructive feedback, and being good role models. Conversely, absence of these behaviours might negatively impact athletes' experiences.

Parents also help to shape athletes' motivational climates. Parents provide essential emotional, informational, and practical support (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Knight et al., 2016), and influence athletes' sport experiences and the type of sport and level of competition they participate in (Bebetsos et al., 2014). Parents' roles are dynamic and ever changing throughout the different stages of athlete development, ranging from introducing children to sport in the "sampling years," to providing financial support and combatting setbacks during the "specialising" and "investment" years (Côté, 1999). O'Rourke et al. (2014) have noted that at season end, parents have even more influence than coaches on young athletes' motivational climate, supporting self-esteem, trait anxiety and autonomous regulation.

Furthermore, parents provide support including time, finance, and transport towards their child's sporting pursuits (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Wheeler and Green (2014) noted parents invest significant time, money, and energy into their child's sport due to perceived social, psychological, and physical benefits for them. However, providing ongoing financial support can be stressful for families (Harwood & Knight, 2009).

Close relationships between peers built on common interests frequently occur within sport. Relationships can be formed between different aged peers, and present opportunities for role modelling and leadership (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009), which enhances youth athletes' development (MacDonald et al., 2011).

Balish and Côté (2014) and Bowers and Green (2013) found that community support, which possibly encapsulates all elements of the "motivational climate," significantly influenced the development of successful athletes. Both studies examined participants from small communities/areas, which suggests small communities may positively affect athletes' motivational climates.

## Rural and Regional Athletes

According to Ankersen (2012), several areas across the globe consistently produce elite athletes. Typically, these areas are small, independent, and often isolated communities with minimal equipment. Balish and Côté (2014) found that young athletes in a small athletically successful Canadian community spent significant time participating in youth-led,

predominantly outdoor, sporting activities. These activities primarily involved mixed-age youths, who typically played and competed together in subsequent years. Balish and Côté (2014) also identified deep family roots in the community and stability growing up as key factors of athletic success, as the community emphasised development and participation, rather than winning, at a young age (Balish & Côté, 2014), which created valuable opportunities for early sport sampling (Balish & Côté, 2014; Bowers & Green, 2013).

New Zealand urban centres are small by global standards, with a large proportion of the population living outside these centres (Statistics New Zealand, 2016). However, New Zealand has excelled on the world sporting scene. For instance, New Zealand finished with the fourth highest medal tally per capita at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (Burrows, 2021). Hurley (2012) states “small town New Zealand is still the home of our Olympic medallists despite the big cities having most of the country's high-performance facilities” (para. 1). This suggests New Zealand’s rural and regional communities provide key developmental experiences for the nation’s top athletes worthy of study.

### **Study Context**

This study is based on a master’s study conducted by the primary author who is a lecturer in sport and recreation at a tertiary institute. The second, third and fourth authors of this study are lecturers in sport and recreation, with specific interests and expertise in the sociology of sport, sports coaching and athlete development and were supervisors of the initial master’s study. Author five is a research assistant who was involved in developing the original master’s study to a manuscript format and the final editing process. Author one’s interest in this topic stems from his rural upbringing and regional age group success as a hockey player and athlete. All authors are passionate about young people’s experiences in sport and have a collective interest in creating more supportive environments for young athletes.

### **Method**

The aim of our research was to explore the early experiences of elite New Zealand hockey players from rural and regional communities. Specifically, our study focuses on early sport experiences; early play experiences; and the environment and people surrounding the athletes as they grew and developed.

We used a qualitative descriptive approach to describe participants’ perceptions and experiences of the world (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). This approach differs from other forms of qualitative research as it provides straight description rather than theory development or interpreting the meaning of an experience. Perceptions are shaped by human interpretations and need to be as true and real as possible. In the context of our study, participants’ perceptions of their experiences are essential for describing their early sport and play experiences.

Ethical permission was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

### **Participants**

We used purposive sampling to identify potential participants. Participants were required to have: (1) represented New Zealand in hockey at elite level; and (2) spent their sampling years (childhood; 6–12 years) in a rural/regional area (as defined by Statistics New Zealand, 2017).



