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**From Podium to Pitch: Transferring Competencies from  
Individual Elite Sports to Entrepreneurship**

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## **Foreword**

First and foremost, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the participants of this study. I appreciate your willingness to share your time, experiences, and insights; your transparency was instrumental in making this thesis both feasible and profoundly enlightening. The process of conducting interviews and engaging with your narratives was a valuable and rewarding experience.

Additionally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Madeleine Englund, for her unwavering support, valuable contributions, and intellectually stimulating discussions throughout the research process. Your guidance has been crucial to the development of this thesis.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how competencies gained from individual elite sports are dynamically enacted, adapted, and integrated into entrepreneurial activities. Although existing literature recognises that elite athletes develop transferable competencies, there is still limited understanding of how these competencies are reinterpreted and applied in entrepreneurial settings. Grounded in Human Capital Theory (HCT) and informed by its contemporary critiques, this study adopts an abductive, exploratory qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five former individual elite athletes who have transitioned into entrepreneurship. Thematic analysis revealed six key themes: discipline, resilience, self-leadership, adaptability, drive, and influence of the social environment. The findings suggest that these competencies were not simply transferred; instead, they were reflexively adapted through personal experiences, social interactions, and contextual interpretations. This research challenges the traditional perspective of static human capital, promoting a relational, experiential, and practice-oriented approach to competence development and transfer. Additionally, it expands the HCT framework by including affective, embodied, and socially embedded aspects of learning. The study presents both theoretical and practical contributions, suggesting a dynamic model for competence transfer while highlighting the entrepreneurial capabilities arising from individual elite sports experiences. It also highlights implications for athlete transition programs, entrepreneurship education, and a more nuanced understanding of informal and experiential human capital development.

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Background and Research Context**

The transition from elite individual sports to entrepreneurship represents a relevant, yet relatively underexplored domain within both academic literature and applied entrepreneurial practice. Although the career paths of former elite athletes have received increasing scholarly attention, existing studies predominantly concentrate on themes such as identity reconstruction (Park et al., 2013), psychological adjustment post-retirement (Lavalley, 2005), and reintegration into conventional employment settings (Stambulova et al., 2009). In contrast, the potential contributions of individual elite sports to acquiring transferable professional competencies, particularly those relevant to entrepreneurial activity, remain largely overlooked in the existing academic literature.

This thesis investigates how former elite athletes perceive, reflect upon, and mobilise the competencies developed through individual elite sport in their entrepreneurial practices. Rather than evaluating entrepreneurial success or performance outcomes, this study examines how participants articulate and implement the competencies they deem relevant for navigating uncertain and dynamic entrepreneurial environments through the firms<sup>1</sup> they have founded and operate. This investigation is grounded in the behavioural view of entrepreneurship proposed by Gartner (1988), which conceptualises entrepreneurial activity as a collection of intentional actions linked to venture creation and development, rather than merely an expression of stable personality traits. This behavioural framework aligns with the emphasis of the study on how previous experiences in individual elite sports shape entrepreneurial practices through the development and recontextualization of competencies. To investigate these processes, the study utilises Human Capital Theory (HCT; Becker, 1993) as its primary analytical framework. Rather than focusing on financial returns, this thesis conceptualises the “return on human capital” as the capacity to enact, adapt, and apply experiential competencies in entrepreneurial contexts. The theoretical foundations and limitations of this approach are elaborated in Chapter 2.

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, the term "*firm*" is uniformly employed to denote the entrepreneurial organisations established and managed by the participants. This designation has been chosen for its neutrality and comparability across various industries and organisational phases. Alternative terminology, including "*startup*," "*business*," "*venture*," or "*company*," is utilised solely within participant quotations, theoretical references, or in discussions pertaining to the process of establishing a business.

In this context, the following definitions are applied:

- **Individual Elite Athletes** are defined as individuals who have competed at the highest level of their respective sport, in individual disciplines where performance outcomes are essentially self-determined (Swann et al., 2015).
- **Competencies** are understood as clusters of observable behaviours, organised around an underlying intent, that predict effective performance in specific contexts (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008).
- **Entrepreneurial activity** refers to the behavioural process of founding and developing business ventures, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and self-direction (Gartner, 1988).

By analysing participants' retrospective narratives, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how competencies derived from individual elite sport are transferred and enacted within entrepreneurial environments. The research question, objectives, and theoretical positioning that guide this inquiry are presented in the following sections.

## **1.2 Research Gap and Problem**

While the career transitions of individual elite athletes have been thoroughly studied in sports psychology and athlete development literature, most research focuses on three main themes: identity reconstruction (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Park et al., 2013), psychological adjustment after retiring from sports (Lavalley, 2005), and reintegration into regular employment (Stambulova et al., 2009). Although these studies offer valuable insights, they primarily analyse the post-athletic phase through a psychosocial lens, which limits our understanding of the entrepreneurial paths that former individual elite athletes may pursue.

In recent years, scholars have posited that elite sports performances can cultivate entrepreneurial traits like discipline, perseverance, and resilience (Ratten, 2015). These traits are often viewed as personal, stable and innate qualities that influence certain behaviours. However, this study presents a different perspective. Based on participants' narratives and a competence-centred approach, the findings indicate that these traits can also be perceived as competencies, contextual, experience-based skills that are intentionally applied across various domains.

This distinction is crucial. Traits refer to enduring personality dimensions such as conscientiousness or extraversion. Skills, by contrast, are often seen as task-specific techniques or proficiencies that can be taught and measured. Competencies, however, encompass broader behavioural capabilities that integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, developed through practice, shaped by environmental demands, and refined through reflection (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). By framing discipline, perseverance, and resilience as competencies rather than traits or isolated skills, this study highlights the role of situated learning and active adaptation in the development of entrepreneurial capacity.

Furthermore, there has been limited attention on how former individual elite athletes themselves perceive the relevance of sport-based competencies within entrepreneurial contexts. The majority of studies lack insights into the reflective and interpretive processes through which these individuals identify, transfer, and operationalise their competencies in new environments. These experiential dimensions, especially within the dynamic and uncertain nature of entrepreneurship, remain both under-theorised and empirically unexplored (Cope, 2005; Dimov, 2017).

This oversight is especially important considering the growing number of individual elite athletes who choose entrepreneurship as a career path after sports (Ratten, 2015). Although individual elite sports offer a rich environment for experiential learning, performance pressure, and personal growth, there is limited empirical research that explores how these experiences convert into entrepreneurial behaviour and how former individual elite athletes view this transition.

To address this gap, the present study seeks to investigate how former individual elite athletes reflect upon, articulate, and apply sport-derived competencies in their entrepreneurial

endeavours. In doing so, the study progresses beyond trait- and skill-based assumptions, focusing instead on the dynamic, reflective, and practice-oriented processes through which competencies are transferred and enacted.

### **1.3 Research Question and Objectives**

In response to the gaps identified in the existing literature, this study seeks to explore how former individual elite athletes perceive, interpret, and mobilise competencies developed through individual high-performance sport in their entrepreneurial activities. Rather than focusing on general traits or economic outcomes, the study adopts a competence-based perspective that prioritises experiential development, contextual adaptation, and reflective enactment.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question:

*How are competencies cultivated through individual elite sports transferred to entrepreneurship?*

To support the exploration of the proposed research question, this study outlines four main objectives:

- To identify the essential competencies that former elite individual athletes perceive as relevant for, and transferable to, their entrepreneurial activity.
- To examine how these competencies were cultivated and embodied through high-performance individual sport.
- To analyse the dynamic enactment, adaptation, and integration of these competencies within participants' entrepreneurial activities.
- To critically evaluate the applicability of HCT and explore its potential extension in the context of competencies from individual elite sports to the field of entrepreneurship.

These objectives provide an analytical framework for investigating the nuanced processes through which competencies are developed, recontextualised, and enacted across domains. In alignment with this approach, the study draws on HCT (Becker, 1993) as a guiding framework, while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations and incorporating a critical, experience-oriented perspective.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Positioning**

This study explores entrepreneurship through a competence-based, practice-oriented lens and primarily employs Human Capital Theory (HCT) for analysis. Originally introduced by Schultz (1961) and expanded by Becker (1964), HCT suggests that individual competencies, comprising knowledge, practical skills, and behaviours, function as forms of capital that can be enhanced through education, training, and experience. In Becker's revised version (1993), the theory was extended to include informal, experiential, and tacit learning, legitimising non-traditional contexts like sports as important areas for developing human capital.

In this study, HCT is employed to investigate how competencies cultivated through individual elite sports may be recontextualized and enacted within entrepreneurial environments. Instead of concentrating on economic returns or objective performance metrics, this research adopts a behavioural interpretation of "return on human capital", characterised by the capacity to apply, adapt, and reflexively mobilise competencies in novel and dynamic settings. This interpretation is consistent with the study's empirical and methodological focus, which centres on the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of former individual elite athletes.

While HCT offers valuable insights into competence development and transfer, this study takes a reflexive approach by integrating established critiques of the theory. Researchers have argued that traditional uses of HCT often prioritise formal education and economic output, neglecting the relational, embodied, and context-sensitive aspects of learning (Cope, 2005; Dimov, 2017; Kang & Mok, 2022; Marginson, 2019; Marvel et al., 2016). These critiques are especially relevant in high-performance sports, where learning occurs through iterative practice, mentorship, and engagement in performance cultures rather than through formal education.

This study seeks to extend the application of HCT beyond traditional areas, recognising its limitations. It aims to enhance understanding of the formation, transfer, and enactment of human capital across different life domains. Specifically, HCT serves as the foundational framework for exploring how former individual elite athletes reflect on and implement their sport-derived competencies in entrepreneurial activities. A comprehensive exploration of HCT and its significant extensions is provided in Chapter 2.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that guide the current study. HCT acts as the core analytical lens to investigate whether and how competencies developed through participation in individual elite sports can be recognised and leveraged in entrepreneurial initiatives. To provide context, the chapter assesses empirical studies from sports psychology and entrepreneurship, exploring how experiential, dynamic, and socially embedded forms of learning may represent significant aspects of human capital. Additionally, it critically examines the limitations of HCT, especially regarding its ability to address tacit, relational, and context-sensitive dimensions of competency development. These components together form the theoretical basis for interpreting the empirical data.

### **2.1 Human Capital Theory**

Human Capital Theory (HCT), first introduced by Schultz (1961) and subsequently formalised by Becker (1964), serves as the analytical foundation for this study. At its core, HCT posits that individuals can enhance their productivity and economic prospects through intentional education, training, and experiential learning investments. Such investments are conceptualised as mechanisms for increasing human capital, generating returns similar to those produced by investments in physical capital.

Becker's original formulation (1964) emphasised formal education and vocational training as the principal sources of human capital. However, in his revised edition (1993), Becker broadened the framework to encompass informal, tacit, and experiential forms of learning. This extension is relevant in contexts such as elite sport, where competencies are frequently cultivated through situated practice, emotional intensity, and embodied experience, rather than through traditional classroom instruction. Consequently, this study is grounded in Becker's revised model (1993), which legitimises non-formal learning as a credible source of human capital accumulation.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges that even the updated version of HCT has its limitations. Critics claim it continues to maintain assumptions related to linearity, individual rationality, and learning in isolation. Researchers such as Dimov (2016), Marvel et al. (2016), Kang and Mok (2022), and Marginson (2019) emphasise the importance of viewing competence

development as reflective, socially embedded, and context-sensitive qualities that traditional models often neglect. This study responds to these critiques by investigating how competencies gained from individual elite sports are redefined and applied through reflective practices in social settings, thus enhancing the explanatory power of HCT.

The foundational principles of HCT, as adapted from Becker (1993), may be summarized as follows:

- **Human Capital as an Investment:** The revised model asserts that formal, informal, and experiential learning collectively function as strategic investments in human capital. This expanded perspective enables a more thorough understanding of competence development, especially in fields like individual elite sports, where learning often transpires through informal channels.
- **Competency Accumulation and Productivity Gains:** Human capital is acquired through experiential learning, resulting in enhanced performance and increased adaptability. Becker (1993) corroborates this assertion with empirical evidence demonstrating that experiential learning significantly influences productivity across diverse domains. In the context of the present study, the competencies cultivated in individual elite sports are likely to be applicable in entrepreneurial environments.
- **Application to Professional and Entrepreneurial Contexts:** While Becker did not explicitly apply HCT to the field of entrepreneurship, following research has adapted this theoretical framework to clarify the role of human capital in the processes of venture creation and development. Empirical studies conducted by Haynie et al. (2010), Neck and Houghton (2006), and Gupta and McCarthy (2024) have demonstrated that experiential and informal learning significantly contribute to the enhancement of entrepreneurial capacity, thus highlighting the significant relevance of HCT within this particular domain.

Although HCT originated within the realm of labour economics, contemporary inquiries emphasise that not all meaningful learning occurs in formal educational settings. Scholars such as Dimov (2017), Marvel et al. (2016), and Rae (2005) highlight the importance of experiential, situated, and socially embedded learning processes in developing competencies. In high-

performance fields, including individual elite sports and entrepreneurship, learning is often characterised by practice, feedback mechanisms, mentorship, and cultural immersion, rather than traditional instructional methods (Jonker et al., 2010; Rae, 2005).

In this study, we utilise HCT as a framework to explore how competencies developed in individual elite sports, like discipline, resilience and adaptability, might be viewed as forms of human capital relevant to entrepreneurial activities. This viewpoint emphasises that competencies can emerge, are context-sensitive, and are influenced by experiential factors, rather than being fixed lists. Although HCT provides a valuable framework for conceptualising learning as an investment in productivity, its capacity to account for informal, experience-based development processes is subject to critical examination in Section 2.4.

## 2.2 Conceptualising Competencies through Elite Sports

To contextualise the application of HCT, it is essential to outline the various competencies that research suggests can be developed through participation in elite sport. Athletes competing in high-performance environments, whether in individual or team sports, face demanding training schedules, ongoing psychological pressure, and a strong emphasis on long-term goal orientation. These circumstances are associated with the development of specific psychological and behavioural competencies (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004; Jonker et al., 2010).

This chapter delineates the competencies associated with sports as identified in prior research, yet the present study concentrates specifically on individual elite athletes. Notably, the existing literature does not consistently differentiate between team and individual contexts; therefore, the following synthesis includes insights from research on elite sports in a broader context.

The competencies outlined below are supported by empirical research and recognised as potential indicators of sport-based human capital:

1. **Discipline:** This refers to the ability to adhere to structured routines, sustain high performance levels over time, and commit to long-term objectives. In elite sport, discipline is fostered through continuous exposure to structured training environments

and established behavioural expectations, often leading to its internalisation as a self-regulatory mechanism (Sokol, 2021).

2. **Resilience:** Defined as the capacity to recover from setbacks, adapt to change, and persist in adversity, resilience in elite sports is developed through a dynamic interplay of personal experiences, coping strategies, and reflective learning practices (Gupta & McCarthy, 2024).
3. **Adaptability:** This encompasses the ability to adapt to new or changing demands, embrace transitions, and effectively solve problems, particularly under pressure. In elite sports, adaptability is developed through evaluating stressors, formulating coping and self-regulation strategies, and integrating adaptive responses to enhance performance (Schinke et al., 2015).
4. **Self-Leadership:** Elite athletes cultivate self-leadership competencies by consistently reflecting on their actions and regulating their behaviours, which enables them to set personal goals, track their performance, and take ownership of their outcomes, ultimately fostering ongoing growth and achievement (Jonker et al., 2010).
5. **Drive:** This intrinsic motivation acts as the driving force for elite athletes to pursue excellence, persevere through challenges, and sustain long-term engagement. Such dedication is often rooted not only in personal goals and competencies but also in the motivational climate present in elite sport environments (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004).
6. **Leadership:** Leadership in elite sports involves the ability to guide, motivate, and coordinate individuals to achieve shared goals, often in high-pressure situations. Athletes can take on leadership roles in formal contexts, such as team captains, as well as in informal settings, where they encourage decision-making, accountability, and strategic direction (Gould et al., 2013).
7. **Teamwork:** Involves collaborating effectively with others through communication, trust, and shared responsibility. Even in individual sports, athletes often train and prepare in team settings, cultivating interpersonal competencies and shared focus (Westerbeek & Smith, 2005)

8. **Emotional Intelligence:** Defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions, is developed in elite sports through consistent exposure to emotionally challenging situations. This requires athletes to navigate their own emotions as well as those of their coaches, teammates, and opponents (Laborde et al., 2016).

