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Pathways to World Class

A study of the career experiences
of Swedish World Class athletes

Schubring, Grahn, Rylander,
Lundvall, Bergström



Preface

In 2021, the General Assembly of the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) gave its support to a programme called #elitesports2030. The programme lists eight target areas aimed at strengthening Swedish international elite sports. These include

- increased resources for national teams;
- a stronger and more long term, strategic leadership in elite sports within the governing bodies;
- investments in hubs for performance development;
- competent and accessible coaches;
- coach education and development;
- elite sports-focused research;
- improvements in the socio-economic situation of athletes; and
- a coordinated national support system.

When the SSC now, in 2023, issues the report “Pathways to World-Class”, it is an important contribution to the development of effective and strong support for elite sports and the internationally competing individual. The report includes stories from 18 people who have made the journey from their debut in the national team to the absolute top of the world in their sport. Along the way, they have met coaches and experts in different development environments, and they have been tested and inspired by various competitions. For many, finances and support for athletic development have been recurring challenges.

Athletes from individual and team sports, larger and smaller sports, summer and winter sports, and Paralympic sports participated in the study. The athletes’ stories help us understand what this pathway is like. To the 18 athletes, we say thank you for what you have accomplished and for sharing your important experiences. By learning from those who have succeeded, we can create better conditions for tomorrow’s athletes to reach, from their club, via national teams and all the way to the podium.

This is an executive summary of the report and the full version (in Swedish) is available by clicking [here](#).

Enjoy reading and our warmest thanks to the research team – Astrid Schubring, Karin Grahn, Pär Rylander, Suzanne Lundvall, and Elin Bergström – for your important work!

Peter Mattsson
Managing Director, #elitesports2030

Andreas Linderyd
Head of Research

Executive Summary¹

Background and purpose

Only a few talented athletes reach world-class status. The journey to the top is long and winding, and to make it to world-class in a sport requires that several different factors fall in place at the right time. Knowledge of these factors and their interaction is crucial for creating good conditions for career paths to the top, especially for countries like Sweden, which compared to many others, have limited resources for elite sports.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Swedish athletes reach world-class level. The concept of world-class means the highest international level. Athletes at this level have won medals in the Olympic/Paralympic Games or in a World Championship, are ranked among the top 10 in the world, or play in a top club of an international league in team sports. The study aims to describe career paths from the first selection for the senior national team to international world class level and to identify factors that promote this career development. In addition, the advice of world-class athletes to young athletes and their wishes for the Swedish elite sports system are compiled.

Method and cohort

The study is a multiple case study with 18 Swedish elite athletes of the highest world-class level, from both team and individual sports. Together, these athletes have won more than 30 Olympic/Paralympic medals, 70 World Championship medals, and six Champions League titles.

Results

The empirical study shows both similarities and differences in the athletes' career paths. It takes the athletes in the study 1-11 years from their senior national team debut to reach world-class level. We identify three different ways to reach world-class: "short career path" (n = 7), "medium-long career path" (n = 7), and "long career path" (n = 4). Both individual athletes and team athletes from summer and winter sports are represented in all three types of career paths, which suggests that these categories are not the main cause of the differences. However, none of the participating para-athletes are represented in the latter group.

In the report, we also show that career paths do not follow a straight development curve (i.e., linear), but rather resemble waves, where ups and downs in development together propel the athlete forward in her or his career. During the

¹ This text is a translation of the Swedish summary of the project report: Schubring et al., (2022). Vägar till världstoppen. En studie av svenska toppidrottarens karriärerfarenheter (pp. 6-7). Stockholm: Riksidrottsförbundet. The report can be accessed [online](#).

athletes' elite careers, several turning points occur, i.e., moments of change that significantly affect their career development. These are:

1. being seen as talented;
2. achieving success;
3. experiencing “lightbulb-moments”
4. becoming part of a world-class environment
5. moving abroad
6. becoming (semi-)professional
7. self-initiated turning points
8. fortunate events; and
9. challenges.

These turning points become keys that open up the athletes' continued career development and gradually provide access to financing, quality coaching, support services, and other necessary resources to reach the top.

A combination of supporting factors enable development from entry into the senior national team to international world-class. At an individual level, this involves having a deep knowledge of one's sport and an ability to manage life as an athlete, as well as taking care of one's health – something we call “being sports-educated”.

At a social level, an athlete's family and partner provide crucial practical, economic, and emotional support. A trusting relationship between coach and athlete, being seen by the coach, and the coaches' ability to individualise are additional supporting factors. Furthermore, the context affects athletes' career paths, such as the sports environment and support system around the athlete, as well as social norms and structures. It is important to have access to a good training and competition environment, optimal equipment or aids, as well as personal and financial support. The availability of these resources varies significantly between different sports. For athletes who receive structured support late, that is, have a long career path, the path to world-class level occurs under more uncertain conditions.

Recommendations

World-class athletes advise young elite athletes to put in the hard work required to develop but also have fun along the way. Furthermore, they advise young athletes to believe in themselves, be determined and disciplined, but also dare to go their own way, seek help from others, and find the right environment to develop. From the Swedish elite sports system, world-class athletes wish, among other things, for better coordination of and between support systems, more flexible support, improved individual adaptation, and help in accessing the best development environments. The results show that athletes' paths to world-class level differ, and different developmental paths create specific support needs. Support at multiple levels is needed for athletes to develop the complex mix of skills and knowledge required to reach the top. The study provides a unique insight into the career paths of Swedish world-class athletes and highlights the importance of versatile development as well as learning (beyond sporting skills) to achieve and maintain their world-class level performances.

“ Because we threw everything we had in it and said: ‘Now it’s do or die, and we just go for it. Now we’re putting all our money in!’ We borrowed from friends and family, and it was extreme exhaustion, but also where we got another boost, and then we got selected for the Olympics. And then we got support and money and could leave our jobs and do it full-time.”

Athlete in Pathways to world-class study.



Riksidrottsförbundet

Idrottens Hus, Box 11016, 100 61 Stockholm | Phone: +46 8 699 60 00
riksidrottsforbundet@rf.se | www.rf.se