Our participant recruitment began with an initial consultation between the primary author and Hockey New Zealand. Hockey New Zealand provided a list of 15 potential participants who were, subsequently, contacted via email and invited to participate in the study.

Eight (six current, two former) elite New Zealand hockey players participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Gender	Elite New Zealand Hockey Status (Black Sticks)	'Rural' Status
1	Female	Current	Highly rural/remote area (small farming community)
2	Female	Current	Highly rural/remote area (small farming community)
3	Female	Current	Rural area with high urban influence
4	Female	Retired	Rural area with high urban influence
5	Male	Current	Secondary urban (small regional township)
6	Male	Current	Minor urban (small regional township)
7	Male	Current	Highly rural/remote area (small farming community)
8	Male	Retired	Minor urban (small regional township)

## Data Collection

Participants provided fully informed consent. Prior to the interviews, indicative questions were shared with each participant to aid memory recall of childhood experiences. Interviews were digitally recorded, ranging in length from 62 to 97 minutes, and transcribed verbatim.

Interview questions were based on previous research (e.g., Hodge et al., 2012), in-depth discussions with Hockey New Zealand and phone/video call conversations with key authors of previous New Zealand-based athlete development research. These questions were developed under three overarching areas of interest: "early sport experiences," "early play experiences," and "the people around them."

Due to the semi structured conversational interview approach employed (Baumgartner & Hensley, 2006; Dearnley, 2005; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Mojtahed et al., 2014), an element of flexibility was applied to the questioning. Although the questions were preformulated, a semi-structured interview approach allowed the researcher to digress from the interview guide as required by participant responses (Matthews & Kostelis, 2011).

## Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed by the researcher using NVivo11 and thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages.

**Table 2**  
*Phases of Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description of Process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Interview transcripts were read and re-read to obtain familiarity with the data. Data was simultaneously collected and analysed (Sandelowski, 2000) through “memoing” (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003; Cooney, 2011) and “notes on transcripts.” To enhance truthfulness, ‘member checking’ was also employed (Matthews & Kostelis, 2011) and transcripts were shared with participants to confirm accuracy.
2. Generating initial codes	Guided by the three overarching areas of interest, data was analysed both deductively and inductively (e.g., whenever a recurring topic, such as “Risky Play,” was identified within participant transcripts a code was generated; Terry et al., 2017). Regular meetings were held between the researchers during all phases of the analysis to review and discuss the process.
3. Searching for themes	Coded data was sorted into themes and relevant data extracts were collated under each theme. For example, information relating to parents’ involvement in their child’s sport was coded under the theme “support” and sub-theme “parents.” A range of themes and sub-themes were identified, and all associated data sets collated within them.
4. Reviewing themes	Themes were then reviewed, and dominant themes identified and refined. A selection of transcripts was shared with the researchers, followed by a discussion to ensure consistency of themes gained from responses. Thematic concept maps were produced, which outlined dominant themes and illustrated how they linked together.
5. Defining and naming themes	The reviewing process continued to refine and name the themes (Terry et al., 2017). Themes were considered in relation to other themes and individually.
6. Producing the report	Finally, an initial preliminary findings report was drafted, which helped to finalise and refine dominant themes and sub-themes, providing a descriptive summary that best fit the data (Sandelowski, 2000). This report provided the basis for the final discussion and review before the final write-up.

## Results

Four dominant themes that emerged from data analysis are presented in this section: Diverse range of sports played; Types of play; Roaming and responsibility; and Support. Participants are referred to as P1-P8.

