

Lifestyle management for elite athletes: A European perspective

Paul Wylleman * and Richard Parker **

*Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium - **UKSport, United Kingdom

Introduction

Research among former Olympic athletes, elite student-athletes and young elite athletes revealed that the development of their athletic career is influenced by their non-athletic development in the psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational domains (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In consequence, sport governing bodies and centres of sporting excellence developed initiatives providing guidance and support services related to education, professional career development and lifestyle management.

Method

Using a combination of a five item open-ended questionnaire with a follow-up interview, data was gathered among career counsellors, sports managers, sports administrators, and sports psychologists from 17 European countries attending the first European Forum on Lifestyle Management (London, April 2004). The data was content-analysed and thematically categorized in (a) support and services optimising the combination of education and elite sport, (b) career development during and after the elite sports career, and (c) lifestyle support during and after the elite sports career.

Results

With regard to the education of elite athletes, 9 (53%) countries developed at secondary level specialised sports schools ('topsportschools', 'elite sport schools', 'sport gymnasiums', 'vocational sport schools'). As the majority of initiatives provide support in a decentralised way – the number of schools ranged between 1 (Estonia) to 61 (Sweden) – young elite athletes generally attend boarding schools. Most specialised sports schools are integrated in the mainstream education system, running on state funded support. With regard to the career development of elite athletes, it transpired that an increasing number of elite athletes are able to apply for a career as a full time state funded 'amateur' athlete. Most countries provide some form of State support (e.g., the Netherlands) which is generally accompanied by the use of private recruitment agencies (e.g., Finland). Only four (23%) countries provide career counselling in a structured way (e.g., France) with the remaining countries offering some form of one to one counselling service. Five (29%) countries also make retirement support or pension schemes available for their former elite athletes. Finally, a variety of lifestyle support initiatives were identified, including the wide use of workshops and seminars and the provision of web based support to current and former elite athletes. While most countries indicated that a variety of providers (sports federations, specialist advisers, private companies) were involved in lifestyle support services, only a couple of countries (e.g., UK) have developed support networks in which schools, excellence centres and counselling advisers co-operate.

Discussion

While many European countries have engaged in developing support services which enable their elite athletes to develop in a more holistic way – in elite sport, education, professional career and lifestyle – the need for more research into the availability and effectiveness of these initiatives is required.

References

Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. In M. Weiss (Ed.), Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective (pp. 507-527). Morgantown, WV: FIT.

Contact co-ordinates author

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Faculteit LK, Dept Sports policy and management (SBMA), Pleinlaan 2, B1050 Brussel

e-mail: Paul.Wylleman@vub.ac.be