These competencies are conceptualised not merely as static attributes but rather as dynamic and context-sensitive manifestations of human capital. Their development is fostered within performance-driven environments and may extend their relevance beyond the specific context of sports (Becker, 1993; Dimov, 2016; Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004; Marvel et al., 2016).

The study aims to explore additional relevant competencies instead of adhering to established analytical methods frameworks. This approach allows empirical patterns to shape the development of conceptual themes that are deeply connected to the participants' lived experiences. This exploratory method is consistent with the study's abductive analytical framework, where theoretical constructs are continuously honed through repeated engagement with the data.

### **2.3 Linking Competence Development to Entrepreneurship**

Expanding on the competency concepts outlined earlier, this chapter examines how these capabilities are recognised in academic literature as relevant to entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurship is defined as the process in which individuals engage in activities aimed at starting new firms, concentrating on observable actions rather than vague personal traits (Gartner, 1988).

This behavioural framework highlights a growing number of studies indicating that qualities like discipline, resilience, and adaptability serve as important forms of human capital, especially in volatile and dynamic entrepreneurial settings (Becker, 1993). These qualities are gaining recognition in empirical research examining the relationship between high-performance environments and entrepreneurial success (Dimov, 2017; Marvel et al., 2016).

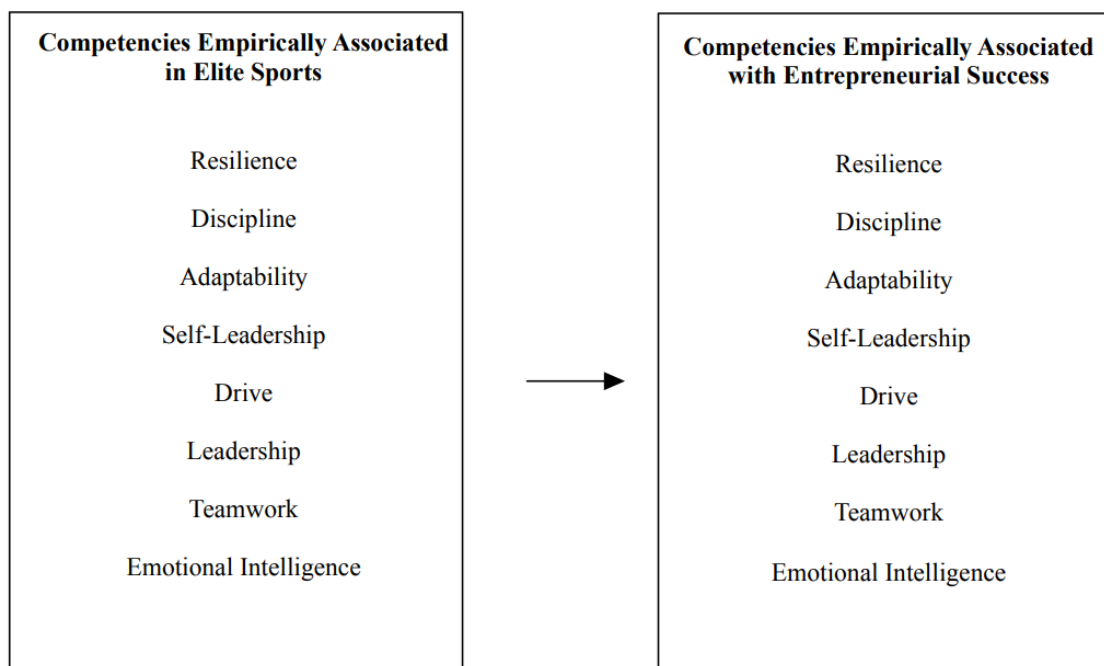
Empirical studies have shed light on the relationships between specific sport-based competencies and entrepreneurial effectiveness. The competencies introduced in Section 2.2 have each been examined in relation to entrepreneurial outcomes:

1. **Discipline:** Linked to sustained effort, structured decision-making, and long-term commitment in entrepreneurial activity (Baum & Locke, 2004).
2. **Resilience:** Enhances the capacity to effectively manage adversity, sustain motivation, and perform under challenging circumstances (Ayala & Manzano, 2014).
3. **Adaptability:** Enables opportunity recognition and swift adaptation in uncertain or changing circumstances (Haynie et al., 2010).
4. **Self-leadership:** Fosters entrepreneurial independence, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation among individuals (Neck & Houghton, 2006).
5. **Drive:** Promotes sustained commitment, aspiration, and enduring involvement in entrepreneurial activity (Baum & Locke, 2004).
6. **Leadership:** Facilitates strategic direction, decision-making, and the capacity to influence others in entrepreneurial ventures (Ratten, 2015).
7. **Teamwork:** Promotes the establishment of effective collaboration, the assumption of shared responsibility, and the fostering of mutual support within entrepreneurial ventures (Cope, 2005).
8. **Emotional intelligence:** Facilitates stress regulation, enhances decision-making capabilities, and enhances communication competencies within entrepreneurial contexts (Ratten, 2015).

These competencies are viewed not as fixed traits but as dynamic, experience-driven abilities that may transcend traditional elite sports. Earlier studies support their recognised importance, promoting a broader view of human capital that includes informal, socially embedded, and

practical learning processes (Becker, 1993; Dimov, 2017; Marvel et al., 2016). This viewpoint corresponds with a shift in thinking from static, out-of-context models of entrepreneurial competence (Rae, 2005) to a more process-oriented and context-aware understanding.

Although these connections offer a theoretical basis for this investigation, the actual relevance and transferability of these competencies will be examined empirically in later chapters. Therefore, this study interacts with existing literature not just as a collection of predefined categories, but as an interpretive tool for analysing participants' narratives.



*Figure 1: Competencies Empirically Associated with Elite Sport and Entrepreneurial Success*

## **2.4 Critical Reflections on the Use of Human Capital Theory**

While HCT offers a strong framework for understanding the connection between competence development and economic productivity, its use in entrepreneurial settings, especially among those with experiential learning backgrounds like former individual elite athletes, has faced significant criticism. Many critiques arise from the theory's original premise, which emphasised formal education and structured training as the primary methods for accumulating human capital. However, these critiques also reveal ongoing limitations in Becker's (1993)

revised model, particularly regarding its ability to capture the dynamic, relational, and socially embedded aspects of learning (Dimov, 2017; Marginson, 2019; Kang & Mok, 2022).

A key problem is the unclear definition of human capital in entrepreneurship research. Marvel et al. (2016) observe that literature frequently fluctuates among various indicators, including educational attainment, prior experience, and competencies inventories, failing to establish a coherent theoretical definition. This lack of clarity obstructs measuring and comparing human capital in different contexts, thus diminishing the explanatory power of HCT in areas marked by non-linear, practice-oriented, and highly individualised competency development.

Moreover, even though Becker (1993) explicitly incorporates informal and experience-based learning, the theory still focuses heavily on productivity-driven outcomes and measurable returns. This focus tends to overshadow the more subtle yet critical aspects of learning, including emotional regulation, intuitive judgment, and interpersonal sensitivity, all of which are essential for entrepreneurial success. These competencies, central to this study, generally arise not from formal education but from engaging in emotionally intense, uncertain, and high-pressure situations, such as those found in individual elite sports (Dimov, 2017; Kang & Mok, 2022).

HCT also tends to conceptualise competence as a static, transferable asset that can be acquired and deployed in a linear manner. In contrast, this study perceives competence as a dynamic and context-dependent process, one that is continuously shaped through cycles of action, reflection, and adaptation. Marginson (2019) critiques HCT's inherently economistic assumptions, indicating that the theory tends to prioritise monetisable outputs while neglecting the emotional, identity-related, and social dimensions of human development. These dimensions are especially prominent when moving from individual elite sports to entrepreneurship, where individuals commonly pursue financial success, a sense of purpose, reinvention, and psychological continuity.

Kang and Mok (2022) emphasise the important role of institutional and cultural influences, claiming that shared social dynamics, performance standards, and intersubjective connections frequently shape the development of competence. In high-performance areas like individual elite sports, most learning occurs through interactive experiences with peers, coaches, and

prevailing cultural expectations, which are aspects often overlooked by traditional, individualistic views of HCT.

Together, these critiques do not dismiss HCT; rather, they encourage its thoughtful and context-sensitive application. Accordingly, this study utilises HCT not as a definitive framework, but as an initial conceptual foundation that is continuously examined and reshaped in light of participants' narratives. By avoiding rigid classifications and allowing empirical themes to emerge inductively, the study remains receptive to the complex, situated, and evolving nature of competence development and transfer

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical foundations of the study. HCT, as revised by Becker (1993), serves as a conceptual lens through which the development and transfer of competencies from individual elite sports to entrepreneurial activity are examined. Rather than assuming a linear or automatic transfer, the study adopts a context-sensitive perspective in which competencies are shaped through experience, reflection, and adaptation.

Eight competencies, discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership, drive, leadership, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, have been identified in prior literature as cultivated within elite sports and recognised as relevant in entrepreneurial contexts. The chapter has also addressed the limitations of traditional HCT models, which often overlook the relational, affective, and socially embedded dimensions of learning. These critiques support the study's use of HCT as a flexible and reflexive framework, suitable for exploring how competencies are redefined and mobilised through lived experience.

The next chapter presents the methodological approach, outlining how the study was designed to investigate former elite athletes' own interpretations, adaptations, and applications of these competencies in entrepreneurial environments.

### **3. Methodology**



*Figure 2: Overview of the Research Process*

The figure illustrates the sequential steps of the empirical process, from participant selection to theme development, employed in this qualitative study.

#### **3.1 Research Strategy**

This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate how competencies gained through individual elite sports are utilised and navigated in entrepreneurial activities.

Bell et al. (2019) emphasise that qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring complex, subjective, and context-dependent issues. Instead of presuming a straightforward or linear transfer of competencies, this study aims to provide nuanced insights on how former individual elite athletes understand, adapt, and incorporate their sports experiences into new fields. It remains open to identifying processes that may entail reflective reinterpretation, practical application, and adaptation of existing competencies based on the context.

The research is based on an interpretivist epistemology that suggests knowledge is co-created through social interactions and shaped by the cultural and situational contexts from which it emerges (Bell et al., 2019). Participants' narratives are seen as contextualised reflections of lived experiences, offering insights into the interpretation, application, and significance of competencies across various fields. This perspective aligns with the study's aim of showcasing how participants create and articulate the relevance of competencies gained from sports within entrepreneurial settings.

Methodologically, the research adheres to an abductive approach, facilitating iterative movement between empirical observations and theoretical considerations. The study is

informed by a theoretical interest in the applicability of HCT to competency development and transfer, while remaining receptive to emergent insights throughout the research process. Instead of rigorously testing predefined hypotheses, the theoretical framework guided the formulation of the interview guide, allowing participants' narratives to flow freely and later assisting in interpreting the thematic patterns that emerged from the data (Gehman et al., 2018).

Conducted in a Scandinavian setting, the study acknowledges that cultural norms such as egalitarianism, mutual trust, and cooperation are particularly salient. These values are known to shape the understanding and practice of entrepreneurship, strongly emphasising social responsibility, power-sharing, and stakeholder orientation (Strand et al., 2015). While the Scandinavian context is not analysed as a primary empirical concern, it is recognised as a relevant background factor that may have influenced how participants reflect on and articulate their experiences. As a result, this context supports the use of a qualitative and interpretive strategy to capture socially grounded views on competency transfer. This approach aligns with the interpretivist focus on grasping the meaning-making process within particular cultural contexts, where social norms and values shape how individuals create and share their experiences (Bell et al., 2019; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### **3.2 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory, cross-sectional design to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the transfer of competencies developed through individual elite sports into entrepreneurial activity. Such a methodological approach is particularly suitable for exploring participants' subjective experiences in under-researched areas, especially when the aim is to understand contextually-bound interpretations instead of outlining causal relationships (Bell et al., 2019). The selection of exploratory and cross-sectional designs aims to capture participants' reflections on the development and application of competencies, while avoiding the imposition of predefined theoretical categories or the necessity for longitudinal follow-up.

Exploratory research designs are especially justified in emerging research areas, aiming to uncover insights into participants' subjective views on complex experiences framed by context (Bell et al., 2019). Considering the limited focus on the application of sport-acquired competencies in entrepreneurial contexts (Ratten, 2015), an exploratory design is imperative for accessing participants' interpretations regarding this transfer process. This study's flexible

and participant-centric structure enabled individuals to express their thoughts freely, without theoretical limitations, thereby deepening their understanding of the importance of competencies gained from individual elite sports.

Cross-sectional qualitative designs are ideal for studies that gather retrospective accounts of lived experiences at a specific moment, especially when aiming to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to past events (Bell et al., 2019). In line with this perspective, the cross-sectional aspect of the current study highlights its retrospective focus; instead of being followed over time, participants were asked to reflect on their transition from sports to entrepreneurship at a specific point.

This methodological choice allowed for the collection of contextualised accounts regarding competency transfer, specifically emphasising how experiences are perceived and articulated retrospectively. Additionally, the selected design aligns with the abductive methodological strategy detailed in Section 3.1. Although theoretical frameworks such as HCT and existing competence literature informed the research, the design fostered an iterative relationship between participants' narratives and theoretical interpretation. This adaptability enabled the study to stay open to emerging themes while grounding the analysis in relevant theoretical concepts (Gioia et al., 2012).

### **3.3 Research Process**

#### **3.3.1 Sampling**

This study used a purposive sampling method to identify participants with firsthand experience in individual elite sports and entrepreneurship, aiming to explore how competencies gained through sports are reflexively interpreted, adapted, and dynamically enacted within entrepreneurial contexts. This approach is preferred in qualitative research when the goal is to achieve a profound, contextually situated understanding of a specific phenomenon through engagement with individuals who have direct and meaningful experience (Bell et al., 2019). Instead of seeking statistical generalisation, purposive sampling aims to explain how individuals interpret and understand their lived realities, particularly during transitional life phases, where retrospective accounts can provide the conceptual depth necessary for developing theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Bell et al., 2019). This formulation shows a

readiness to recognise interpretive and adaptive processes, avoiding the assumption of a uniform mechanism of competence transfer.

To ensure consistency with this aim, two inclusion criteria were established:

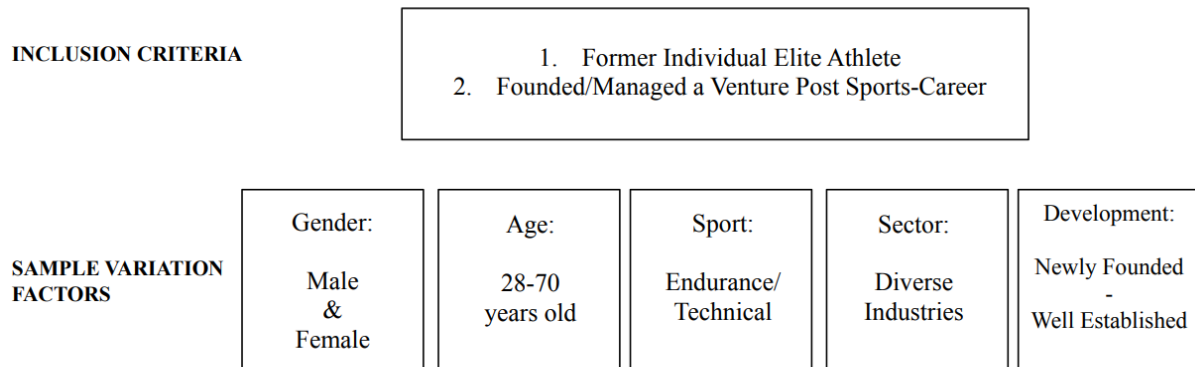
1. **Former Individual Elite Athletes:** Participants must have concluded their careers in individual elite sports
2. **Entrepreneurial Experience:** Participants must have subsequently established and overseen a venture after the conclusion of their athletic careers.

The initial criterion aligns with the characterisation of individual elite athletes outlined in Section 1.1, where individual elite athletes are defined as those whose performance outcomes are predominantly self-determined and who have competed at the highest levels of their respective sports (Swann et al., 2015). This focus guarantees that participants have experienced the strict requirements and high-performance environments typical of individual elite sports. In alignment with Bell et al.'s (2019) emphasis on context-sensitive and retrospective meaning-making, only former athletes were included in this study, thereby treating sport and entrepreneurship as sequential, rather than overlapping, life domains. This temporal distinction clarified the participants' reflections on competence development and its transfer across various contexts.