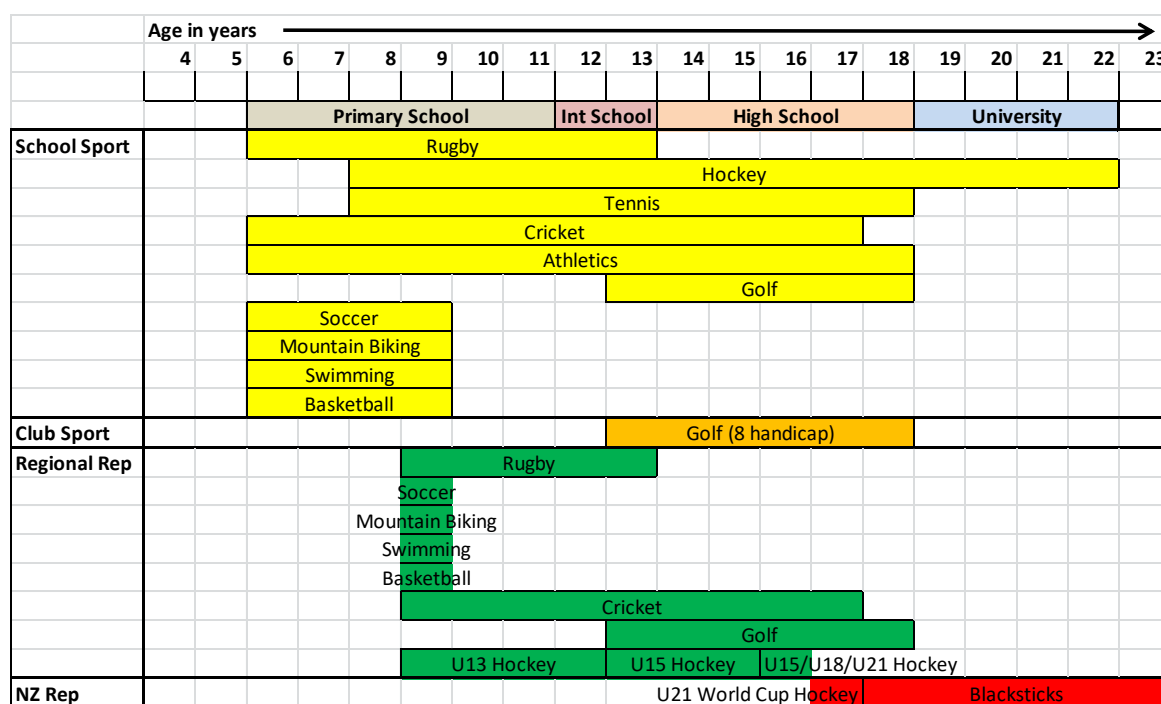
### Diverse Range of Sports Played

Seven participants engaged in a diverse range of sports, including athletics, basketball, cricket, golf, gymnastics, horse riding, mountain biking, rugby, shooting, soccer, swimming, tennis, touch rugby and volleyball. Seven participants played both an individual and team sport. P8 reflected, “I started doing tennis, then I started doing things like basketball, and I pretty much tried most sports. So, I think...between five and eight [years old] ... it definitely was rugby, tennis, cricket, soccer, hockey, athletics, mountain biking, swimming and basketball.” Participants engaged with sport at a young age and the diverse range of sports they played extended into the participants’ high school years, where they continued to engage with a range of sports. P2 stated:

At high school I tried soccer for a year, did some volleyball. Obviously, athletics, rugby, hockey and did table tennis. They tried to get me into touch, but I wasn't really keen on that. I did a cricket tournament once and then quite liked badminton too, so just dabbled around [laughter].

Sport timelines were also captured as a component of the analysis process (see Figure 1, for an example). When describing their early sport experiences, participants outlined their entire sporting pathway encompassing their first sport experience through to their selection for the New Zealand hockey team. These sport experiences are unique to each participant and illustrate the strong relationship between experiences at a young age and those later in life.

**Figure 1**  
*Participant Sporting Timeline*



Note. Timeline template adapted from Hodge et al. (2012).

Most of the participants attended relatively small schools (less than 300 students), which they often credited for their involvement in a diverse range of sports. At times, insufficient player numbers resulted in a mix of genders playing together. This was coupled with a supportive environment where participants were able to be self-determining and make their own choices at an early age.

Participants mentioned a variety of benefits from playing a diverse range of sports, including determining what they were good at; playing for enjoyment; acquiring transferable skills, such as vision, hand-eye coordination, movement, and footwork; vision of the bigger picture and understanding the game better; developing a range of skills, including skills that improved their performance in hockey. P1 stated:

I came in fresh [playing hockey], loving it and I wasn't just drilled...I just got to play lots of different sports, have fun, obviously I was competitive, but I got

to find out what my favourite sport was by default, like by experimenting [with] other sports.

