

High performance athletes' education: value, challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the value of education for High Performance Athletes, the challenges they face when they try to combine a career in sport with education and the opportunities available to educate themselves. The Socio-Ecological Model was applied to contextualize factors that inhibit their effort to get an education. It was found that such factors could be at individual, interpersonal, institutional and community levels, as well as state policies. However, the literature supports the argument that as life extends beyond a sporting career High Performance Athletes need to understand the value of education and by implementing a dual career strategy prepare themselves for the challenges of life when sport cannot be practised any more.

Keywords: Sports, education.

Introduction

The ancient Greeks' world-view advocated the development of both mind and body (Crowley, 2006). Pier de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, claimed that one of the reasons he restored the Olympic Games was to strengthen sports and their educational role (Kreb, 2008). In modern times, the European Commission (EC): a) acknowledges the importance of balancing education and sport commitments, concept that is called dual career (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004), b) aspires that sports participation promotes good physical / psychological health, personal growth, and at the social level influences positive social values and economic growth, c) accepts that education provides the basis for the human development and it is pivotal to passing on knowledge and values to future generations and d) emphasizes the importance of dual career training for young HPAs "... in order to ensure their reintegration into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers" (EC, 2007, article 2, par. 3).

Purpose of the study

Regardless whether they are financially compensated for their efforts or not the vast majority of HPAs are engaged in long term intensive training programs. As these programs are very demanding in time and concentration they cannot avoid finding themselves in the unenviable position to have to choose between pursuing a professional career in sports and pursuing an education (Athletes to Business, 2011; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Haerle, 1975). However, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the factors that inhibit HPAs' dual career efforts, as well as regarding the impact of education privation in their life after sport is no longer a possibility. The present study investigates the value of education for HPAs', the challenges they face in regards to dual career and opportunities they have available to educate themselves.

Method

In order to address the purpose of this study the Social-Ecological Model (SEM) used (Figure 1), which has been broadly applied to explain social normative factors that influence youths' behaviour in various domains, such as nutrition (Gregson et al., 2001), tobacco use and physical activity (Elder et al., 2007). The Model proposes that most individuals' behaviour is subjected to 5 spheres of influence: a) the individual (within-the-person characteristics, e.g. personality traits), b) the interpersonal (factors that derive from the interaction with family, peers and social networks), c) the institutional / organizational (rules, regulations, and policies in school, at work, etc.), d) the community (social norms and standards), and e) the social structure – policy – systems (government policies, laws and regulations) (McLeroy et al., 1988).



Figure 1. The Social-Ecological Model spheres of influence (McLeroy et al., 1988) (used with the permission of the author).

Results

The available literature provides evidence that education is a valuable asset with great implications in HPAs' life. Many factors inside the prevailing dual career context that constitute inhibitors for HPAs' dual career efforts were identified.

The value of education to HPA's development

HPAs' athletic development is a process that occurs through 4 transitional phases: a) initiation, b) development, c) mastery, and d) discontinuation (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003), which develop in the context of 3 dimensions of their lives: a) the psychological, b) the psychosocial, and c) the academic or vocational development (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Reints, 2010; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003; Weiss, 2004). In this perspective, each HPA is regarded as a person doing sports and, therefore, as an individual who has the need to evolve in more aspects in life rather than solely in the athletic one (Weiss, 2004). Wylleman and Reints (2010) stated that HPAs' successful transitions throughout the aforementioned developmental stages in all levels depend on how well they are "equipped" to cope with the challenges embedded ahead. According to these authors, proper education, along with effective coping skills, broad social skills, pre-retirement planning from a young age, and financial independence are important developmental resources that equip HPAs for a smoother transition in life throughout all stages of their career in sport (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Education seems to have a pronounced effect in HPAs' employability and entrepreneurship during and after a short-lived career as a sportsperson (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Marthinus, 2007). For the majority of athletes, including many that have been very successful in their sport, alternative ways to support themselves financially is a reality (David, 1999). Very few athletes earn enough money while they compete to support them and their family (David, 1999), or to support a jobless post-retirement life (Daudert & Daudert, 2003). But even among those who theoretically have accumulated enough money that could outlast their lives, in reality financial prosperity is not the most probable outcome. Torres (2009) showed that 78% of the National Football League (NFL) players are bankrupted or under severe financial stress due to unemployment or divorce within 2 years from retirement. Similarly, 60% of the National Basketball Association (NBA) players seem to have the same destiny within 5 years from retirement (Torres, 2009). The director of the German Soccer Players Union claimed that at the end of their career 20-25% of professional soccer players (members of their union) are bankrupt or in serious debt (DieWelt, 2011). Daudert and Daudert (2003) found that only 9% of the professional soccer players in Germany are financially independent after retirement, whereas 26% have more debts than accumulated fortune at the point of retirement.