The second criterion, necessitating that participants have founded and managed a venture in a post-sport context, was rooted in abductive logic, prioritising theoretically relevant cases over breadth (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). By selecting individuals with concrete entrepreneurial experience, the study ensured that competencies cultivated in individual elite sport were retained, actively executed, evaluated, and reflected upon in practical settings.

Participants were identified through the researcher's network and supplemented via snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). While ongoing entrepreneurial activity was not a requirement for inclusion, all five participants were engaged in managing their firms during the interviews. This enabled the study to gather insights not only on the initial transition from sports to

entrepreneurship but also on the continual application and enhancement of sports-acquired competencies in dynamic entrepreneurial environments.



*Figure 3: Inclusion Criteria and Sample Variation Factors*

### 3.3.2 Participant Overview

The final sample consisted of five former elite individual athletes, each with extensive experience in various elite individual sports, ranging from highly technical disciplines to fully endurance-based activities. As noted by Bell et al. (2019), understanding background characteristics and domain-specific experience is pivotal in interpreting how participants conceptualise their trajectories within qualitative interview research. The athletic careers of the participants spanned five to fifteen years and included both summer and winter sports. After retiring from competitive sport, all participants transitioned into entrepreneurial ventures and remained actively involved in establishing and managing their firms at the time of data collection.

The participants in this study fulfilled the established inclusion criteria and were consistent with the operational definition of successful entrepreneurs utilised herein, specifically, individuals whose firms are independently managed and continue to be actively engaged in the firms activities. Although various conceptualisations of entrepreneurial success have been proposed, encompassing dimensions such as financial performance, sustainability, personal satisfaction, and societal impact (Gartner, 1990), this research embraced a pragmatic perspective prioritising operational continuity and the autonomy of entrepreneurs. The firms

varied in age, ranging from newly launched ventures to more established firms, and exhibited diversity in industry and scope. This detailed case level enables a thorough understanding of the transfer process, supported by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), who underscore the importance of information-rich, theoretically pertinent cases in qualitative inquiry.

All participants possessed a university-level education, which was mentioned as part of their background information; however, none elaborated upon it during the interviews or explicitly linked it to their entrepreneurial activities. Each firm was initially established by the participant alone; nonetheless, all the firms have since evolved to include additional owners and employees.

Participants articulated their entrepreneurial activities using various terms, such as startup, business, company, venture and firm. For consistency, this thesis uses the term “firm,” as outlined in the introductory chapter.

### **3.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews**

This study utilised semi-structured interviews as its main data collection method. This approach is especially fitting for research focused on examining participants’ subjective experiences, while also permitting unexpected insights to arise (Bell et al., 2019). In this investigation, semi-structured interviews facilitated a comprehensive, flexible, and reflective discourse, enabling participants to articulate how competencies developed through elite sport have been interpreted and transposed into entrepreneurial contexts. The interview format supported both retrospective depth and situated meaning-making, aligning with the study’s interpretivist and abductive framework (Bell et al., 2019).

The interview guide was carefully crafted to address HCT, its critiques, and relevant research on competencies linked to elite sports and entrepreneurial achievement. As noted by Gioia et al. (2012), semi-structured interviews offer distinct advantages in research environments aiming to maintain participants’ emic perspectives while also nurturing the formulation of theoretical insights. This methodological approach enables participants to articulate and interpret their experiences in their own terms, fostering both inductive and abductive understanding. Consequently, the guide deliberately avoided using the term “competence” to

reduce theoretical bias and allow genuine meanings to surface through participants' responses reflection.

Initially, participants were thoroughly informed about the study protocol, including ethical considerations and consent protocols.

Subsequently, the guide was organized into four primary sections:

- (1) a background section addressing participants' historical involvement in sport and entrepreneurship
- (2) a central segment examining formative experiences and the shift from sport to entrepreneurship
- (3) a reflective segment encouraging interpretation, learning, and contextual application
- (4) a concluding section allowing for clarification or elaboration.

While thematic undertones such as resilience, self-leadership, and adaptability informed the guide's development, these themes were explored implicitly through open-ended prompts rather than through explicit language. This organisational structure adheres to recommendations for guiding semi-structured interviews through broad thematic framing, allowing space for elaborative discourse (Bell et al., 2019). The framework aspired to balance thematic concentration with narrative openness, facilitating participant-led reflection while ensuring theoretical alignment. Collectively, the semi-structured format reinforced the abductive approach by fostering participant-driven meaning-making within a thematically guided structure.

Five interviews were conducted, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Three sessions took place in person, while two occurred via Microsoft Teams because of logistical reasons constraints. All interviews were recorded with prior consent and adopted a conversational tone, encouraging participants to articulate their thoughts freely and authentically.

Bell et al. (2019) assert that providing participants with the flexibility to communicate in their preferred language is crucial for attaining depth and validity in qualitative research interviews. Consequently, language flexibility was incorporated into the interview process. Given that the researcher is a native Norwegian speaker, and several participants were more proficient in Norwegian, interviews were conducted in either Norwegian or English based on the

participants' preferences. This approach allowed participants to focus on the substantive content of the questions rather than the linguistic formulations, thereby fostering authenticity and comfort in their responses. Interviews conducted in Norwegian were transcribed and analysed in the original language, with English translations prepared exclusively for reporting purposes.

### **3.3.4 Recording and Transcription**

Bell et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of using recordings to enhance interpretive accuracy. This approach is especially vital when the interviewer works alone, as in this study; employing recordings and their transcriptions guaranteed precision and allowed for deeper engagement with the data. Moreover, Bell et al. (2019) stress that qualitative interviewers need to be highly aware of the details and nuances in participants' responses.

In accordance with this imperative, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim using the integrated transcription feature of Microsoft Word. The researcher took concise notes during the interviews to emphasise key points and guide future inquiries. These notes were primarily used in real-time to enrich the discussions, also serving as initial references for later content review. However, as the data collection was personalised, attentive listening to the recordings during transcription was vital to ensure all significant statements, expressions, or nuances were captured. The ability to revisit the full recordings also allowed the researcher to reconnect with the empirical material over time, thereby enhancing both the reliability and depth of the analysis.

Each transcript underwent a thorough manual review and editing process alongside the audio to maintain the tone, emphasis, and contextual richness inherent in the participants' narratives. Special attention was given to non-verbal elements, such as hesitations and tonal shifts, which play a crucial role in the interpretive framework (Gehman et al., 2018; Gioia et al., 2012). Although this process required a considerable investment of time, it permitted a deeper familiarity with the data and facilitated the subsequent use of rich, illustrative quotations in the findings outlined in Chapter 4.

### 3.3.5 Thematic Analysis

Bell et al. (2019) highlight that data analysis is one of the most complex and interpretatively demanding stages of qualitative research. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the dataset in a structured yet adaptable manner. Following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), the analysis unfolded through three iterative stages:

- (1) the identification of first-order concepts grounded in participants' language
- (2) the synthesis of higher-order themes via interpretative integration
- (3) the integration of these themes into broader dimensions.

This structured approach facilitated theoretical insight while remaining firmly rooted in the empirical material.

Several methodological safeguards were introduced throughout the analysis to reduce the risk of confirmation bias and maintain fidelity to participants' meanings. Bell et al. (2019) highlight that individual researchers must engage iteratively and reflexively with the data to minimise interpretive bias. This investigation promoted reflexivity through ongoing analysis of audio recordings and transcripts, careful verbatim transcription, and a clear coding process. Initial codes were generated inductively, allowing concepts to naturally emerge from the participants' language rather than being imposed by existing theories. During the coding phase, we focused on maintaining the context and tone of participants' statements to avoid over-interpretation or selective emphasis. Furthermore, notes taken during the interviews acted as reference points for revisiting significant moments, which deepened the understanding of the data's situational context. This iterative and reflective method aimed to minimise the influence of preconceived notions and foster a thorough, grounded interpretation of the material.

The evaluation of thematic saturation was conducted pragmatically in accordance with the study's abductive framework. Although saturation has been critiqued within small-sample qualitative research (Gioia et al., 2012), it was deemed reached in this context when no new codes related to competence emerged during the final interviews and when the thematic structure exhibited internal coherence and consistency across the dataset.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

The research was conducted by established ethical guidelines for qualitative inquiry, as delineated by Bell et al. (2019) and Creswell and Miller (2000). These frameworks emphasise fundamental principles including the avoidance of harm, the procurement of informed consent, the respect for privacy, and the acknowledgement of reflexivity's significance within the research process.

At the point of participant recruitment, and again prior to each interview, individuals were thoroughly informed regarding the study's objectives, their rights, and the protocols for data management. They were explicitly assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any repercussions. The principles of anonymity, along with the audio recording and transcription protocols, were articulated in the interview invitation and confirmed at the outset of each session. All participants provided informed and explicit consent for both recording and transcription.

All data underwent anonymisation during transcription by removing or generalising identifiable information details. Recordings and transcripts were securely stored within password-protected files, with access restricted solely to the researcher. By ethical research practices, all materials will be permanently deleted following the final evaluation of the thesis (Bell et al., 2019).

Given the close-knit nature of the individual elite sporting community in Scandinavia, particular diligence was employed to ensure participant anonymity. Pseudonyms and generalised descriptions were consistently utilised throughout the thesis to uphold confidentiality and reduce identifiability.

Creswell and Miller (2000) emphasise that a researcher's values, assumptions, and positionality significantly shape interpretive research. These factors can influence both how data is interpreted and how themes are developed. Given that a single researcher conducted this study, reflexivity was especially crucial. Although theoretical perspectives guided the analytical approach, there was a concerted effort to avoid imposing predetermined categories on the data. Instead, the thematic analysis focused on the participants' meaning-making processes, allowing

patterns to develop inductively. This reflective strategy aimed to reduce interpretive bias while improving the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **3.5 Limitations**

As customary in qualitative research, this study is evaluated based on critical considerations related to credibility, transferability, and dependability, which are essential elements of the broader notion of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry (Bell et al., 2019). These criteria are relevant when assessing the quality and scope of the study and provide a framework for considering its methodological limitations.

Firstly, the limited sample size of five participants hinders the opportunity for statistical generalisation. However, the aim of the study was not to produce generalisable assertions within the quantitative framework, but instead to foster contextually rich and theoretically meaningful insights through analytical generalisation (Bell et al., 2019). The chosen participants represent a relevant and information-dense sample, in line with investigating competence transfer across various domains.

Secondly, even though continual entrepreneurial activity wasn't a specific inclusion criterion, all participants were actively involved in their firms during the interviews. Although the study did not evaluate entrepreneurial performance or financial outcomes, this ongoing involvement allowed participants to consider not only the initial transition but also the ongoing application and growth of their competencies over time. However, the sampling method excluded those who had exited their ventures, a group that might provide different perspectives on the reassessment or restructuring of competencies after discontinuation. Future research could gain value by incorporating such cases to delve deeper into these dynamics.

Thirdly, while all participants possessed university degrees, none acknowledged formal education as a crucial source of their entrepreneurial competence. This observation aligns with critical perspectives on HCT, suggesting that tacit and experiential learning might play a more crucial role in entrepreneurial development than formal academic training (Dimov,

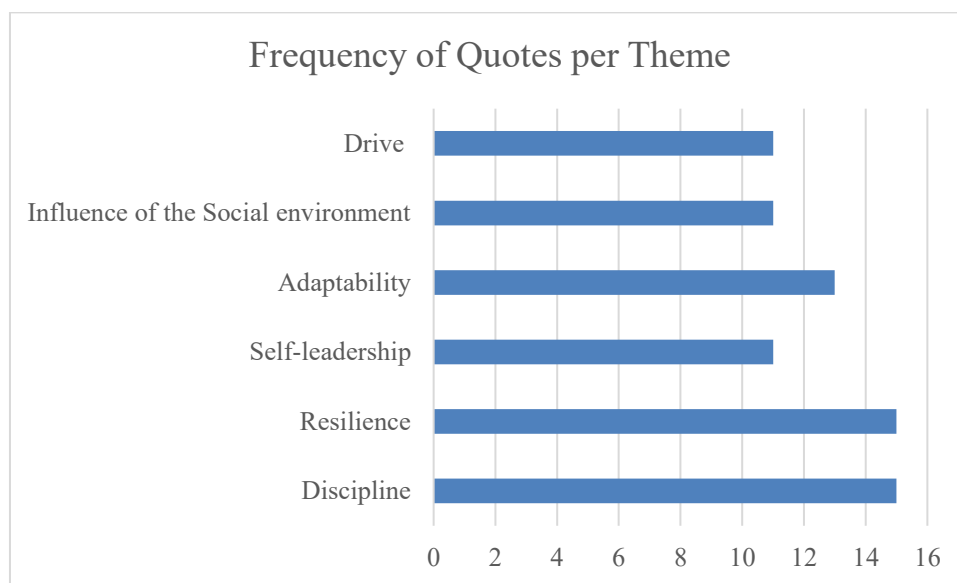
2017; Marvel et al., 2016). However, this does not lessen the potential significance of formal education, and subsequent studies could further explore its role in competence development.

Finally, interviews were conducted in Norwegian or English, depending on participant preference. The analysis was conducted in the original languages to maintain contextual nuance; however, the translation of selected quotations for reporting purposes may have resulted in subtle shifts in meaning, despite careful efforts to preserve fidelity and accuracy.

In summary, these limitations define the study's contextual boundaries and should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates methodological rigour through a transparent abductive research design, a coherent connection between the research question and methodological choices, systematic and reflexive analysis, and deliberate efforts to maintain the integrity of participants' perspectives across language barriers.

## **4.0 Empirical Findings**

This chapter presents empirical findings from five semi-structured interviews conducted with former elite athletes who had transitioned into entrepreneurship and were actively managing their firms at the time of the interviews. The objective is to showcase how they articulate and reflect on the competencies acquired through individual elite sports and their application in entrepreneurial activity. Through thematic analysis, six main themes emerged: Discipline, Resilience, Adaptability, Self-leadership, Drive and the Influence of the Social Environment. Each theme is accompanied by representative quotes that illustrate patterns in participants' perceptions and descriptions of these competencies. Collectively, the findings address the study's research question regarding the relevance and transferability of sport-derived competencies to entrepreneurial settings.



*Figure 4: Frequency of Quotes per Theme*

### **4.1 Discipline**

Discipline was recognised as a universally essential competency by all interviewees. Participants described discipline not just as a behavioural trait but as a foundational framework shaping their actions in entrepreneurship. They viewed the transfer of discipline as immediate and intuitive, reflecting a deeply rooted mindset developed through years of intensive training and preparation. While the thematic content aligned closely, several participants highlighted unique nuances that revealed the varying role of discipline among individuals. One participant explained how a clear structure improves cognitive clarity and reduces cognitive load during decision-making, especially in high-pressure situations.

*"Having structure enables me to concentrate and make informed decisions, even in high-pressure situations. In sports, I always had a daily plan, and this habit of proactive preparation continues to provide me with a competitive advantage in my business as well." (Interview 2)*

The participant described discipline as a deeply embedded structure that enhances concentration and supports quality decision-making under pressure. Emphasis was placed on the value of preparation and structure in sports and their current entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, another participant emphasises the enduring function of discipline as a stabilising construct.

*"Discipline was everything in sport. It gave me a framework, and it still gives me an edge in entrepreneurship, helping me frame how to work towards my goals and try to deliver every time." (Interview 4)*

This participant emphasised that the structure and routines developed through sports influence their work habits in entrepreneurship. They view discipline as an internal framework that enables them to consistently pursue goals and excel. The participant's account focused less on decision-making and more on discipline as a foundation for sustaining long-term performance. Additionally, a third participant offered a more reflective view, connecting discipline to emotional regulation and the clarity of one's goals.

*"Having a routine provides me peace of mind. In sports, everything has its time and place, and I've carried that discipline into entrepreneurship. It helps me avoid decision fatigue and keeps me focused on what matters." (Interview 5)*

This participant connected discipline with emotional stability and mental clarity. They explained how routines established in sport continued to assist them in remaining focused and avoiding decision fatigue in their entrepreneurial activity. The references to "peace of mind" and "decision fatigue" imply that discipline helps to reduce friction in daily operations, thereby enabling sustained focus over the long term.

While there is general consensus on this topic, the examples provided emphasise the distinct ways in which participants associate discipline with specific aspects of their entrepreneurial

activity, such as cognitive clarity, organised planning, and emotional resilience. This variation demonstrates the different ways in which discipline gained from sports impacts their current entrepreneurial roles.

## 4.2 Resilience

Resilience emerged as a prominent theme throughout the interviews, with participants expressing how their experiences in elite sport informed their ability to navigate adversity, maintain momentum, and withstand failure. Although there was a consensus regarding the importance of resilience, participants demonstrated variability in their understanding of its origins, functions, and expressions within their entrepreneurial activities.