All participants mentioned playing hockey from a relatively young age. One participant specialised early in hockey due to the school and influential members of the community being hockey focused. P4 stated, “there were no other sports we could play [at school], so hockey was the only option...it was a real hockey community.”

Sport was important to most communities and often coupled with an implicit, or in some cases explicit, expectation to be involved with sports that the area was renowned for.

Participants eventually narrowed their focus to one or two sports for reasons including timetable clashes between sports codes, coaches’ influence, injuries and, ultimately, sporting success.

### **Types of Play**

Most participants stated their early childhoods included unstructured play with inherent risk. P4 said, “we would be climbing the rocks, finding freshwater crayfish, catching the bugs, making huts outside, taking the fern fronds off and making little hideouts.” All participants mentioned having unstructured “muck around” sport experiences as children. Participants felt that less structured experiences, including versions of structured sport and made-up games, supported their development as elite athletes:

Sometimes when it freezes enough at home you get the real ice on the dam...we must have done that [played ice hockey] a lot because all my family members just have the big box of old-fashioned skates. So, we’d all get our skates on and play ice hockey, we all had old wooden sticks, we bought a puck and have goals and then tractor lights were on, you have your big bonfire going. (P2)

Participants mentioned that their play (e.g., climbing trees, riding bikes, playing modified games of rugby, or playing “go home, stay home” (a New Zealand version of hide and seek, generally played in the dark) in the local forest) was ultimately driven by them with the majority of these play experiences embracing the outdoor environment and elements of risk.

### **Roaming and Responsibility**

Participants mentioned having high levels of responsibility placed upon them at a young age, which included important jobs at their home or farm, and caring for animals. P7 stated, “I got my first dog when I was six, had my first horse at that age as well. I’ve got seven dogs now and two horses.”

Participants said they were generally allowed to roam freely, including near potentially dangerous elements, such as waterways. P2 explained, “We were allowed to go down to the river and play...we’d just take things through the hole in the fence and go down and dig around and muck around for hours.” Many of the participants were the oldest sibling, often fulfilling a supervisory role over their younger siblings, taking on roles of responsibility at relatively young ages.

Roaming was generally more accepted by participants’ families when they were in larger groups nurturing a sense of community at early ages, looking out for themselves and their peers. For instance, P8 recalled, “If I said, ‘Oh, me and my brother are going to go down

[to the forest to play]’ generally the answer would be ‘No, unless there’s a whole bunch of you going down.’”

Strong wider community support was also apparent. Participants noted feeling safe to roam due to adults within the community looking out for them. According to P4, “Within a distance of 20k (kilometres), 10k each way, we knew everybody, and everybody knew us. So, everyone was always obviously looking out for people...it was such a safe community and obviously a really supportive community.”

However, participants also noted that this has changed, and communities are now quite different to what they were five to ten years ago. Despite enjoying a safe and supportive community in their youth, most participants perceived a shift that has occurred in recent years with that sense of community living and support declining.

## Support

### *Parents*

All participants acknowledged that support from their parents contributed immensely towards them reaching elite level. Even as elite adult athletes, participants commented on the support they still receive from their parents. P2 explained, “You’ve got to have supportive parents because they name teams quite late. It’s not like you have a lot of preparation, so you need to be able to afford to go. My parents have always been there to help.”

All participants felt that parents were crucial to helping them overcome challenges, such as financial costs associated with playing:

Hands down the biggest reason I’ve gone as far with hockey is financial support from my parents...and the amount of money [they have spent]. I think they worked out that they spent 15 grand on it last year. (P7)

Participants commented that parents supported them through travelling challenges. P3 mentioned, “My mum and dad would spend a lot of their time driving me from different sports to training and then a different training.”

A large proportion of participants either had farming parents with flexible hours or came from households where one parent did not work. This enabled parents to be available to support their child’s sporting pursuits. P1 commented:

I was probably lucky in a sense that my mum only worked half a day, twice a week, so she was available, and then dad obviously, you don’t have set hours as a farmer. It’s probably lucky that my parents were there if I needed, they weren’t full-time working, or you know office job or something where you can’t get time off.

