

Negotiating a ‘Dual Career’ Path: Elite Sport and University Education in Three European Contexts

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Keywords: Dual career, elite sport, universities, life stories,

Abstract

Introduction, Research Issues and Questions

The demands placed by elite sport are such that athletes continuously find themselves striving to achieve excellence. Elite sport is characterized by intense, and at times, ruthless competition to achieve selection (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006), this immediately implies that in order to succeed most athletes’ time will be dedicated towards developing their sporting career, with very little time left to develop other aspects of their lives outside their sport. Thus many athletes will be subject to a double threat – on the one hand they engage in an athletic career which is subject to instability often hampered by injury and the inescapable impact of aging (Roderick, 2006), while on the other they are forced to make sacrifices in terms of education and their subsequent work career .

The reality facing many elite athletes today is that few are sufficiently financially rewarded to allow them to make a living out of their sport, and even fewer can rely on measures in place in their own country to assist with the financial and psychological impacts of their retirement from sport (Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007). This places even more importance on the need for the athlete to either have a ‘dual career’ or else prepare for a post-athletic career while still participating in elite sport. However managing a dual career, in this case that of elite sport and higher education does not come without challenges. As Kidd (2003 cited in (David, 2005) observes the grueling schedules of some of these student-athletes mean that apart from spending 30 hours per week studying they have to balance this with 20-30 hours of sports training, a work-schedule characteristic of a senior manager. This has immediate implications on the lifestyle of the athlete in terms of time management, required effort and commitment to fulfill his or her role both as a student and athlete (and indeed other roles such as parent, spouse etc.).

This study therefore aims to address the following research questions:

- What are the decision-making processes that elite athletes go through in order to combine their sporting and academic careers successfully while at university?
- What are the struggles and constraints that exist in combining a ‘dual career’ and how can policy be adapted to ameliorate these life experiences?

Methodology

Drawing on Miller's (2000) typology of life story analysis, the study uses a 'narrative approach' in conducting 18 life stories with elite athletes who also have experience of university level education in France, Finland and the UK. The countries selected reflect different approaches to state intervention in sport / education identified by the author in an earlier policy study commissioned by the European Union (Amara, Aquilina, Henry, & Taylor, 2004). The four approaches are broadly classified as follows:

- State Centric/Statutory Action
- State as Sponsor/Facilitator
- National Federation as Intermediary
- Non-interventionist / No formal structures

Findings / Discussion / Implications

Having previously adopted a 'top-down' approach for the European study in order to map out the full range of educational services on offer, the principal aim of the current study is to gain an insight into the elite athlete's worldview, and his/her perceptions of the significant factors in personal educational decision-making. This 'bottom-up' approach in turn is intended to provide insight into the decision-making processes that these athletes make use of in order to negotiate their 'dual career' paths, and how these have been adapted by athletes in different sporting contexts and in different types of educational system, with what kinds of outcome. Key themes emerging from the analysis of these life stories will be presented. Evidence of good practice and major challenges that exist in combining an elite sporting career together with a university career, will also be highlighted and ways of how these life experiences can be ameliorated by sport managers, educational administrators and policy makers will be suggested.

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