One participant emphasised the crucial role of perseverance and emotional regulation, especially in high-stress situations. The ability to manage panic and continue progressing, even when faced with unexpected challenges, was described as a mindset carried over from sports:

*"Sports taught me the importance of perseverance, regardless of my emotions. I learned to avoid panic and not to halt my progress when challenges arise; instead, I assess the situation and keep moving forward. Always stay on top. This mindset is invaluable now, especially when unexpected problems occur in my worklife." (Interview 2)*

Another participant highlighted how frequent sports and entrepreneurship setbacks shaped their response patterns. They described that the core competency lies not in avoiding failure but in the ability to recover and continue:

*"You're always going to mess something up, or something or someone will mess up. Especially in a venture. The key is how quickly you recover. Sport taught me that." (Interview 4)*

A third participant described how their tolerance for failure was developed through repeated exposure to loss in elite sport, which later enabled them to approach entrepreneurial risk with greater confidence:

*"I've never been afraid of losing. In sports, you encounter failure so often that you eventually stop fearing it. This mindset gives me the courage to take risks that truly make a difference in the end. I believe this separates me from others as an entrepreneur." (Interview 5)*

While all participants viewed resilience as a central competence, they associated it with various aspects of their entrepreneurial roles, ranging from emotional regulation and goal persistence to risk-taking. This diversity reflects the many ways in which experiences of adversity in elite sport have shaped their ability to navigate uncertainty and pressure in

### **4.3 Adaptability**

Adaptability has been identified as a fundamental competence prevalent across all interviews, cultivated through extensive experience in navigating unpredictable scenarios encountered in elite athletic environments. Participants concurred that this capacity for rapid adjustment, maintaining composure under pressure, and the ability to modify strategies as necessary is directly applicable to the realm of entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, they articulated various methodologies for actualising adaptability, which encompassed troubleshooting, analytical reasoning, and intuitive decision-making processes.

One participant demonstrated how their sporting background has equipped them to respond decisively when faced with alterations to initial plans, a scenario that they frequently confront in their entrepreneurial activity:

*"In sports, plans change all the time. That taught me to troubleshoot quickly and be open to changing direction if needed; that mindset is an absolute core in my role as a founder." (Interview 1)*

This quotation exemplifies adaptability as a practical and action-oriented mindset, underscoring the importance of decisiveness and flexibility as fundamental components for effective functioning within a dynamic entrepreneurial environment. Another participant articulated adaptability as a process rooted in analytical thinking. Instead of responding instinctively, they highlighted the necessity of employing a systematic approach to navigate uncertainty.

*"Sport made me analytical. I break things down and adapt quickly; that's how I navigate uncertainty in my business." (Interview 2)*

This reflection suggests a more cognitive form of adaptability, where the capacity to assess and deconstruct situations before taking action emerges as a fundamental strategy. It posits that for this participant, engagement in sport not only fostered flexibility but also cultivated a systematic approach to thinking.

In contrast, a third participant characterised adaptability as predominantly intuitive, a competence shaped by recurrent high-stakes scenarios necessitating rapid pattern recognition and immediate response:

*"My decisions are often instinctive; it's as if I sense the pattern and react. I believe that years of high-pressure competitions have given me that edge." (Interview 4)*

This response shows that adaptability functions on both conscious and subconscious levels. The interviewee's accumulated experience enables swift and confident decision-making without requiring extensive analysis.

These viewpoints underscore adaptability as a shared competency that manifests in various personal expressions. While some individuals deconstruct problems and formulate strategic plans, others depend on instinctive responses or swift alterations in direction. Despite these variations, all participants characterised adaptability as a crucial competency for effectively navigating the uncertainties inherent in entrepreneurial activity.

#### **4.4 Self-leadership**

Participants identified self-leadership as a crucial competency developed through elite sport and subsequently applied in entrepreneurship. It was often described in terms of autonomy, personal accountability, and the capability to maintain performance without external direction. One participant, in particular, emphasised a strong preference for working independently and taking initiative.

This participant linked their self-leadership to early experiences of training alone and setting their own standards, describing this trait as one of their greatest assets in entrepreneurship:

*"I don't wait for anyone to tell me what to do. I set the pace, just as I did when training alone. This is probably one of my absolute best qualities since it is such a key in entrepreneurship."  
(Interview 2)*

In the same interview, the participant elaborated on how frustrations related to team dynamics compelled them to transition to individual sports and, subsequently, to the entrepreneurial path:

*"In team sports, I got frustrated when others didn't train hard enough. I moved to individual sport because I didn't want to depend on people who weren't fully committed. I think that's why I also started my own business, so I don't need to rely on others." (Interview 2)*

These reflections demonstrate that self-leadership, for this participant, evolved into not just a competency but a conscious strategy to prevent dependency and sustain control over personal performance. Another participant viewed self-leadership as rooted in intrinsic motivation and perseverance, especially during challenging or unstructured times:

*"Even when I'm tired or uncertain, I show up and get things done. That mindset comes from sports. It helps me remain consistent, especially during long and unstructured periods at work."  
(Interview 1)*

This perspective emphasises the importance of self-leadership, not only in relation to autonomy from external influences but also in the capacity to initiate and sustain one's own momentum. It underscores the ability to maintain productivity in the face of internal challenges and external situational obstacles.

Collectively, these reflections articulate that self-leadership comprises both a practical competence and a personal disposition. Whether manifested as independence from others or as perseverance through internal barriers, this competence emerged as central to how they manage their entrepreneurial roles.

## 4.5 Drive

Every participant identified a powerful internal drive as a key characteristic of their entrepreneurial mindset. Although they articulated it differently, they often linked this motivation to their backgrounds in elite sports. This drive was characterised as self-motivated, deeply ingrained, and not reliant on external rewards or recognition.

One participant shared that training alone in their sport instilled the ability to chase goals independently, without supervision or encouragement. That same sense of autonomy now forms the foundation of their work as an entrepreneur.

*“I don’t need external control. I’m accustomed to working toward my own goals, having been on my own in the field during my competitive years. I would say it’s a form of self-drive. That hasn’t changed; maybe it has even become more clear. As an entrepreneur, your business is relying on you to keep on going. Never give up.” (Interview 2)*

Another participant described their drive as a constant urge to grow and compete. For them, it was not just a source of motivation, but a force that shaped how they approach work and set ambitious goals:

*“I believe my unbreakable internal drive distinguishes me from other entrepreneurs: an insatiable hunger to improve, a competitive fire that compels me to push past every boundary, and the ability to set even-higher goals.” (Interview 4)*

A third participant recognised their extroverted nature and love for being in the spotlight, but stressed that their true motivation originates internally. They view themselves as their own driving force, consistently striving for higher goals and persevering even when others may falter:

*“I am a highly extroverted individual who thrives in the spotlight. However, what truly drives me is my internal standard. I have always been my own motivating force, relentlessly pushing myself to achieve greater heights. In entrepreneurship, this is a strength, since I believe I have the ability to keep on going when people give up” (Interview 5)*

Collectively, these viewpoints demonstrate that drive, although common among participants, assumes personal significance and shape. For certain individuals, it is linked to autonomy and discipline; for others, it centres on ambition and achievement. Regardless of how it manifests, this intrinsic motivation is considered crucial for upholding consistent effort and determination in entrepreneurial work.

#### **4.6 Influence of the Social Environment**

Most participants highlighted the importance of the social environment in their development as elite athletes. They shared how coaches, training partners, and high-achieving peers played a crucial role in shaping their mindset, discipline, and learning processes. A common theme was that shared ambition and learning from others were fundamental to their growth, both as athletes and individuals. In contrast, one participant emphasised the significance of the sport itself over the social context.

One participant described how being surrounded by top performers created a culture of excellence that continues to impact their operations practices:

*“ Training with the best and learning from each other has pushed me to excel, and I carry that mindset with me. Upon reflection, I believe that’s part of why I’ve managed to thrive in the harsh world of entrepreneurship. I strive to be the best I can and try to bring others with me on the ride.”(Interview 3)*

This quote demonstrates how the participant finds motivation in shared standards and collective support. The teamwork seen in sports is reflected in their present initiatives to inspire and incorporate others into their entrepreneurial efforts.

Another participant echoed this sentiment, explaining that their professional mindset is influenced by personal qualities and a learning culture fostered through sports:

*“I believe the culture and people in sports have shaped who I am today. It’s likely a combination of personality and learned competencies, but I don’t think I would thrive in my industry without that athlete mentality I got from being taught by others. As an entrepreneur I apply the same culture to my venture, trying to make sure everyone pushes each other and learns from one another, constantly evolving.”(Interview 5)*

The participant considers how the principles of mutual support and collective advancement influence their present position, indicating that the social culture inherent in sports has profoundly shaped their approach to leadership.

On the other hand, a different participant minimised the significance of social context, asserting that the most important insights were derived directly from the sport itself:

*“People often say it’s the culture or teammates that shape you, but I honestly believe it was the sport itself. That’s where I learned the most, as it provided me with the tools I use in business every day, like planning, goal-setting and never giving up; the hard work” (Interview 2)*

This perspective highlights the role of organised routines and personal discipline in shaping individual development, contrasting with the impact of social interactions. It presents a more individualised view of growth, where success is largely driven by the sport’s inherent challenges instead of relational factors.

Overall, these insights indicate that while a majority of participants recognised the significance of the social dimensions of their sport for their development, at least one individual perceived their progress as mainly influenced by the sport’s structural elements. Interestingly, all participants were from individual sports, yet four of the five emphasised the value of interactions with peers and coaches. This implies that even in non-team environments, strong social networks can thrive, fostering spaces for collective goals, role modelling, and collaborative learning.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Included in Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Emerged in Interviews</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Discipline	Yes	Yes	Utilises routines and planning strategies from sports to maintain structure and control at work.
Resilience	Yes	Yes	Learning to handle pressure, setbacks, and uncertainty helps them face challenges in entrepreneurship
Self-leadership	Yes	Yes	Assumes responsibility, works autonomously, and remains motivated without depending on others.
Adaptability	Yes	Yes	Being able to shift direction and adjust quickly, developed in sport, is useful in uncertain markets.
Drive	Yes	Yes	A strong inner motivation to improve and achieve a competitive mindset fuels their work.
Influence of the Social Environment	No	Yes	Sports culture and peer influence shape how they learn, lead and interact with their colleagues and other entrepreneurs.

*Table 1: Overview of Competencies and Influencing Factors Identified in Theoretical Framework and Empirical Findings*

Table 1 compares the competencies established within the theoretical framework with those that emerged during the empirical investigation. Notably, five of the competencies were supported by existing literature; however, the influence of the social environment was not included in the initial conceptual model, yet it emerged as a significant factor within participant narratives.

All quotes cited in the empirical chapters were derived from the five semi-structured interviews. In line with the study's methodological procedure, all transcripts were systematically coded and thematically categorised. The full set of original quotes, organised by

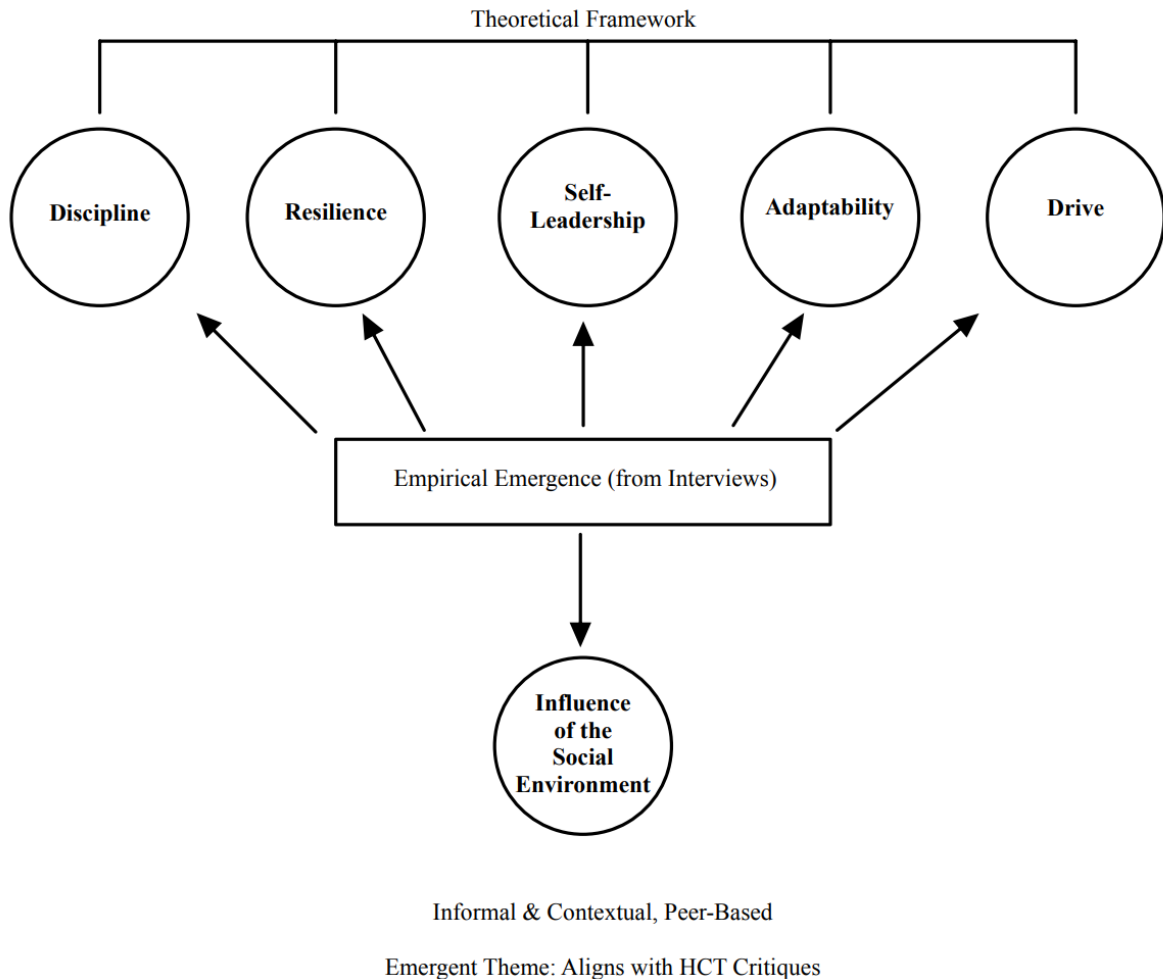
participant and theme, is provided in Appendix B to ensure transparency and traceability of the analytical process.

## **5.0 Analysis**

This chapter explores how competencies acquired from individual elite sports are reinterpreted and utilised in entrepreneurial environments. Six key themes emerged from the empirical data: Discipline, Resilience, Adaptability, Self-Leadership, Drive, and Influence of the Social Environment. The analysis is framed by HCT (Becker, 1993), particularly its broadened view of informal, experiential, and tacit learning. These aspects are especially relevant in elite sports, where learning occurs through practical experience, emotional involvement, and social interactions rather than formal education. Additionally, the inductive emergence of themes, particularly concerning the social environment, necessitates a focus on relational and context-sensitive perspectives on learning and identity development (Cope, 2005; Rae, 2005). This underscores the limitations of Human Capital Theory in addressing affective, emergent, and socially embedded learning processes, as highlighted by researchers like Dimov (2017), Marginson (2019), Marvel et al. (2016), and Kang & Mok (2022).

Each section investigates how the competencies typically associated with individual elite sports are not merely transferred to entrepreneurship but are actively restructured, negotiated, and integrated into new contexts. Thus, this chapter addresses the research question by highlighting both common developmental mechanisms in sports and entrepreneurship, along with the distinct pathways through which each competency adapts to tackle entrepreneurial challenges.

### Competence Dimensions: Empirical Emergence and Theoretical Anchoring



*Figure 5: Competence Dimensions: Empirical Emergence and Theoretical Anchoring*

Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between the theoretical framework and the empirical findings. The theory proposed five competencies: discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership and drive, which were confirmed through interview data collection. In contrast, the Influence of the social environment emerged inductively and was not included in the original model. This placement highlights its empirical emergence and crucial role in shaping other competencies. Additionally, this theme aligns with critiques of HCT by emphasising the significance of informal, relational, and context-sensitive learning processes.