This quote highlights the unique nature of the largely rural settings where these participants grew up.

Furthermore, some participants credited their parents’ involvement in sport as influencing their participation. For example, P7 indicated he played rugby and hockey due to his parents’ involvement, “my dad played rugby...he played rugby quite a bit...and mum was a hockey player.”

Parents were also employed in volunteer sport-related positions within the community. This was typically due to their children being involved in sport. Some participants mentioned deciding to play a particular sport due to one of their parents being the coach.

### *Siblings*

Siblings had considerable impact on participants' development. As highlighted in the "roaming and responsibility" theme, siblings often influenced participants' play experiences, either as supervisors or key playmates. Participants also noted siblings were key practice buddies, as P8 explained:

My younger brother...we were quite competitive...we would go and train on a cricket astro pitch, which is kind of less than a couple of hockey sticks width. We would do that all day and all night, as much as we possibly could. So, our tight skills and stuff kind of got created from there quite quickly.

Some participants credited their siblings as a reason why they started playing a sport. In some instances, siblings were spoken of as "role models." In other instances, participants were "dragged along" to their siblings' sporting fixtures, which led to them being involved. For example, P7 recalled, "The only reason I was playing hockey was sort of filling in because my mum was coaching a team and my sister was playing in a team...and I was there."

### *Coaches*

Coaches had major influence on participants' sport development, including attainment of elite status. Participants stated that coaches provided support in many ways, such as confidence building. For example, P4 mentioned. "[my coach said] 'I bet you're going to be a Black Stick [New Zealand elite hockey team player] one day.'" This comment from the coach planted a seed in the participant's mind that she could be successful as a hockey player. Participants also felt at times coaches' support was direct and persuasive; for example, P8 said:

He [the coach] coached me at the first academy, and throughout my career...I think it was after I got picked in the under-21 World Cup. He called me up and goes "I've got you a scholarship for university. I want you to come up to Auckland. I want you to play on their club hockey team and you're going to live with these other New Zealand players and stuff, all sorted." I was just like "yeah, sweet, of course, I'm there."

### *Peers*

Participants discussed friends, who were typically also sporting peers, whom they grew up alongside. Participants noted frequently interacting with the same peers throughout their sporting careers. Playing in the same teams with the same people through the grades was commonly discussed, as P3 states, "We had this one basketball team, it pretty much stayed the same from year seven [approx. age 11] to year ten [approx. age 14], so we would always be hanging out the whole way through." Competing with or against the same people at different tournaments and events was also frequently mentioned by participants:

You always see them [other players] at every tournament because there are so many tournaments now. So, you always see them there. We know who's good, and you've always got a game plan, and you always know who to go away from, and so it's usually those ones. (P6)

Most participants said they made lifelong friends through their sport, which provided another source of support.

## Discussion

### Diverse Range of Sports Played

Over the past few decades, pressure to achieve elite status and, subsequently, specialise early has increased (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Côté et al., 2012). Despite early specialisation being a successful pathway for athlete development (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Helsen et al., 1998; Smith, 2015), this study suggests early sampling is a viable and holistic alternative route to success.

The sport experiences of participants in this study align closely with Côté's (1999) Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP). Participants typically followed 'early sampling' pathways.

The benefits participants identified from playing a diverse range of sports are consistent with other studies, including development of essential fundamental movement skills (Goodway & Robinson, 2015; Thomas & Wilson, 2014), access to a range of sports (Goodway & Robinson, 2015), sustained motivation towards sport later in life (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Goodway & Robinson, 2015), higher self-determination (Moesch et al., 2013), development of fitness (Fransen et al., 2012), and increased enjoyment (Côté & Hancock, 2016).