Therefore, most HPAs have to find another occupation to meet ends after retirement (Athletes to Business, 2011). When professional athletes reach this point, their resume is very different to that of typical job seekers of the same age as they prepare for the labour market in more traditional ways, which include some form of education and some job-related experience (Athletes to Business, 2011). In the same period, HPAs have developed only sport-specific expertise, which, unfortunately, can hardly be directly transformed in occupational skills and applied to business (Athletes to Business, 2011; Haerle, 1975). Accordingly, the absence of work experience gained outside the sports arenas place HPAs at a disadvantage in the search and retention of a job outside their sporting expertise (North & Lavallee, 2004).

Moreover, not many ex-athletes will find work in their sport area. A relevant study conducted among baseball players in the US revealed that only 24% of former players were able to get a position in their sport area at some capacity. The remaining 76% were employed elsewhere and those who were not formally educated occupied low-ranking jobs (Haerle, 1975). It has been stated that HPAs' former fame provides an initial advantage (Haerle, 1975), which may be more evident for elite Olympic level athletes (Athletes to Business, 2011).

However, this advantage at some point dissipates, as employers apply more traditional criteria to hire and retain employees in the long run.

Engaging in a demanding training schedule may be a lifestyle choice, but it does not guarantee a successful professional career in sport. For example, 90 - 98% of young athletes participating in soccer academies in UK, France, the Netherlands and Germany do not reach elite level (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004). This atypical shift into sport retirement can also happen to those who reach elite level but suffer an early career-ending injury. Their “smoothness” of transition to a non-sporting life depends largely upon age, the cause of retirement (voluntary or non-voluntary) and how well prepared the athlete is for the post-competition life (Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova, Stephan & Jaephag 2006; Tinley, 2002).

For the minority that have reached the professional level in sports, the peak of their career lingers in their 20’s or 30’s, following which retirement definitely appears in the horizon. A survey conducted among European basketball players revealed that only 1.6% of them still competed at the age of 35 or above (UBE, 2008). Another survey conducted within the European Union revealed that only 7% of athletes consider retirement at any time. However, this consideration was not accompanied with a specific action plan for their future (North & Lavallee, 2004).

Experts suggest that education is the framework that could guide HPAs into a second career, cultivate non-athletic skills, prepare and support them for the transition into athletic retirement (Athletes to Business, 2011; Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavellee, 2004). Authors assert that having some form of education assists HPAs into: a) “financially maturity” during and after their career, b) a second “self-identity”, distinct from that of a professional athlete, that will be vital in compassing their post-retirement life and c) preparing and qualifying them for their second profession in life (Athletes to Business, 2011; DieWelt, 2011; Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Torres, 2009).

The challenges faced by HPAs in pursuing a dual career

The challenges HPAs face combining sports and education are discussed below, using the SEM for their contextualization:

The individual sphere: Adolescence is the developmental period, in which self-identity is consolidated (Eriksson, 1963). Through social learning and imitation adolescents adopt social roles and behaviours that others demonstrate and get rewarded, avoiding behaviours that receive adverse social responses or even punishments (Bandura, 1977). In the current sporting context, success brings immediate gratification. Superstar athletes are idolized by the masses (Tinley, 2002). On the other hand, the fatigue resulting from dual career efforts is also immediate, while the benefits derived from education (e.g., employability) are usually distant. Moreover, well-educated HPAs get limited (if any) appraisal or public recognition. Therefore, it may be more probable for young HPAs to be attracted and adopt behaviours of an athlete with evident athletic accomplishments than of an athlete that is a dual career paradigm.