## **5.1 Discipline: From Structured Routines to Reflective Application in Entrepreneurial Activity**

Across all participant narratives, discipline emerged as a developed competency, honed through comprehensive, structured training and focused performance. Rather than being viewed as an innate quality, discipline was invariably connected to the routines, expectations, and long-term commitments that are essential to elite individual sports. These behavioural patterns went beyond personal habits, reflecting what Kang and Mok (2022) describe as socially embedded norms, unwritten expectations that become internalised through sustained exposure to performance-oriented environments. Participants elaborated on cultivating discipline through repetitive planning, consistent execution, and meticulous self-monitoring. These reflections echo Sokol's (2021) perspective of discipline as a self-regulatory ability deeply rooted in the behavioural culture of elite sports, shedding light on a form of learning that remains underexamined in traditional HCT applications (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961).

However, this competence did not seamlessly translate into entrepreneurial activities; instead, participants discussed a process of reinterpretation. The structured mindset and disciplined routines typical of athletic life were slowly modified to meet entrepreneurship's fluid and unpredictable nature. Some participants shared how they leveraged their discipline to create order amidst uncertainty, establishing routines that grounded their endeavours and clarified their priorities. Others explained how discipline bolstered their motivation, aiding in time management, tracking progress, and maintaining momentum when facing entrepreneurial challenges. These insights emphasise that while discipline originated in sports, it was not simply transferred, but actively reconfigured to meet new contextual demands. This corresponds with Dimov's (2017) view of competence as dynamic and context-sensitive, rather than static or universally applicable.

The applications of discipline varied based on the entrepreneurial context. For some, it facilitated long-term strategic thinking and prioritisation; for others, it served as a psychological framework that reduced decision fatigue, enhanced emotional stability, and encouraged consistent action. These distinct uses indicate that discipline promotes both behavioural structure and cognitive clarity.

The findings presented here engage with and expand upon HCT (Becker, 1993), which defines competencies as productive assets cultivated through intentional investments in education, training, and experience. Although this updated version of HCT recognises informal and experiential learning, it lacks sufficient explanatory power to clarify how such competencies emerge from embodied, tacit, and socially embedded practices, particularly those that do not stem from deliberate human capital investments. Consequently, the findings question the assumptions in earlier versions of HCT that prioritised formal education and economic productivity (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). By doing so, this research contributes to the conceptual development of HCT, emphasising discipline as a fluid, socially embedded, and experientially enacted competence, rather than merely a fixed asset arising from formal investment.

In this study, discipline is viewed not as a formal investment but as an experiential outcome of engaging in structured, high-performance settings. This experience is then reactivated and recontextualised within entrepreneurial decision-making, time management, and strategic planning. This perspective is consistent with the critiques proposed by Dimov (2017) and Marvel et al. (2016), who call for a more emergent and contextually sensitive approach to understanding human capital. Instead of seeing discipline as a fixed and measurable trait, the findings highlight its intrinsic fluidity, showcasing how it is reinterpreted and strategically utilised in response to the uncertainties and autonomy inherent in entrepreneurial activity.

Through this framework, discipline is unveiled not merely as a technical or procedural competency but as a fundamental competence that enables participants to maintain direction, focus, and consistency in the face of entrepreneurial challenges. It offers a stabilising framework that fosters cognitive clarity and sustained performance, especially in dynamic environments with sparse external validation or guidance. Thus, discipline is not only a legacy of athletic experience but also a versatile and strategically mobilised asset within the unpredictable and autonomous realm of entrepreneurial activity.

## 5.2 Resilience: Reconfigured, Navigating Pressure Through Practice

Throughout the interviews, resilience emerged as a key theme, with participants highlighting how their experiences in elite sports shaped their capacity to handle adversity, maintain momentum, and endure failure. Although there was a general agreement on the importance of resilience, participants shared varied views on how it is developed, the roles it plays, and how it is expressed in entrepreneurship. These views resonate with Gupta and McCarthy's (2024) definition of resilience as a dynamic competency developed through experience, coping, and reflection, rather than a fixed characteristic. This competency appears to stem from constant exposure to emotionally charged and often uncontrollable situations in sports. Participants noted that their resilience grew through ongoing encounters with failure, loss, and performance setbacks, especially in contexts where they faced these challenges alone. In individual sports, where emotional burdens are commonly borne alone and accountability lies solely with the athlete, many highlighted the importance of “dealing with it alone.” This solitary confrontation with adversity seems essential to the specific type of resilience emphasised in this study.

Participants described this competence as not being formally taught or learned, echoing Marvel et al.'s (2016) critique of HCT's reductionist view, which considers learning mainly as a result of intentional effort. Rather, resilience formed naturally in real-time through emotionally charged, high-stakes experiences that challenge traditional models of structured teaching. These insights support Marvel et al.'s (2016) position that entrepreneurial competencies frequently arise from tacit, embodied interactions with complex situations, contrasting with HCT's focus on cognitive and measurable competency development.

One participant expressed that consistent setbacks in sports reduced their fear of negative results, allowing them to make bolder and more decisive entrepreneurial decisions. Another participant highlighted the importance of persisting despite emotional exhaustion, a mindset considered vital during the uncertain and isolating periods of entrepreneurship. These observations align with Ayala and Manzano's (2014) claim that resilience boosts a person's ability to cope with challenges, sustain motivation, and perform well under pressure. Although the concept of resilience is fundamentally rooted in individual elite sports, it did not emerge in entrepreneurship as a fixed competency. Instead, participants adapted and reconfigured this ability to meet new emotional and structural challenges. Some of them described using

resilience to expedite decision-making by reducing hesitation, while others emphasised its importance in managing emotions during prolonged periods of uncertainty. These differences illustrate Dimov's (2017) assertion that transferring competencies is not automatic; it occurs through reflection and contextual adjustments.

The experiential and unstructured aspects of this learning process further challenge the assumptions present even in the revised version of HCT (Becker, 1993), which broadened the framework to encompass informal and experiential learning. While Becker (1993) validated learning outside formal education, the findings indicate that HCT still fails to adequately represent emotionally charged and relational learning processes. Furthermore, they challenge the assumptions ingrained in Becker's original formulation (1964), which emphasised formal education and rational economic returns. In contrast, resilience was nurtured through visceral and often solitary experiences of adversity. This observation reinforces Marginson's (2019) critique regarding HCT's neglect of emotional, identity-based, and relational dimensions of human development, thereby underscoring the inadequacy of models that prioritise economic rationality and quantifiable outcomes. Accordingly, the findings support Kang and Mok's (2022) argument that competence development is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional factors, not merely individual investment decisions.

Alongside these interpretations, some participants characterised resilience as not just the capacity to recover from setbacks but also as a strategic orientation aimed at sustaining a position of strength. Instead of merely "bouncing back," resilience was viewed as a psychological necessity to persistently stay ahead, maintain high standards, and ensure performance leadership, even amidst changing circumstances. This important distinction indicates that resilience can act as a proactive stance rather than just a reactive response. For these individuals, their competence encompassed more than just managing adversity, it involved a commitment to remain calm, decisive, and visibly in control during uncertain times. This focus on ongoing superiority reinforces the notion that entrepreneurial resilience is developed through both endurance and assertiveness, influenced by the constant pressures and expectations present in elite sports.

For many participants, resilience was not just a behavioural competency but a psychological framework developed in elite sports settings and later activated in entrepreneurial contexts. This developmental approach clearly separates resilience from other competencies explored in

this study. Rather than emerging from structured routines or social norms, resilience was formed through real experiences of failure and maintained through emotional regulation in environments marked by uncertainty and isolation. Keeping composure during chaos, recovering from setbacks, and acting without relying on external approval highlight resilience as a crucial element of entrepreneurial success. These insights underscore the need for competence frameworks that move beyond static models to capture the emotional, non-linear, and experiential aspects of learning integral to experiences in both sports and entrepreneurship.

### **5.3 Adaptability: Learning Without Instruction**

Adaptability emerged as a crucial competency highlighted by all participants, deeply connected to their athletic backgrounds. These experiences necessitated quick responses to changing conditions, strategic shifts, and various situational complexities. Participants credited their development of this competency to high-level sporting environments characterised by unpredictability, influenced by factors such as injuries, performance variations, tactical changes, and the evolving nature of competition that demanded constant adjustments. In these scenarios, adaptability became more than just a theoretical concept; it was ingrained through trial and error, feedback mechanisms, and practical performances. This perspective resonates with the framework proposed by Schinke et al. (2015), who define adaptability as a dynamic competency fostered through stress evaluation, development of coping strategies, and performance-oriented learning cycles.

For some participants, adaptability evolved into a highly analytical competency. These individuals described their ability to strategically analyse new situations, tackle challenges, and adjust their strategies based on real-time information. While rooted in experiential learning, this form of adaptability developed into a structured cognitive response pattern within the context of entrepreneurial activities. One participant illustrates how elite sports equipped them to manage uncertainty through logical sequencing and critical thinking, showcasing the transfer of learned problem-solving strategies into entrepreneurial decision-making processes. In contrast, some participants described adaptability using more intuitive language. Their responses, influenced by a series of experiences in high-pressure situations, depended on recognising patterns, instinctive judgments, and implicit responses. This instinctive aspect

supports Haynie et al.'s (2010) claim that adaptability encourages swift, non-linear decision-making in unstable conditions. Together, these accounts suggest that adaptability operates on a spectrum, encompassing both deliberate adjustments and instinctual, non-verbal reactions.

Despite these nuanced differences, all participants agreed on the vital role of adaptability in successfully navigating the uncertainties associated with entrepreneurial endeavours. The ways in which they developed and expressed the competency demonstrated significant variation. This point resonates Marginson's (2019) critique of traditional HCT, which often focuses heavily on formal, outcome-driven learning while overlooking the informal, emotional, and context-aware processes that usually lead to competency development.

Moreover, these results support Marvel et al.'s (2016) assertion that entrepreneurial competencies are often built through non-linear, implicit, and adaptive processes that go beyond traditional educational methods. Participants did not view their adaptability as a standalone or transferable competency; instead, they understood it as a capability that is continually influenced by context, developed through independent decision-making, real-time adjustments, and repeated encounters with unpredictable situations. The learning that underlies this competency was emergent and experiential, rather than merely the product of structured or purely cognitive activities.

What distinguishes adaptability as a competency is its foundation in unstructured, limited feedback situations. In individual elite sports, athletes frequently faced circumstances requiring critical decision-making without direct coaching or team assistance. This level of autonomy demanded thorough environmental evaluation, strategic reshaping, and emotional stability under pressure. In contrast to competencies shaped by social norms or intentional planning, adaptability emerged in response to disruptions, making it the most contextually adaptive and responsive competence identified in this study.

These findings challenge fundamental assumptions within HCT as revised by Becker (1993), which links competence development to structured investments. Although the revised model recognises informal and experiential learning, it offers limited understanding of how competencies like adaptability are developed through situational pressures and practical experience. Consequently, this study contributes to a conceptual expansion of HCT by emphasising adaptability as an emergent, experience-based competence that is actively utilised

in entrepreneurial ventures. This approach supports Marvel et al.'s (2016) call for frameworks that acknowledge the implicit and improvisational aspects of entrepreneurial learning.

#### **5.4 Self-leadership: A Contextual and Reflective Competence**

Self-leadership emerged as a key competency among participants, characterised by intrinsic motivation, personal initiative, and accountability. These characteristics were particularly evident in individuals with backgrounds in individual elite sports, where personal effort, consistency, and ongoing self-assessment were crucial for advancement. Participants noted that training environments lacking immediate feedback or external guidance fostered a greater sense of autonomy and ownership, which they later applied to their entrepreneurial activities. This competence was not taught through formal education but developed instinctively through iterative practice, self-monitoring, and reflective trial-and-error. Participants repeatedly pointed out that solitary training routines compelled them to establish and uphold behavioural patterns without external oversight. These insights correspond with Jonker et al.'s (2010) description of self-leadership as a competence rooted in behavioural regulation and reflective engagement. Moreover, they reinforce Dimov's (2017) view that entrepreneurial competencies are not acquired in a static manner but continually redefined through contextual practice.

Participants' descriptions highlight both behavioural and psychological aspects of self-leadership. Some defined it as the ability to plan independently and execute tasks consistently, while others underscored its significance in providing direction and fostering intrinsic motivation without external validation. This interaction emphasises the complex nature of self-leadership, blending performance techniques with emotional resilience. Neck and Houghton (2006) argue that self-leadership enhances entrepreneurial effectiveness by strengthening self-regulation, autonomy, and internal motivation, claims that are consistently supported by empirical evidence.

This competence can also be viewed through the lens of Kang and Mok's (2022) critique of conventional HCT. Instead of originating from direct investment in specific competencies, self-leadership seems to develop from social integration and ingrained performance expectations. In the structured cultures of elite individual sports, where supervision is limited, athletes

naturally assimilate institutional norms related to self-governance and discipline. These implicit expectations influenced lasting behavioural patterns, which participants later reconceptualised in their entrepreneurial roles.

Many participants viewed self-leadership as arising from structured independence and personal motivation; however, one participant shared a different perspective. They linked their strong inclination for autonomy to past frustrations with teammates who demonstrated a lack of discipline and commitment in team sports. This dissatisfaction encouraged them to intentionally transition to individual sports and eventually entrepreneurship, enabling them to take complete control over the process and results. This trajectory illustrates that self-leadership can also emerge as a response to ineffective group dynamics, rather than solely from positive personal growth. It underscores the relational foundations of competence development, aligning with Dimov's (2017) focus on context-sensitive learning. Additionally, this narrative supports Kang and Mok's (2022) assertion that behavioural competencies can develop through interactions with social norms, rather than just through their internalisation. Thus, the participant's journey reflects a thoughtful disengagement from unsuitable environments, resulting in strategic autonomy aligned with entrepreneurial needs.

In entrepreneurial settings, participants noted that they relied on internalised systems to navigate uncertainty, pursue long-term objectives, and sustain consistency during periods of isolation or uncertainty. Self-leadership was actively re-engaged and tailored to the entrepreneurial context rather than transferred. This phenomenon is somewhat acknowledged in the HCT revised by Becker (1993), which encompasses informal and experiential learning. Nonetheless, even this broadened framework fails to thoroughly account for how deeply embedded, emergent, and relational dynamics influence competence development. In contrast, earlier iterations of HCT (Becker, 1964) focused mainly on formal training and economic productivity, neglecting the internal and emotional learning processes highlighted here.

In this study, self-leadership stands out due to its profound internal grounding and development out of necessity rather than explicit teaching. Unlike competencies acquired through mentoring or collaboration, it emerges from self-directed routines, reflective practices, and strategic independence. These results emphasise that self-leadership is not a static quality but a fluid and adaptable resource, particularly suited for entrepreneurial efforts characterised by uncertainty, autonomy, and constant adjustment.

## **5.5 Influence of the Social Environment: A Relational Context for Competence Formation**

Unlike other themes in this chapter, the influence of the social environment is not defined as a standalone competence. Instead, it serves as the relational framework within which competencies such as adaptability and self-leadership are developed and strengthened. This theme emerged inductively from participants' stories, consistently emphasising the significant impact of peers, coaches, and the broader motivational climate present in individual elite sports.

In four out of five interviews, participants noted that performance-driven environments established behavioural norms and standards that influenced their attitudes towards consistent effort, long-term commitment, and psychological strength. The social environment included mechanisms like observation, modelling, shared expectations, and interpersonal accountability. These elements were perceived not merely as passive backgrounds but as active cultural and relational forces that integrated competence development into daily interactions. Thus, the social context played a crucial role in what participants later recalled and redefined as entrepreneurial competences.

Multiple narratives illustrate this dynamic. One participant mentioned: "Training with the best and learning from each other has pushed me to excel, and I carry that mindset with me." Another highlighted their relational motivation: "I try to create a culture where everyone pushes each other and learns from one another." A third participant noted: "I bring others with me on the ride," indicating that collective ambition influenced both athletic performance and firm-building practices. These examples demonstrate that, even in individual sports, athletes are part of socially constructed learning environments that prioritise mutual growth, informal mentorship, and shared responsibility for experiences.

Nevertheless, the impact of this environment on participants varied significantly. For instance, one individual emphasised internal motivation and discipline, characterising their personal development as predominantly self-directed. This difference aligns with Dimov's (2017) perspective that external conditions influence competence development not just passively, but through the active engagement and interpretation by individuals. It is both relational and agentic, arising from experiences and crafted through personal meaning-making.