Findings from this study provide further evidence that athletes can reach representative level late and still succeed. For example, Hodge et al. (2012) found that some athletes only became involved in sports that they ultimately excelled at in their late teens, after an initial stage of diverse sport participation. Furthermore, Black et al. (2019) found that it was uncommon for American professional and collegiate ice hockey players to specialise in their chosen sport before the age of 12. Moesch et al. (2013) highlight the benefits of late arrival to elite level, associating it with higher levels of self-determination. The current study reinforces that the "early sampling" pathway supports success, rather than inhibiting it. In fact, one participant indicated that her late introduction to hockey meant she felt "fresh" and "enjoyed it." Conversely, some athletes might "burn out" or "pull out" from sport because of "early specialisation" leading to less enjoyment (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Smith, 2015), shortened peak performance and increased injuries (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Côté et al., 2012), and loss of motivation and less adherence to sport (Fransen et al., 2012).

However, it is important to note that the participant who followed an "early specialisation" pathway had a very supportive environment, highlighting that the disadvantages of early specialisation can be minimised if accompanied by suitable conditions, such as enjoyment, autonomy, and competency (Larson et al., 2019).

Participants mentioning they narrowed their sporting focus and began to specialise as their careers progressed is in line with the DMSP, which proposes that athletes tend to narrow their focus around age 13 to 15 (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hancock, 2016; Côté et al., 2012).

Table 3 outlines empirical support from the present study for each of the DMSP's seven postulates of early involvement in sport (Côté et al., 2009; Côté et al., 2012).

**Table 3**  
*Empirical Support for the Seven Postulates of Early Involvement in Sport*

<b>Postulate</b>	<b>Findings of current study</b>
Early diversification (sampling) does not hinder elite sport participation in sports in which peak performance is reached after maturation.	Participants were not hindered by their early diversification. Diversification supported their progression to elite status.
Early diversification (sampling) is linked to a longer sport career and has positive implications for long-term sport involvement.	All participants maintained clear passion for sport during and following their playing careers.
Early diversification (sampling) allows participation in a range of contexts that most favourably affects positive youth development.	Participants perceived that their diverse range of contexts positively impacted their development.
High amounts of deliberate play during the sampling years builds a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in activities that are enjoyable and promote intrinsic regulation.	All participants mentioned experiencing high levels of motivation and enjoyment within their sporting pursuits.
A high amount of deliberate play during the sampling years establishes a range of motor and cognitive experiences that children can ultimately bring to their principal sport of interest.	Participants highlighted a variety of transferable skills developed through these experiences.
Around the end of primary school (about age 13 years), children should have the opportunity either to choose to specialise in their favourite sport or to continue in sport at a recreational level.	Participants narrowed their sport focus as they progressed through their teenage years.
Late adolescents (around age 16 years) have developed the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills needed to invest their effort into highly specialised training in one sport.	As the demands of elite-level hockey increased, participants specialised in hockey.

### **Types of Play**

All participants referred to experiencing different forms of “deliberate play,” typically involving unstructured, modified versions of sport with their friends and family (Côté, 1999). Benefits associated with “deliberate play” experiences are numerous. Bowers and Green (2013) stated “playing in unstructured settings actually change the way participants think about their experiences playing organized sports (and vice versa) with both settings providing meaningful experiences capable of connecting participants to the community” (p. 422). Furthermore, unstructured settings allow athletes to practise various movements and skills without repercussions or restrictions of structured sport, which enables greater freedom to make mistakes and try new things (Bowers & Green, 2013). Balish and Côté (2014) support this in finding that their participants spent substantial time in youth-led sporting activities that occurred in local recreational areas. Moreover, Forsman et al. (2016) reported that athletes with greater experience of sport-specific play and practice during childhood were more likely to be selected for national youth teams at 15 years than those with less experience. It appears that selection of participants from the present study into representative teams followed a similar path.



The reflections by participants in this study on a childhood of largely outdoor play activities resonates with Sandseter's (2009) definition of "risky play." Outdoor play and learning are associated with developing motor fitness and abilities, environmental awareness and navigation competencies, as well as promoting creativity (Bento & Dias, 2017; Brussoni et al., 2012; Taylor & Kuo, 2006). Likewise, risk taking has many benefits, including increasing self-confidence (Rosin, 2014); developing critical thinking skills, physically active lifestyles, and self-regulation skills (Dietze et al., 2013), developing risk-assessment skills and responsibility for one's own safety (Bourke & Sargisson, 2014), fostering happiness, well-being and resilience (Niehues et al., 2015), and improving self-confidence and the ability to cope in social situations (Christie et al., 2014).