Research indicates that in order expertise in sports to be achieved a 10-years period of deliberate intensive training is required, during which the athlete will devote to training up to 10.000 hours (Baker, 2003; Ericsson, 1996; Ward, Hodges, Starks & Williams, 2004). For example, international level wrestlers commence intensive training programs in the age of 13, investing an average of 38.7 hours per week (Ward et al., 2004; Baker, Cote & Abernethy, 2003). In team sports HPAs spend an average of 13 years and 4.000 hours on sport-specific practise in order to reach elite level (Baker et al., 2003). Moreover, a survey depicted that in a typical week school and training commitments consist of 40 - 90 hours of workload and 49% of student-athletes have problems balancing (Rost, 2003).

When overwhelmed in such an extent, the aspect of life that student-athletes neglect the most is their education (Athletes to Business, 2011). High educational dropout rates for young HPAs have already become evident in Europe (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004; Athletes to Business, 2011). Hence, fatigue due to heavy workload and decreased awareness of education’s future benefits seem to be significant inhibitors for dual career efforts.

The interpersonal sphere: It has been documented that Felix Magath, the German football coach, convinced a promising 17 years old soccer player to drop out of high school. He stated: “...I am convinced that he will have a great career ... in 15 or 20 years, when his career is over, he will not need a high school diploma” (FifPro, 2004). In 2011, the same coach stated for Julian Draxler, a 17 years old talented soccer player: “...I would welcome if Julian would pause school for a while in order to focus on football” (Preuss, 2011). Moreover, Vince Lombardi, the Green Bay Packers’ coach, stated that “winning is not everything, it is the only thing” (Kreb, 2008). Individuals who try to combine high performance sports and education cannot escape the “win at all costs” philosophy (Underwood, 1984; Lavellee & Robinson, 2007). David (2005) stated that when a decision needs to be made whether an athlete should engage in intensive training or continue in studies, significant others, such as parents and coaches, often try to impose their opinion, functioning either as facilitators or inhibitors of dual career efforts, depending on their own attitudes towards education’s importance in life.

Examples of reverse attitude (albeit few) also exist. In 1999, Coach Carter, basketball coach of the Richmond High School, USA, benched his undefeated players because they did not meet pre-agreed educational standards. Not surprisingly, this action was perceived as very unorthodox and made national news. Coach Carter defended his decision by stating that “...students come first” (Carter, 2005). Moreover, Merikoski-Silius (2006), member

of the Finnish Olympic Committee, suggested that athletic performance and success should be accompanied by academic progression.

The institutional and organizational sphere: The educational system in USA promotes dual career in college sports (NCAA, 2006) as many institutions offer scholarships to talented athletes. O'Shaughnessy (2011) criticized this practise, advising parents of talented athletes to ask themselves whether they wish their offspring to be students-employees of athletic departments. Along the same lines, Figler and Figler (1984) argued that, despite good intentions, college student-athletes end up feeling like "employees" that "have to do their sport-job" rather than being encouraged to balance their sport with an education, while Gaston (2003) argued that student-athletes become so professionalized that their education is hindered.

Poor graduation rates of college basketball players (in 1994 it was 40%) (Kreb, 2008) support this criticism. Fortunately, in the last decade this rate has risen. For the 2002 cohort of Division I college student-athletes, the graduation rate was between 63 - 79%. To put these numbers in perspective, the same period the graduation rates of all students was 62% (NCAA, 2011). The improvement is attributed to the strict enforcement of an NCAA policy that obliges student-athletes to achieve specific academic requirements throughout their studies in order to be eligible for participation in any athletic competition (NCAA, 2006).