The social environment challenges the earlier assumptions of HCT (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), which prioritise individual investment and cognitive growth. Although the revised HCT (Becker, 1993) acknowledges experiential learning, it does not adequately consider the emotional, relational, and social factors that influence the learning process. As noted by Kang and Mok (2022), institutional norms, cultural contexts, and peer relationships often play a crucial, yet underexplored, role in developing competencies. In this study, the motivational climate, collective performance expectations, and peer feedback established a relational framework that facilitated the normalisation and implementation of essential competencies.

The social environment was not initially included in the theoretical framework as a distinct competence. However, it clearly emerged from the empirical material as a recurring theme in participants' accounts. Rather than constituting a standalone competence, it operated as a contextual mechanism, a form of situated scaffolding that enabled participants to develop and sustain competencies later activated in entrepreneurial activity.

## **5.6 Drive: The Invisible Engine**

Every participant expressed a profound and enduring intrinsic motivation, which they felt distinguished them from individuals lacking elite sports backgrounds. Although their expressions differed, there was a strong agreement that this internal drive, cultivated through competitive experiences, was vital to their entrepreneurial identities and everyday practices. It was repeatedly characterised as self-driven, deeply ingrained, and primarily unaffected by external validation or supervision.

Participants linked their motivation to the inherent climate of individual elite sports, where persistent effort is crucial for both external validation and personal advancement. This view correlates with Mallett and Hanrahan's (2004) claim that elite athletes' intrinsic motivation arises from personal ambition and the demanding nature of high-performance environments. In such settings, drive is not a fixed trait; instead, it evolves dynamically, continually bolstered by challenges and personal goal-setting.

One participant described how early independence in sports fostered their ability to pursue goals without external supervision, a competence that has only grown in entrepreneurial contexts. Another expressed a relentless urge to push their boundaries, while a third highlighted their ability to sustain long-term motivation without social support, considering this resilience a significant advantage in their entrepreneurial path.

These narratives align with Baum and Locke's (2004) concept of drive as a competence nurtured through elite sports, having a major influence on entrepreneurial efforts. According to their framework, drive enhances persistence, ambition, and long-term commitment, particularly in unstructured environments where motivation must originate internally. In this context, drive upholds other competences such as discipline and self-leadership and acts as a distinct motivational force. Its uniqueness is rooted in the combination of emotional intensity, autonomy, and continuity, developed progressively through experiential learning instead of imposed teaching.

This interpretation supports the perspective advanced by Marvel et al. (2016), who claim that entrepreneurial competencies frequently arise from embodied and emotional experiences that extend beyond formal education. In this research, participants' insights into their internalised drive exemplify a type of "motivational capital," defined here as the emotional and psychological framework that enables sustained action over time, formed not through intentional educational efforts but through emotionally intense, high-stakes experiences.

These findings reveal a significant limitation within traditional HCT. While Becker (1993) broadened his original framework to encompass informal and experiential learning, HCT lacks the conceptual tools necessary to fully recognise internally sourced motivation as a form of productive capital. Earlier versions by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) primarily classify human capital as quantifiable educational and training investments. However, the motivation expressed by participants arises not from measurable instruction but rather from competitive involvement and identity-driven ambition. Marginson (2019) critiques this limitation, asserting that conventional models neglect the emotional and identity-forming aspects of human development that are essential for ongoing behavioural engagement. In this regard, motivation is viewed not merely as a transferable resource but as a deeply rooted psychological competence developed through sustained emotional investment and purposeful self-guidance. This competence fosters consistent behaviours, enhances goal prioritisation, and sustains

entrepreneurial momentum in unpredictable and frequently isolating circumstances. These revelations challenge simplistic views of competence as isolated, teachable competences and instead advocate for frameworks that recognise the affective, experiential, and context-driven aspects of human capital development.

### **5.7 Competence Transfer: An Unexpected Uniformity**

Despite the differences in age, gender, sports disciplines, and entrepreneurial fields among participants, their stories about competence development and transfer exhibited a remarkable thematic alignment. This cohesiveness was unexpected, considering the variety in life stages, business scope, and professional contexts. While some alignment was likely due to common experiences within elite sports and entrepreneurial activities, the consistency went beyond mere surface similarities, encompassing not only the identified competencies but also the methods of cultivation, interpretation, and mobilisation. This similarity implies that engaging in individual elite sports may expose individuals to common behavioural and cognitive frameworks that go beyond athletic boundaries (Kang & Mok, 2022; Marginson, 2019).

Although the recurring focus on competences like self-leadership aligns with participants' experiences as athletes and founders of independent firms, the prominence of the social environment was somewhat surprising. These results question the belief that elite sports are solely individual pursuits and underscore the importance of relational contexts in competence development. The data indicate that competencies frequently emerge within interactive learning environments rather than as standalone competencies.

The five primary competencies: discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership, and drive, were consistently highlighted in all interviews. Participants articulated these competencies in personal terms related to their contexts; yet, the structural similarities in their narratives were striking. Some emphasised planning and strategy, while others focused on perseverance or emotional regulation; however, the core narrative remained consistent. This alignment strengthens the empirical weight of critiques of HCT. While Becker (1993) views human capital as the outcome of individualised, productivity-enhancing investments, Marginson (2019) disputes this by advocating for a more relational and identity-focused model of human

development. The findings enhance this viewpoint, suggesting that competencies are frequently co-created through socially embedded and experiential learning (Kang & Mok, 2022; Marvel et al., 2016).

A possible explanation for this convergence is the high-pressure, repetitive nature of elite individual sports. Years of structured training and frequent encounters with unpredictable situations seem to cultivate behavioural patterns that may be activated in entrepreneurial contexts. Dimov (2017) supports this view by defining learning as emergent, iterative, and influenced by contextual involvement. The participants' ability to reflect deeply on their competence development indicates a heightened self-awareness rooted in these early experiences.

However, the data also uncovered subtle differences. One participant emphasised their growth as stemming mainly from personal discipline, minimising the impact of social factors. Others described motivation in diverse terms, including ambition, competitive spirit, or a focus on mastery. These differences reinforce the idea that while the content of competence may converge, individual processes of meaning-making influence how these competences are assimilated and expressed (Kang & Mok, 2022).

While all five competencies emerged in the interviews, their depth and emphasis varied significantly. Drive was consistently described, whereas discipline and resilience were more frequently mentioned, illustrated through a broader array of examples. Likewise, the influence of the social environment was evident but manifested in various ways, from peer modelling to internalised norms. These differences made it inappropriate to rank the competencies by importance. Rather, the findings indicate a network of interdependent competencies shaped by individual histories and contextual interpretations. The significance of any given competence was determined not only by its frequency but also by its narrative depth and connection to broader life paths.

The observed consistency improves the internal consistency of this study but raises questions about its applicability. Can these patterns be observed in the wider population of former individual elite athletes, or are they influenced by the reflective tendencies of this specific sample? Although generalisation isn't the objective, the findings emphasise how retrospective interpretation influences the articulation of competence trajectories. This doesn't diminish their

significance; instead, it highlights the reflective and meaning-making processes that individuals use to understand past experiences and apply them in entrepreneurship contexts. In conclusion, entrepreneurial development in this context appears to involve not just acquiring isolated competencies, but rather constitutes a cumulative, situated learning process. It is influenced by agency, relational experiences, and the institutional contexts in which the firm is established and practised. The observed consistency underscores the need for a contextualised understanding of HCT, one that transcends instrumental models and recognises how competencies are dynamically co-developed and interpreted across different contextual domains.

### **5.8 Intersections Between Competencies: Integrated Patterns of Practice**

Although five key competencies: discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership, and drive, emerged as significant empirical themes, three additional competencies from the theoretical framework: leadership, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, did not manifest as separate themes. This lack of distinction doesn't necessarily mean they are irrelevant; rather, it likely reflects the context of the interviews and the perspectives participants applied concerning the study's emphasis on individual elite sport and entrepreneurial ventures. Participants' insights were heavily influenced by their experiences in high-autonomy performance settings. As former elite athletes who are now entrepreneurs, they frequently highlighted the importance of personal accountability, independent decision-making, and self-sufficiency. While elements of leadership and teamwork were noted, especially regarding social influence, these aspects were not elaborated upon enough to qualify as distinct themes. Similarly, emotional intelligence was hinted at through references to empathy and emotional regulation, yet it was generally intertwined within larger discussions on resilience and adaptability. These overlaps suggest that while such competencies were present, they were contextually embedded rather than independently articulated

More importantly, the five core competencies identified in this study did not function independently. Instead, participants described them as mutually reinforcing and often activated together in response to entrepreneurial challenges. For example, discipline is frequently intertwined with resilience and adaptability, especially in high-stakes or uncertain scenarios. Participants depended on structured routines to keep the momentum going, utilised adaptability

to adjust when circumstances changed, and relied on resilience to overcome setbacks. One participant noted that following a long-term plan prevented them from “wasting time” during uncertain times, demonstrating how competencies were used in interdependent clusters.

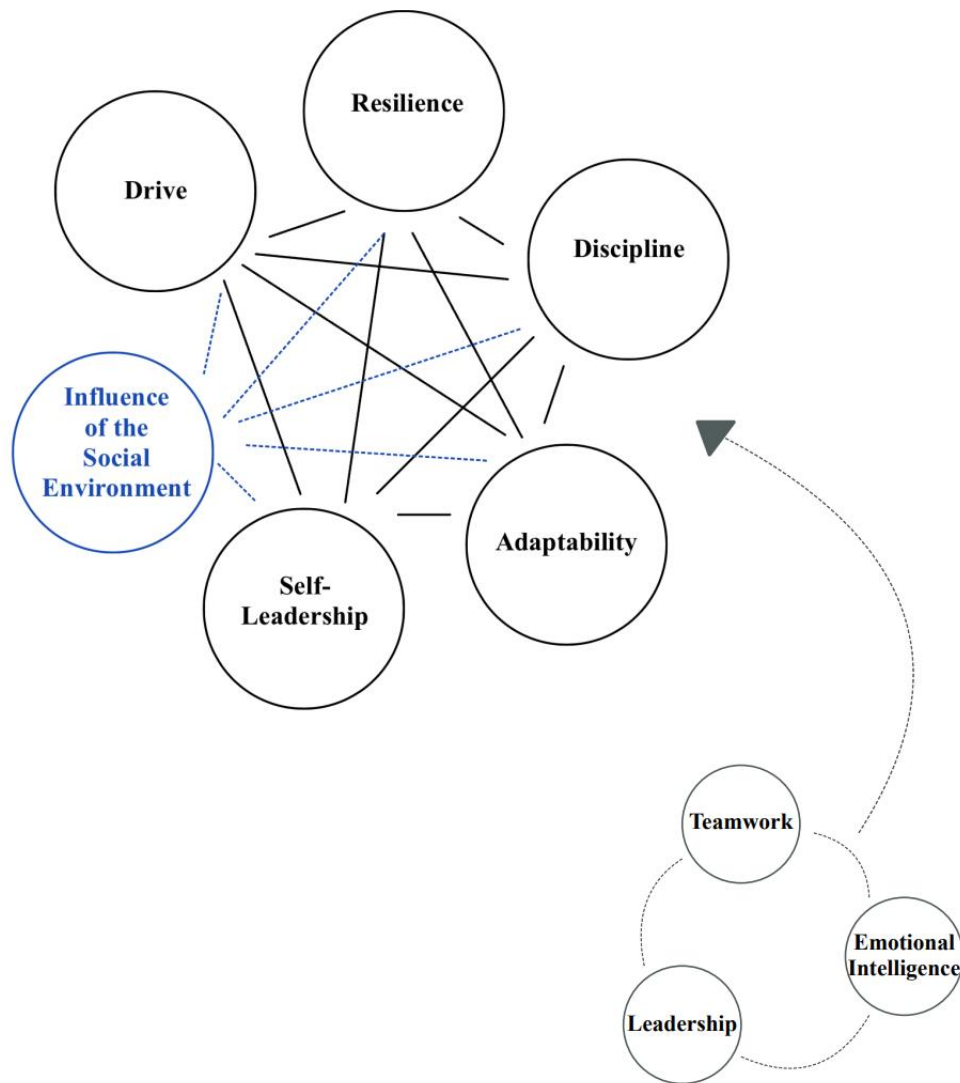
In a similar fashion, routine management and strategic autonomy required both self-leadership and discipline. These competencies worked together to generate consistency and uphold accountability, particularly during periods characterised by sustained effort without external support. Several accounts revealed that elements of leadership and teamwork were subtly integrated within self-leadership, especially in how participants influenced others, exemplified high standards, or cultivated team cultures, often shaped by norms learned in sports.

These dynamic interactions highlight the shortcomings of traditional HCT models, which often view competencies as additive, static, and quantifiable elements. Instead, the findings suggest the need for more holistic and context-sensitive perspectives. As Dimov (2017) and Marginson (2019) point out, competence development and application depend on context, social embeddedness, and continual learning. The entrepreneurial capacity demonstrated in this study arises not from isolated competencies, but from their synergistic integration over time.

The interconnectedness of factors became particularly clear during strategic tensions, such as product launches, leadership changes, or times of uncertainty. In these situations, participants frequently highlighted that various competencies were engaged simultaneously. They explained that merging behavioural patterns from individual elite sports, incorporating cognitive, emotional, and practical strategies, was crucial for successfully managing phases of strategic complexity tension. Participants shared that they relied on established behavioural patterns from elite sports, integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioural competencies to sustain their entrepreneurial efforts. One participant noted how they utilised discipline to keep operational momentum while waiting for investors' decisions, adaptability to adjust their strategy, and resilience to stay devoted to their long-term objectives.

The competencies examined in this study are therefore more than mere individual resources; they represent interconnected practices activated in response to situational needs. In this context, competence is better understood as an emergent quality arising from continuous engagement, adaptive adjustments, and contextual fine-tuning. These insights advocate for a new perspective on human capital, viewing it as dynamically developed and relationally tied,

thus challenging overly simplistic models and highlighting the necessity to study entrepreneurial competencies as integrated systems.



*Figure 6: Intersections Among Competencies: Integrated Patterns of Practice*

Figure 6 illustrates the interactions among key competencies, namely discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership, and drive, as conveyed in participants’ narratives. Rather than manifesting in isolation, these competencies form integrated patterns of practice. Leadership, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are positioned on the outskirts, as they were mentioned but not consistently elaborated upon across the narratives. Furthermore, the influence of the social environment (indicated in blue) is conceptualised not as a competency in itself, but as a formative context that informs the development, interpretation, and enactment of these competencies.

**Note:** The figure serves as an illustrative synthesis derived from prominent empirical patterns. It is not intended as a prescriptive model; rather, it assists in understanding of how the transfer of competencies occurs as a relational and context-sensitive process.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Answer to the Research Question and Objectives**

This study explored how competencies cultivated in individual elite sports are reconfigured and applied in entrepreneurial contexts. It raised the following research question:

**How are competencies cultivated through individual elite sports transferred to entrepreneurship?**

In order to explore this inquiry, a series of five comprehensive interviews was conducted with former individual elite athletes who have transitioned into the realm of entrepreneurship. The investigation unveiled five fundamental competencies: discipline, resilience, adaptability, self-leadership and drive, which were assessed to be both pertinent and transferable. Furthermore, the influence of the social environment surfaced as a substantial contextual element influencing the development, interpretation, and practical application of these competencies. These findings effectively addressed the primary research objective *to identify the essential competencies that former elite individual athletes perceive as relevant for, and transferable to, their entrepreneurial activity.*

Secondly, the analysis demonstrated that *these competencies were cultivated and embodied through high-performance individual sport.* Solitary training regimens, emotionally charged performance contexts, and continuous encounters with failure and adversity have significantly contributed to the formation of competence. These experiences fostered competence not via formal instruction, but through prolonged, embodied, and affective interaction with the sporting environment. This aligns with the second research objective, emphasizing the informal and experiential aspects of competence development.

In line with the third objective, the findings revealed that the transfer of competence was not automatic. Rather, *it was a reflexive process in which participants actively adapted and enacted sport-derived behaviours within entrepreneurial contexts.* For instance, discipline was repurposed to establish clarity and reduce cognitive overload, particularly in uncertain or complex entrepreneurial settings. This dynamic interpretation supports a behavioural and

context-sensitive view of competence, aligned with Gartner's (1988) processual definition of entrepreneurship. It also illustrates participants' agency in translating their prior experiences into novel, entrepreneurial situations.

Finally, this *study critically evaluated the applicability of HCT* by examining the transfer of competencies from individual elite sports to entrepreneurship. While HCT provides valuable insights into structured behaviours such as discipline and planning (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), it inadequately addresses the socially embedded, affective, and contextual aspects of informal learning. Empirical findings support critiques of HCT that highlight these limitations (Dimov, 2017; Marginson, 2019; Kang & Mok, 2022), demonstrating that competencies like resilience and adaptability are more influenced by high-pressure environments and relational norms than by formal investments in training. This observation underscores the necessity for an expanded perspective on human capital that incorporates dynamic, emergent, and socially co-produced forms of competence.