In New Zealand, play is closely linked to concepts of freedom and creativity (White et al., 2009). This is consistent with the finding that participants were frequently involved in creative and imaginative outdoor play. The early play experiences that emerged from living in rural or regional areas could, potentially, be linked to participants' development of essential skills required to overcome inherent challenges of reaching elite level.

### **Roaming and Responsibility**

Participants' accounts of their childhoods reflected large amounts of responsibility and trust bestowed upon them at a relatively young age. Reflecting a "rural" upbringing, this trust and responsibility ranged from important jobs to the care of animals (e.g., dogs, horses, pet lambs, etc). Trust and responsibility were also evident in the sport and play experiences of participants. Although parents had a presence, participants were, as children, allowed to roam unsupervised and were given responsibility to make their own decisions. The notion of roaming unsupervised is akin to Sandseter's (2009) concept of "play" where partakers might disappear or become lost.

Supervision is an additional element of responsibility. Overprotective parenting in low-risk environments may negatively impact children's development (Brussoni & Olsen, 2013; Çelik et al., 2012; Ungar, 2009). The relative freedom enjoyed by all participants in this study is consistent with Çelik et al.'s (2012) finding that parents from urban areas were more over-protective than parents from rural areas.

Participants felt safe to roam in the community, as others would "look out" for them. Balish and Côté (2014) found that parents were relatively unconcerned about their children roaming, as they felt assured members of the community would "look out" for them.

Despite recounting generally positive community sentiments, participants noted that communities and community support have changed over the past ten years. This supports Walters et al.'s (2018) finding that a loss of "sense of community" was a key reason parents disallowed their children to roam unsupervised.

### **Support**

The finding that early in participants' lives parents' roles included introducing them to sport aligns with Côté's (1999) assertion that parents have significant and changing roles through all stages of athlete development. Role modelling is evident in the sport literature. Sukys et al. (2014) highlights causal links between parents and adolescents' exercise habits. It is argued that perceived benefits of sport participation prompt parents to invest substantial time and money into their children's sporting pursuits (Wheeler & Green, 2014; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Across the globe, sport participation is financially demanding and stressful for families (Dunn et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009). In New Zealand, sport participation can also be

expensive (Jackman, 2014; Thomas, 2018). Despite this, parents of participants continued to support their children financially to play sport, including at the elite level.

In addition to providing support relating to travel, money, and time (Wheeler & Green, 2014; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), parents of participants frequently undertook volunteer coaching roles, which, according to Doherty (2006), is a common occurrence. Trussell (2016) found young people felt positively about parents volunteering in community youth sport, particularly in high profile roles, such as coaching. Participants in this study shared similar positive perceptions of parent volunteers.

The findings from this study that the motivational climate created by parents may significantly impact an athlete's outcomes is consistent with global sport literature (e.g., Bebetos et al., 2014; Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013). Parents provide essential emotional, informational, and practical support (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Knight et al., 2016). According to O'Rourke et al. (2014), the motivational climate created by parents is a significant predictor of athletes' self-esteem, anxiety levels and autonomous regulation.

Overall, the participants in this study were fortunate to have supportive family environments resulting in positive outcomes for them as athletes. This is consistent with sport literature asserting that perceived parental support leads to positive outcomes (Knight et al., 2016; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

The finding that siblings strongly influence athletes' development was also suggested by Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009). Children usually feel safe playing with siblings and friends (Walters et al., 2018), and, typically, siblings are key playmates. Due to living in remote regional communities, immediate family members were whom participants had the most interaction with; therefore, siblings had important roles as key playmates.

Coaches often provided unrelenting support, which assisted participants with achieving elite status. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) found coaches who were good role models, demonstrated belief, made good connections, communicated well, and provided constructive feedback to their athletes enhanced their developmental experience in sport. This was evident in the early formative experiences of participants in the present study.

Participants' peers also influenced their development. According to Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009), athletes' peers support development of work ethic, provide opportunities for close and unique friendships built on common interests, enable special relationships to develop with different aged peers, and represent opportunities for leadership and role modelling. Furthermore, socialising or spending time with friends has frequently been linked to increased sport participation (Kilpatrick et al., 2005; Walters et al., 2011), and Balish and Côté (2014) suggest that competing alongside the same athletes through various grades contributes to a community's sporting success.