Other sports organizations try also to promote dual career efforts. In the USA, the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) encourage athletes to pursue an education (NFL, 2011; NBPA, 2011). The NFL has established a Players Development Department, which organizes the Continuing Education Program, the Career Development Program and the Career Transition Program (NFL_b, 2011). Similarly, the NBPA has established the Career Development Program, which assists players to explore educational options for their smooth transition to a post-competition life, like college courses in their place of residence during competition, as well as during off-season periods (NBPA_b, 2011). Another program is the Sportscaster U. Broadcasting Program, a 3-days seminar in Syracuse University that offers NBA players the opportunity to be trained as television sports casters (NBPA_a, 2011). Moreover, the NFL and the NBPA collaborate with several prominent educational institutions, such as Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Florida. In 2009, 16 professional NFL players earned a bachelor or postgraduate degree through such NFL programs (NFL_b, 2011). They also employ networking practises, offer support and guidance throughout the whole dual career process. Some athletes join the NFL Business Management and Entrepreneurial Program, a cooperative venture between the NFL and several graduate business schools, consisting of workshops that educate athletes on topics such as personal investment, business planning, and cash-flow management. The program aims to prepare athletes that are interested in building and operating their own businesses (NFL_b, 2011). Lastly, for the retired American football athletes who may not have some former education, the NFL collaborated with the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School and developed a program that helps players built a career after sports. Up to 2011, 220 athletes had attended this program (Hadavi, 2011).

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) runs a program that guides Olympic athletes into education for a better post-retirement life. IOC works in collaboration with Adecco, a global human resources company, preparing athletes for their transition into the labour market (www.olympic.org, 2009).

FifPro, the worldwide collective representative organization of professional soccer players, in collaboration with the Nordjylland University in Denmark, initiated the Fifpro Online Academy in September 2011 (Fifpro, 2011). The academy is the first well-organized attempt to educate athletes, regardless of their place of residence or work, using a distance learning structure.

The community sphere: HPAs are often perceived by their fellow students as over-privileged, spoiled, lazy and recipients of special treatment (Kreb, 2008; Lorenzen & Lucas, 2003). As a consequence, they are exposed to an extensive stereotype threat. Stereotype threats echoes to the formation of stereotypes that often influence the subjected target group into behaving in accordance with the stereotypical behaviour, a psychological mechanism widely acknowledged as the self-fulfilling prophecy (Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross 2007). For instance, stereotypes once attributed low intelligence to Afro-Americans and poor mathematic skills to women. Based on studies that confirmed their worse performance these beliefs formed stereotype threats for both groups in academia (Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007). However, research has demonstrated that Afro-Americans' and women's bad performance in the stereotype-threatened domains was not a product of inferior skills, but a product of lower self-esteem, reduced performance expectations, and increased anxiety behaviours (Steele, 1997; Steele, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Ambady, Shih, Kim & Pittinsky, 2001 as cited in Gleitman, Reisberg & Gross, 2007). Similarly, Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) demonstrated that when athletes are reminded of their athletic identity in an academic setting, they perform worse.

The policy and regulation influence: Professional athletes in EU are workers and, like all other workers, have the right to seek employment in any member-state (Bosman Case; Schmidt, 2007). If young athletes are enrolled in a university, it may not be easy for them to continue their studies in another country or adjust to a new academic environment, since the EU lacks a common educational system (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004). A Finnish survey revealed that 75% of young talented athletes wish to continue in higher education (Merikoski-Silius,

2006). However, the ununiformed education systems within EU may discourage many HPAs to pursue further a dual career.