In conclusion, this study promotes a nuanced understanding of how experiential competencies cultivated in elite sports are reinterpreted and manifested within the realm of entrepreneurship. Rather than being viewed as static assets, these competencies are actively reshaped through reflective practices, social contexts, and entrepreneurial activities, positioning individual sports as a critical incubator for fostering entrepreneurial capacity.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

This study enhances the theoretical framework of HCT by analysing how competencies developed in individual elite sports are transformed and utilised in entrepreneurial activity. Although HCT serves as a foundational concept for viewing competence as a type of capital, initially introduced by Schultz (1961) and refined by Becker (1964), it has primarily emphasised formal education, systematic training, and quantifiable productivity outcomes. The research highlights alternative routes of competence development that are informal, emotional, and influenced by context.

This study aligns with the fourth research objective by thoroughly evaluating the relevance of HCT and its potential evolution concerning competencies acquired in individual elite sports, which are later applied to entrepreneurship.

Traditional interpretations of HCT, established by Schultz (1961) and further developed by Becker (1964), illustrate human capital as arising from deliberate investments in education, training, and job-related experiences that enhance productivity and yield measurable benefits. While this framework has paved the way for understanding structured behavioural competencies like discipline and goal orientation, it often neglects informal, experiential, and socially embedded learning methods.

Building on Becker's updated perspective (1993), which recognises the significance of non-formal, tacit, and emotional experiences in human capital accumulation, this study demonstrates that even within this broader framework, there is still an emphasis on individual benefits, rational decisions, and quantifiable competence development. The findings challenge that focus, showing that crucial entrepreneurial competencies, particularly resilience and adaptability often emerge from high-pressure, emotionally charged, and relational contexts in individual elite sports. This is especially reflected in how participants described developing resilience through solitary experiences of failure, and how peer cultures and coaching settings influenced their entrepreneurial behaviours.

This assertion aligns with Dimov's (2017) perspective that entrepreneurial learning is often emergent, contextual, and situated, attributes that traditional, linear models of human capital struggle to adequately represent. The current study also clarifies that competencies are not passively obtained and transferred but actively reinterpreted, refined, and selectively utilised as athletes encounter entrepreneurial challenges.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that competence development is not merely a cognitive or individual process. Instead, it is shaped by prolonged interaction with cultural norms, institutional contexts, and peer relationships. Kang and Mok (2022) contend that traditional HCT insufficiently acknowledges these socially embedded processes, a limitation clearly evident in participants' reflections on how performance expectations, coaching practices, and social modelling shaped their entrepreneurial outlooks. Marginson (2019) similarly critiques HCT's instrumentalist logic, arguing that its emphasis on productivity and economic outcomes

overlooks the identity-forming and relational aspects of human development that underlie long-term engagement.

Marvel et al. (2016) advocate for dynamic models of entrepreneurial learning that encompass intuition, emotion, and non-linear trajectories. This investigation supports this notion by evidencing that competencies acquired from individual elite sports are not just applied in entrepreneurial contexts but actively enacted, adapted, and ingrained within evolving environments and social interactions.

By focusing on former individual elite athletes and utilizing a qualitative, abductive methodology, this research provides a more practice-oriented and context-aware viewpoint on human capital. Instead of viewing human capital as a static pool of economically beneficial traits, this study recasts it as a dynamic, contextual, and relational process. Competencies transition not only from individual elite sports to entrepreneurship but are also transformed, recontextualized, and sustained through reflective practices and social exchanges.

In light of this, the study proposes a conceptual advancement of HCT that builds upon, but moves beyond, Becker's (1993) revised model by acknowledging competence as relationally co-constructed, affectively charged, and continually reshaped through introspective engagement in high-performance, non-formal learning settings like individual elite sports.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

This study offers practical insights for athletes, educators, institutions, and entrepreneurial support systems. These insights stem from findings that underscore the need for reflection and contextual adaptation to transfer competencies developed in individual elite sports. In this regard, the study reconceptualises human capital as socially embedded, experientially gained, and affectively influenced.

For athletes, the findings indicate that competencies acquired through individual elite sports, like resilience, adaptability and self-leadership, can act as vital resources for navigating uncertain and self-directed entrepreneurial settings. By recognising, articulating, and recontextualising these competencies, athletes can enhance their confidence and readiness for

entrepreneurial ventures, even without formal education in entrepreneurship (Becker, 1993; Dimov, 2017).

For educators and programme designers, the findings highlight the importance of creating educational spaces that go beyond traditional curricula by promoting reflective reassessment of past experiences. While participants did not explicitly discuss entrepreneurship education, their focus on self-reflection and identity development in competence transfer indicates that educational environments could benefit from fostering the recognition and activation of competencies gained from individual elite sports. Moreover, these findings draw attention to the educational significance of informal and embodied learning. Participants mainly described acquiring key competencies through emotionally intense, high-pressure, and socially situated experiences in elite sport and entrepreneurship, suggesting that such informal settings play a vital role in their development. Educational frameworks that recognize this wider perspective of entrepreneurial learning could cultivate more inclusive and practice-oriented programs (Marvel et al., 2016).

While participants did not explicitly mention lacking support structures, the findings suggest that the transition from elite sport to entrepreneurship often involved a high degree of self-navigation and reflection. This indicates a potential opportunity for institutions to recognise and support the reapplication of sport-based competencies in entrepreneurial or professional domains (Kang & Mok, 2022; Marginson, 2019).

These findings suggest that entrepreneurial support systems, including incubators, accelerators, and investors, could benefit from expanding their criteria for spotting entrepreneurial potential. Many participants initially did not see how their sports backgrounds connected to their entrepreneurial endeavours, only realising later how their mindset, work ethic, and competitiveness influenced their entrepreneurial activity. This lack of immediate awareness indicates that valuable competencies might remain hidden or unexpressed without reflective prompts or supportive structures. As a result, systems focused solely on formal indicators of human capital, like academic qualifications or entrepreneurship experience, might miss individuals with substantial, experience-driven abilities developed in elite sports. By acknowledging and validating these alternative sources of entrepreneurial talent, support systems could become more inclusive and more effective at identifying underutilised talent pools.

Ultimately, this study contests conventional interpretations of HCT by demonstrating that entrepreneurial competencies can arise from experiential, embodied, and socially embedded learning. These competencies do not transfer automatically; they gain value through reflective and context-sensitive adaptation (Dimov, 2017; Marvel et al., 2016).

In conclusion, this research advocates for a more inclusive and practice-oriented understanding of human capital, one that affirms how entrepreneurial competencies can be developed outside formal education and engaged through reflective recontextualization. By applying these insights, institutions and support systems may more effectively serve both former athletes and the larger entrepreneurial ecosystem.

#### **6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study outlines several specific limitations that also open up substantial opportunities for future research. These limitations mostly stem from sample selection, contextual framework, and methodological constraints; they should not be viewed as signs of methodological flaws. Rather, they reflect the necessary delimitations made for analytical accuracy.

Firstly, the study does not distinguish between inherent traits, skills and competencies gained through individual elite sports. Even though participants consistently credited their competencies to their athletic backgrounds, the design does not allow for a clear distinction between existing characteristics and those cultivated through individual elite sports participation. Future research might utilise longitudinal or developmental methodologies to examine how competencies change over time and how individual elite sports interact with individual predispositions.

Secondly, the research is limited to former athletes from individual elite sports. While this focus enhances internal consistency and analytical depth, it neglects unique dynamics related to team sports. Comparative studies could investigate how leadership, collaboration, and emotional regulation differ between individual and team-based athletes in entrepreneurial settings. Additionally, future research could benefit from including individuals without a sports background to explore whether and how their competence development and transfer processes differ from those shaped by elite athletic experience.

Thirdly, although the analysis inductively addressed the role of the social environment via participant narratives, it was not initially set as an analytical framework. Given the substantial impact of social contexts on competence development and transfer, future studies could more purposefully analyse how institutional, cultural, and relational contexts influence these processes. This aligns with emerging critiques of HCT, advocating for more socially situated interpretations of learning and development (Kang & Mok, 2022; Marginson, 2019).

Fourthly, this study did not investigate how competencies gained from individual elite sports relate to other types of human capital, like formal education or professional experience. Future studies could utilise an integrative framework to examine how these capital forms complement, enhance, or offset each other in developing entrepreneurial capacity.

Taken together, these considerations outline a future research agenda that is both reflective and transformative. This agenda promotes a more dynamic, relational, and longitudinal understanding of how human capital is cultivated and demonstrated across various life domains.

This study provides a data-driven examination of how competencies acquired through individual elite sports are adapted and applied in entrepreneurial endeavours. By identifying five key competencies: discipline, resilience, self-leadership, adaptability, and drive, and demonstrating their versatile use in entrepreneurial contexts, the research deepens the understanding of competence transfer in a dynamic, practice-centred manner. It expands upon existing theoretical frameworks by incorporating socially rooted, emotional, and experiential components while underscoring the significance of context-aware and timely research strategies.

Furthermore, this study reinterprets individual elite sports as a crucial, long-term environment for developing competencies, challenging limited perceptions of athletic careers and highlighting their sustained relevance in entrepreneurial spheres. Collectively, these insights emphasise the need for a more dynamic and contextually relevant perspective on competence and its transferability across different domains.

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# **Appendix**

## **Appendix: A**

### **Interview guide**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>1. Background and motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Can you tell me a bit about your background in individual elite sports?</li><li>- What kind of entrepreneurial firm are you currently involved in?</li><li>- Why did you decide to start something on your own after your sports career?</li></ul>
<b>2. Experiences/Learnings from sport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Looking back, what were some of the most important experiences and learnings from your time in sport?</li><li>-What did you learn from those experiences?</li><li>- Do you think these things mainly came from sports, people or also from other experiences or arenas in life?</li></ul>
<b>3. Bringing sport → Entrepreneurship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Are there ways you still use elements you learned from sport in your work today?</li><li>-How do you usually respond when things don't go as planned, either in sport or in your current business</li></ul>
<b>4. Reflections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Has being an entrepreneur made you think differently about what you learned in sport?</li><li>- Do you think your background in sport gives you any advantages or a different way of doing things compared to others?</li></ul>
<b>5. Wrapping up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Is there anything else from your sports background that you believe has influenced how you work today?</li></ul>

## Appendix B.

### Interview #1

Table 1

Quote #	Quote	Code	Theme
1	I plan my week as an entrepreneur the same way I used to plan my training cycles. It gives me control and keeps my energy focused. Without that structure, I'd be all over the place.	Weekly planning	Discipline
2	Sport taught me to stick to a schedule, and now I apply that to my business. Otherwise, I'd lose control. I plan my working days like I did my training blocks.	Time management	Discipline
3	When everything gets messy at work, I go back to systems. I learned that in sport, to trust the process and routines. It gives me something stable when everything else is uncertain.	Stability through routine	Discipline
4	I've lost competitions and failed projects. You move on, accept, reflect and you need to look forward. That's how sport taught me to deal with setbacks. To keep moving	Moving on from failure	Resilience
5	Pressure doesn't scare me; it triggers me. Sports taught me to breathe, focus, and execute. I apply this mindset specifically in business negotiations.	Performance under pressure	Resilience

6	Even when the outcome is uncertain, I rely on my experience to push through. I have learned to trust the process and avoid panic, especially when things don't go as planned, which is the daily life as an entrepreneur.	Mastering uncertainty	Resilience
7	No one is telling me what to do now. That's fine; I'm used to being my own boss and owning my progress.	Self-direction	Self-leadership
8	Even when I'm tired or uncertain, I show up and get things done. That mindset comes from sports. It helps me remain consistent, especially during long and unstructured periods at work.	Persistence	Self-leadership
9	In sports, plans change all the time. That taught me to troubleshoot quickly and be open to changing direction if needed; that mindset is an absolute core in my role as a founder.	Navigating uncertainty	Adaptability
10	From sports, I learned how to act quickly when something doesn't work. In my company, that means adjusting offers or strategies without getting stuck.	Quick problem-solving	Adaptability
11	I trust my instinct and gut feeling. Those instincts come from years of reacting to various situations in the field where things changed all the time.	Intuition	Adaptability
12	The culture in my sports club demanded effort and quality. That's the mindset I've brought into entrepreneurship.	Sport culture influence	Influence of the Social environment
13	In sports, I learned to genuinely look out for teammates at every level, helping them grow not just to win, but because you truly want the best for each other and I've brought that caring culture into how I behave as an entrepreneur	Culture transfer	Influence of the Social environment

14	What sets me apart from those who have not done sports is my unwavering "never-give-up" spirit, my drive to push every boundary, and go the extra mile.	Drive to push boundaries	Drive
15	I have always been self-driven and I don't need external rewards. I am used to pushing myself, and that's how I operate today.	Inner motivation	Drive

**Table 2**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote#</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Summary</b>
<b>Discipline</b>	Q1, Q2, Q3	Weekly planning, Time management, Using routines in chaos	The participant explains how the disciplined has weekly planning, structured routines, and effective time management have significantly impacted their organizational competencies and control in their entrepreneurial activity. The structure acquired from sports now serves as a stabilising force in the often chaotic landscape of business.
<b>Resilience</b>	Q4, Q5, Q6	Moving on from failure, Performance under pressure, Mastering uncertainty	Drawing from competitive experiences, the participant demonstrates how their mindset enables them to handle business setbacks, navigate uncertainty, and remain composed under pressure. These resilient traits are rooted in the mental and emotional demands of elite sports performance.
<b>Self-leadership</b>	Q7, Q8	Self-direction, Persistence	The participant emphasises autonomy and personal responsibility. Through sport, they have developed strong self-leadership competency, including intrinsic motivation and perseverance, which now assist them in maintaining productivity without external supervision.
<b>Adaptability</b>	Q9, Q10, Q11	Navigating uncertainty, Quick problem-solving, Intuition	The participant establishes a clear connection between elite sports and their capacity to adapt swiftly. Experiences with unpredictable circumstances during competition have trained them to think quickly, make instinctive decisions, and adjust strategies as entrepreneurs.

<b>Influence of the Social environment</b>	Q12, Q13	Sport culture influence, Culture transfer	Although the study centers on individual competence, the participant emphasizes the impact of being in a high-performance environment on their values and expectations. They have intentionally fostered a culture of hard work and shared ambition within their own business.
<b>Drive</b>	Q14, Q15	Drive to push boundaries, Inner motivation	A relentless internal drive to excel and surpass limits is characterised as a defining trait. This mindset, cultivated through sport, now fuels the participant's ambition and endurance as an entrepreneur.