Coping with challenges has been identified as key to athletic success (Hodge et al., 2012). Additionally, commitment, discipline and perseverance are required to succeed in the elite sporting environment (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). For the participants in this study, the "rural" athlete experience included unique challenges, such as limited facilities and travelling distance, financial costs, injuries, and relocation to bigger towns/cities. Coping with such challenges has major benefits for athletes. For example, adapting to playing sport in poor quality or continually changing facilities encourages variability and adaptability within athletes' development (Chow et al., 2015; Davids et al., 2008). Additionally, expectations placed on athletes at relatively young ages supports early maturation, responsibility, and independence, which enhances their drive to be self-determining (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

It is important to acknowledge the supportive climate that surrounded the participants. Support enabled the participants to have successful sporting careers. Key people, such as parents and siblings, had essential roles that frequently changed as participants progressed in their sporting careers, which was essential to their success.

This study supports the notion that early sampling pathways are viable pathways to success and provide positive developmental experiences over and above what is offered through pathways focused on early specialisation. This research also offers evidence of the benefits of unstructured early play, which takes place primarily outdoors, and encompasses elements of risk, responsibility and roaming. Finally, this study highlights the importance of athletes' social, cultural, and physical environments on their development. The final important message is that young people can experience a more enjoyable childhood than if they focus solely and intensively on one sport at an early age, but still are able to reach elite athlete status in sports such as hockey. We strongly recommend that sporting organisations consider this important message as they develop their talent identification and athlete development pathways. It is not only about young people's athletic development, but rather the more rounded character and social skill development that can occur when sport is engaged with in a more balanced way.

Athletes from remote regional communities share a variety of experiences that appear to have benefitted their development. The unique sport experiences, play experiences and relationships with supporting people contributed significantly to the enjoyable and supportive journey to athletic success.

Gaining a better understanding of where New Zealand's elite athletes come from and having insights into their subsequent developmental experiences will potentially foster the development of future elite New Zealand athletes. There has been a trend in New Zealand to encourage sport participation for a more balanced approach to living, as evidenced by Sport New Zealand's (Sport NZ) Balance is Better initiative (Sport New Zealand, 2021). This research provides evidence that supports the Balance is Better messaging.

## **Limitations**

Three main limitations in this study were identified. Because the study focused solely on experiences of those from 'rural' regions, there was no data collected from the participants' more "urban" counterparts. However, the purpose of this study was to explore pathways to elite sport from rural New Zealand. In New Zealand and internationally, there is an increasing focus on centralisation of high-performance sport centres, which is typically coupled with specific pathways to elite success (Anderson & Mayo, 2015; Côté et al., 2012). Despite this elite model resulting in success for some athletes, there is increasing evidence of negative consequences from such an approach (e.g., Fransen et al., 2012; Smucny et al., 2015). Global evidence highlights unique qualities within smaller communities that support athletic success (e.g., Ankersen, 2012; Balish & Côté, 2014; Bell et al., 2018; Bowers & Green, 2013). It was, therefore, important to explore the developmental pathways of successful high-performance athletes within New Zealand who also begin their journey outside of major urban centres.

Participants from "rural" settings were selected for this study. However, due to the difficulty of determining a universal definition of "rural," participants ranged in "rural" status from extremely remote farming communities to peri-urban environments. Therefore, comparisons drawn between these experiences and other "rural-focused" studies require caution. Future research should peruse nuances within the experiences of athletes from these somewhat diverse rural communities.

Thirdly, findings from this study were based solely on self-perceptions of athletes from a single sport. While one could argue that the athletes themselves are placed best to comment on their experiences, triangulation of findings with others close to the athletes (e.g., parents, siblings, coaches, peers) and from other sports would be an avenue for future research. However, there is insufficient evidence of research in New Zealand that has drawn upon the voices of any elite athletes, in relation to their pathways to elite performance. In that regard,

this study addresses a gap in the current literature and provides perspectives from a group that has been largely ignored in research to date.

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