## Interview #2

Table 1

Quote#	Quote	Code	Theme
1	I've always had a plan. That's how I was trained, and I carry that same mindset into entrepreneurship.	Planning mindset	Discipline
2	I sit down and plan my week. Without that routine, I wouldn't be able to manage everything in such a chaotic market. Planning saves a lot of time.	Weekly planning	Discipline

3	Having structure enables me to concentrate and make informed decisions, even in high-pressure situations. In sports, I always had a daily plan, and this habit of proactive preparation continues to provide me with a competitive advantage in my business as well.	Time management	Discipline
4	In sport, I learned to accept failure and keep going. I bring that same approach when something doesn't go as expected in my job.	Handling failure	Resilience
5	Being uncomfortable became normal in sport. That helped me stop avoiding discomfort in entrepreneurship like dealing with financial pressure or client pushback.	Comfort in discomfort	Resilience
6	Sports taught me the importance of perseverance, regardless of my emotions. I learned to avoid panic and not to halt my progress when challenges arise; instead, I assess the situation and keep moving forward. Always stay on top. This mindset is invaluable now, especially when unexpected problems occur in my worklife.	Maintaining calm mindset	Resilience
7	I don't wait for anyone to tell me what to do. I set the pace, just as I did when training alone. This is probably one of my absolute best qualities since it is such a key in entrepreneurship	Personal initiative	Self-leadership
8	I've always been more of an individualist than a team player. I think that's why I became an Entrepreneur, I can rely fully on myself, which is how I prefer it.	Prefers independence	Self-leadership

9	In team sports, I got frustrated when others didn't train hard enough. I moved to individual sport because I didn't want to depend on people who weren't fully committed. I think that's why I also started my own business, so I don't need to rely on others	Dislikes low commitment	Self-leadership
10	I've always known I wanted to run something of my own. Sport gave me the structure and mindset to make it happen, to be my own boss.	Early entrepreneurial intent	Self-leadership
11	If something doesn't go as planned, I don't panic. I quickly try a new solution.	Quick response	Adaptability
12	Sport made me analytical. I break things down and adapt quickly; that's how I navigate uncertainty in my business.	Breaking down problems	Adaptability
13	In sports, nothing ever goes exactly as planned, which has made me flexible. Now, when customer behaviour shifts, I quickly adjust my strategy. It feels natural.	Adapting strategy	Adaptability
14	People often say it's the culture or teammates that shape you, but I honestly believe it was the sport itself. That's where I learned the most, as it provided me with the tools I use in business every day like planning, goal-setting; the hard work.	Learned from sport itself	*Influence of the Social environment  <i>*In contrast to the theme</i>
15	I don't need external control. I'm accustomed to working toward my own goals, having been on my own in the field during my competitive years. I would say it's a form of self-drive. That hasn't changed; maybe it has even become more clear. As an entrepreneur, your business is relying on you to keep on going. Never give up	Internal drive	Drive
16	Even in business, I think like an athlete, there's always room for improvement! I am constantly evaluating what can be done better, and I push myself that way.	Constant improvement	Drive

<b>17</b>	That internal drive to always improve, I'm not sure if it's a personality trait I was born with or skills developed along the way; nonetheless, that's how I operated then, and that's how I operate now.	Internal improvement drive	Drive
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Table 2

Theme	Quote#	Code	Summary
<b>Discipline</b>	Q1, Q2, Q3	Planning mindset, Weekly planning, Time management	The participant emphasizes that the planning routines and structured thinking derived from sports are crucial for navigating the uncertainties of entrepreneurship. Strategies such as weekly scheduling, proactive preparation, and effective time management are directly adapted from elite sports to enhance business operations.
<b>Resilience</b>	Q4, Q5, Q6	Handling failure, Comfort in discomfort, Maintaining a calm mindset	Navigating pressure, overcoming failure, and managing emotional discomfort are essential competencies honed in sports that translate effectively into entrepreneurial life. The participant demonstrates a remarkable capacity to rebound from setbacks, persist amid uncertainty, and sustain focus under duress.
<b>Self-leadership</b>	Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10	Personal initiative, Prefers independence, Dislikes low commitment, Early entrepreneurial intent	The participant exhibits a strong sense of autonomy and internal direction that underpins the participant's behaviour. Their self-reliance and desire to avoid dependency on others in sport directly shaped their decision to pursue entrepreneurship.
<b>Adaptability</b>	Q11, Q12, Q13	Quick response, Breaking down problems, Adapting strategy	The participant developed the ability to quickly shift focus, analyse problems, and change course when necessary. These skills, refined through sport, help them respond effectively to changing market conditions and uncertainty.

<b>Influence of the Social environment</b>	Q14	Learned from sport itself	*Contrary to conventional views that attribute personal growth to team dynamics and culture, the participant argues that their competencies were primarily shaped by the demands of the sport itself. This perspective provides a reflective contrast, highlighting that the experiential learning gained from sports alone formed the foundation for their entrepreneurial mindset.
<b>Drive</b>	Q15, Q16, Q17	Internal drive, Constant improvement, Internal improvement drive	The participant expresses a relentless internal motivation to improve and achieve. This drive appears deeply ingrained and continues to fuel their entrepreneurial behaviour, mirroring the mindset cultivated through sport.

### Interview #3

Table 1

Quote#	Quote	Code	Theme
1	If I don't create structure in my everyday life, I lose focus. I learned that from sports, daily planning and discipline are the foundation of how I run my company.	Daily structure	Discipline
2	Working systematically was second nature to me as an athlete, and it still is in my business.	Systematic mindset	Discipline

3	I still think like an athlete: you make a plan, stick to it, and adjust along the way.	Transfer of planning skills	Discipline
4	In sport, I learned that failure is part of the game. You recover, reset, and go again. This mentality helps me deal with setbacks in entrepreneurship.	Recovery mindset	Resilience
5	There's no time to dwell. I learned to bounce back quickly that's been key for surviving in a startup environment.	Comeback mentality	Resilience
6	I don't let fear of failing stop me. That mindset comes directly from competition, and I think it is such a good competence to bring into my everyday life as an entrepreneur	Fearless mindset	Resilience
7	No one tells you what to do in entrepreneurship, and I prefer that. In sport, I was already used to leading myself.	Self-regulation	Self-leadership
8	I've never been afraid to shift direction quickly. Sport taught me that flexibility is often the key to winning.	Flexible mindset	Adaptability
9	When something isn't working in my business, I try to diagnose and adapt quickly; that's something I've trained myself through years of elite sport.	Fast adaptation	Adaptability
10	Nothing ever goes exactly as planned. Sport taught me to always have a plan B. That's something I rely on heavily in entrepreneurship.	Conditional thinking	Adaptability

11	I didn't realize at the time how much sport shaped me. I thought it was completely separate from business, but looking back, I see how the mindset, culture, work ethic, and competitiveness transferred naturally. So now I apply this in my daily life into the business	Retrospective transfer realization	Social environment
12	Training with the best and learning from each other has pushed me to excel, and I carry that mindset with me. Upon reflection, I believe that's part of why I've managed to thrive in the harsh world of entrepreneurship. I strive to be the best I can and try to bring others with me on the ride.	Culture transfer	Social environment
13	I work better when I am in control. I think I've always been like that, driven from within.	Autonomy preference	Drive
14	There's always something to improve. I'm constantly evaluating what can be done better, just like in training.	Improvement drive	Drive

Table 2

Theme	Quote#	Code	Summary
<b>Discipline</b>	Q1, Q2, Q3	Daily structure, Systematic mindset, Transfer of planning skills	The participant describes how the structured routines and planning mindset they cultivated in elite sports now shape their approach to running a business. They emphasize the importance of weekly preparation, time efficiency, and a systematic mindset as essential tools for navigating the chaotic environment of entrepreneurship.
<b>Resilience</b>	Q4, Q5, Q6	Recovery mindset, Comeback mentality, Fearless mindset	Mental resilience developed through sports plays a crucial role in a participant's ability to manage setbacks, pressure, and failure in entrepreneurship. These quotes highlight how emotional control and the ability to bounce back are applied in daily business practices.
<b>Self-leadership</b>	Q7	Self-regulation	Traits such as independence, accountability, and self-motivation, which are central to elite sports, persist throughout the participant's entrepreneurial journey. They prefer complete control and consistently seek improvement without needing external validation.

<b>Adaptability</b>	Q8, Q9, Q10	Flexible mindset, Fast adaptation, Conditional thinking	Flexibility and the ability to adapt are central to the participant's entrepreneurial decision-making. The quotes highlight how the capacity to think ahead and pivot quickly, shaped by high-performance sports, now contributes to success in business.
<b>Influence of the Social environment</b>	Q11, Q12	Retrospective transfer realization, Culture transfer	At first, the participant didn't realize how much sports had influenced their work ethic and mindset. However, they later acknowledged this impact. They also emphasized the importance of a high-performance environment in shaping expectations and culture, something they now intentionally incorporate into their own entrepreneurial team.
<b>Drive</b>	Q13, Q14	Autonomy preference, Improvement drive	A strong internal motivation and drive to improve are at the heart of the participant's entrepreneurial identity. These traits, fostered through sport, underpin their desire for control, progress, and excellence.

#### Interview#4

Table 1

Quote#	Quote	Code	Theme
1	I always plan my weeks on Sundays. That structure comes directly from sport, and it helps me stay in control when things get hectic.	Weekly planning	Discipline
2	Having a routine is important. In sport, everything had its time and place, and I've brought that discipline with me.	Transfer of routine	Discipline

3	Discipline was everything in sport. It gave me a framework, and it still gives me an edge in entrepreneurship, helping me frame how to work towards my goals and try to deliver every time	Framework from sport	Discipline
4	You're always going to mess something up, or someone will mess up. Especially in a venture. The key is how quickly you recover. Sport taught me that.	Recovery mindset	Resilience
5	Sport showed me that persistence pays off. You keep pushing through discomfort; that's how you make progress.	Endurance under pressure	Resilience
6	I don't let failure define me. In sports, I experienced many failures, which gave me the resilience to keep pushing forward in business.	Resilience through failure	Resilience
7	I don't rely on others to tell me what to do. That started in sports; since I was on my own, you had to lead yourself.	Independent direction	Self-leadership
8	I always take the initiative. If I don't take responsibility for my own progress, no one else will.	Personal responsibility	Self-leadership
9	When something unexpected happens, I stay calm and adjust. That's how I operated in sport, and now it's how I run my venture.	Calm under change	Adaptability
10	My decisions are often instinctive; it's as if I sense the pattern and react. I believe that years of high-pressure competitions have given me that edge.	Instinctive decision-making	Adaptability

11	I didn't think sport and entrepreneurship were connected at all. But looking back, I see that the mindset and competition is similar, so the work ethic is transferred naturally.	Retrospective realization	Social environment
12	Competing with the best athletes in the world motivated me to push harder. That mindset is something I truly think you only learn from sports	Replicating performance culture	Social environment
13	In sports, coaches and teammates taught me that small, consistent efforts compound into lasting wins. Therefore, in my venture, I trust that incremental improvements will drive progress.	Long-term stamina	Influence of the Social environment
14	Competing in a small sport taught me to trust the people around me; everyone had to show up and do their part. I believe this fostered a mindset of mutual responsibility that I've transferred into entrepreneurship. It aligns with my personality as well: I still value close collaboration and expect high standards from those I work with.	Transferred collaboration values	Influence of the Social environment
15	I believe my unbreakable internal drive distinguishes me from other entrepreneurs: an insatiable hunger to improve, a competitive fire that compels me to push past every boundary, and the ability to set even-higher goals.	Internal drive	Drive
16	I've always been competitive, and I believe that has motivated me to continuously improve and challenge myself even more now than during sports.	Transferred collaboration values	Drive

Tabel 2

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote#</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Summary</b>
<b>Discipline</b>	Q1, Q2, Q3	Weekly planning, Transfer of routine, Framework from sport	The structure and discipline cultivated through sports now serve as the foundation for how participants plan, execute, and maintain control in their entrepreneurial activity.
<b>Resilience</b>	Q4, Q5, Q6	Recovery mindset, Endurance under pressure, Resilience through failure	Mental strength developed through repeated exposure to setbacks in sports now enables participants to manage failure effectively and maintain their efforts under pressure.
<b>Self-leadership</b>	Q7, Q8	Independent direction, Personal responsibility, Competitive improvement drive	The participant exhibits a strong sense of self-leadership cultivated through sport, favouring autonomy, taking initiative, and steering their own progress without depending on external direction
<b>Adaptability</b>	Q9, Q10, Q11	Calm under change, Instinctive decision-making, Rapid reassessment	Strategic flexibility and the ability to adjust quickly were cultivated in high-stakes sports environments and are now essential for navigating the uncertainties of entrepreneurship.
<b>Influence of the Social environment</b>	Q2, Q13, Q14, Q15	Retrospective realization, Replicating performance culture, Long-term stamina, Transferred collaboration values	Influences from sports, such as training culture, long-term thinking, and interpersonal trust, have been integrated into the entrepreneurial environment, continuing to shape participants' values and leadership styles.
<b>Drive</b>	Q16, Q17	Internal drive, Transferred collaboration values	A deeply rooted drive to improve and compete is essential for the participant's entrepreneurial success. This mindset, originating in sport, now fuels their ambition and ongoing personal growth development.

## Interview #5

Table 1

Quote#	Quote	Code	Theme
1	The habit of planning ahead is maybe the most valuable lesson I brought from my athletic career. In that time, every detail was meticulously scheduled. Now, I apply that same disciplined mindset to running my business. It's my way of creating structure amidst chaos.	Structured planning	Discipline
2	Having a routine provides me peace of mind. In sports, everything has its time and place, and I've carried that discipline into entrepreneurship. It helps me avoid decision fatigue and keeps me focused on what matters.	Transfer of routine	Discipline
3	I don't act randomly in my business; there is always a system behind my decisions. This mindset has developed over years of high-performance training, where improvisation was not an option.	Systems mindset	Discipline
4	I've never been afraid of losing. In sports, you encounter failure so often that you eventually stop fearing it. This mindset gives me the courage to take risks that truly make a difference in the end. I believe this separates me from others as an entrepreneur.	Risk tolerance	Resilience

5	Sports taught me that hard work and to "keep on going" will pay off. I bring with me this mindset whenever I face tricky situations, whether it involves product development or funding issues	Endurance under pressure	Resilience
6	In competition, you must reset immediately after a mistake, so as not to let it cloud your mindset. That quick reset is something I've carried into entrepreneurship.	Reset mindset	Resilience
7	I take full responsibility for my direction. I set my goals and hold myself accountable to them, just as I did when I trained solo.	Personal accountability	Self-leadership
8	When I feel unmotivated, I don't wait around for inspiration or someone to do anything, I get started anyway. That's something I learned from training alone for years, no one else is going to do it for you. You need to lead yourself. I've brought that mindset with me into entrepreneurship	Intrinsic self-leadership	Self-leadership
9	When something unexpected happens, I shift course quickly. I've trained myself to see disruption as an opportunity, not a setback crisis.	Proactive flexibility	Adaptability
10	In business, just like in sports, nothing ever goes 100% according to plan, ever! I've learned to adjust quickly and not dwell when things change.	Navigating uncertainty	Adaptability
12	In sports, we held each other accountable by continuously raising the bar, and when someone excelled, they lifted up teammates who were still catching up. I bring that same mutual accountability into my venture. Its this type of culture I am building in my venture.	Mutual accountability	Influence of the Social environment

13	I believe the culture and people in sports have shaped who I am today. It's likely a combination of personality and learned competencies, but I don't think I would thrive in my industry without that athlete mentality I got from being taught by others. As an entrepreneur I apply the same culture to my venture, trying to make sure everyone pushes each other and learns from one another, constantly evolving.	Identity shaped by sport	Influence of the Social environment
14	I am a highly extroverted individual who thrives in the spotlight. However, what truly drives me is my internal standard. I have always been my own motivating force, relentlessly pushing myself to achieve greater heights. In entrepreneurship, this is a strength, since I believe I have the ability to keep on going when people give up.	Internal motivation	Drive
15	I'm always pursuing the next level. I can't stand being stagnant, and I believe that mindset is what pushes me forward in business.	Continuous improvement	Drive

Table 2

Theme	Quote	Code	Summary
<b>Discipline</b>	Q1, Q2, Q3	Structured planning, Transfer of routine, Systems mindset	The participant explains how the structured routines and planning mentality developed in elite sports influence their business approach. They highlight the significance of weekly preparation, effective time management, and a systematic mindset as crucial strategies for successfully navigating the chaotic landscape of entrepreneurship.

<b>Resilience</b>	Q4, Q5, Q6	Risk tolerance, Endurance under pressure, Reset mindset	Mental resilience fostered through sports is essential for individuals to effectively navigate setbacks, pressure, and failures in entrepreneurship. These insights underscore the significance of emotional control and the capacity to recover quickly, demonstrating their practical application in everyday business operations.
<b>Self-leadership</b>	Q7, Q8	Personal accountability, Intrinsic self-leadership	Having developed self-discipline through solo training in sports, the participant emphasises their independence and strong internal accountability in managing business goals. They also explain their ability to take action without waiting for motivation, an aspect of self-leadership cultivated through years of pushing themselves without external pressure.
<b>Adaptability</b>	Q9, Q10, Q11	Proactive flexibility, Intuitive decision-making, Navigating uncertainty	Flexibility and adaptability are crucial components of the participant's entrepreneurial decision-making process. The insights shared illustrate how the ability to anticipate future challenges and pivot swiftly, skills honed through high-performance sports, now play a significant role in achieving business success.
<b>Influence of the Social environment</b>	Q12, Q13	Transferred high-performance norms, Mutual accountability, Identity shaped by sport	Initially, the participant was unaware of the significant influence that sports had on their work ethic and mindset. However, they later recognized this impact. They emphasized the critical role of a high-performance environment in shaping expectations and culture an element they now intentionally integrate into their own entrepreneurial team.
<b>Drive</b>	Q14, Q15	Internal motivation, Continuous improvement	The participant demonstrates a deep-rooted internal drive shaped by sport, characterized by relentless self-motivation and a constant desire to improve. This mindset fuels their pursuit of excellence in entrepreneurship and pushes them to consistently raise their own standards and performance.