On the other hand, many EU public bodies employ education counsellors, who assess the academic capabilities and aptitude of each athlete, including their previous studies and personal interests. Counsellors explore education options for each individual athlete, taking into account the hours available for studying, their place of training or residence, and the available institutions in the area (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004). In France, the Institut National du Sport, de l'Expertise et de la Performance (INSEP) offers contracts to clubs/academies that employ young players who combine an intensive sport schedule with an academic program (Athletes to Business, 2011). In 2000, 379 academy rugby players were registered in professional clubs under this scheme. Although only a few (12%) signed a professional contract education was provided to all (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). In Germany, the National Sport Federation, the University Sports Association and several higher education institutions across the country offer dual career programs to approximately 850 HPAs who enrol each year (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). In this framework, elite athletes benefit from carefully established entry criteria, flexible study and examination timetables, alternative means of completing courses, tutoring, monitoring and counselling. In the UK, an athlete can benefit from the services of the Performance Lifestyle Advisor, who usually is eligible to negotiate directly with the teaching staff on behalf of the athlete (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Regarding the education of HPAs, EU member-state policies have been comprehensively reviewed (see EC, DG Education & Culture 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Some member-states set the secondary education as compulsory until an age that varies from 15 to 18 years old (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004), discouraging or inhibiting young athletes to drop out of school.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the argument that because of its great implications in their future prosperity, employability or entrepreneurship (David, 1999; Daudert & Dauert, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2009; Torres, 2009; Haerle, 1975) education is an important developmental necessity for HPAs (Camy, 2006; Chappellet & Theodoraki, 2006; EC, 2007). The SEM proposes that a person's behaviour towards education is influenced by many factors on various levels (individual, interpersonal, etc.) (Gregson et al., 2001). In the prevailing education-sport context significant negative reinforcements for HPAs to avoid a dual career program are evident, including the fatigue produced by a demanding dual career schedule (Athletes to Business, 2011; North & Lavallee, 2004; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Richard & Brettschneider, 1996; Rost, 2003), poor dual career motivation and guidance from coaches and parents (David, 2005; FifPro, 2004; Krebs, 2008; O'Shaughnessy, 2011; Preuss, 2011; Underwood, 1984) unfavourable stereotypes (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Krebs, 2008; Lorenzen & Lucas, 2003) and the lack of dual career structures.

The NBPA, NFL, Fifpro and the IOC acknowledge that athletes' education is a necessary part of their lives and they have established educational options (FifPro, 2011; Hadavi, 2011; NFL, 2011; NBPAb, 2011; www.olympic.org, 2008), which, however, are restrictively available to their members. Some EU member-states have adapted their educational systems to the needs of young athletes and offer dual career programs (Athletes to Business, 2011; EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004) but the lack of proper common structures may be an obstacle to HPAs who move from country to country.

It has been often stated that professional sports guarantees HPAs a short living profession and at least one career change (Athletes to Business, 2011; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Marthinus, 2007; UBE, 2008). However, there is sparse and in cases out-dated quantitative data for the magnitude of education's influence on HPAs' future (Haerle, 1975; Daudert & Daudert, 2003). Most available evidence is descriptive (as is the current study) and derives from experts' opinion, focus group discussions and cases documentation (Athletes to Business, 2011; Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Torres, 2009). In Europe, there is sparse data available of how many HPAs enter to dual career support programs, how many graduate and how many succeed in becoming professional athletes. Arguing in favour of HPAs' education, it is suggested here that more quantitative research in the future is needed, in order to provide further evidence for the value of, and support existing, dual career programs.

Some EU member-states have employed policies and have structured systems that offer dual career support for HPA (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, DG Education & Culture, 2004). Having education counsellors to explore education options for each athlete facilitates the formation of tailored-made education programs that can accommodate HPAs' atypical student life. This mediation by expert professionals may forecast many dual career barriers, provide guidance, reduce workload, fatigue, frustration and therefore increase the probability of a successful completion of a study program without disengaging from a demanding sport schedule (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004; NFL_b, 2011; NBPAb, 2011).

HPAs' education is not restricted only in academia. Some important issues that are of common interest to athletes, sport organizations and to the sport industry could be addressed outside the academic realm. It has been acknowledged that athletes need to be educated / informed about issues like betting, doping, finance management, time management and dealing with the media (NFLa, 2011; www.olympic.orgb, 2009; Spieler Initiative Basketball, 2011; World Anti-Doping Agency, 2011). In order to inform athletes about such issues the UK developed the Performance Lifestyle Programme (Aquilina & Henry, 2010) and Belgium developed the

Study & Talent Education Programme, both of which include relevant workshops and presentations (Aquilina & Henry, 2010).

However, it is often questioned whether dual career structures are financially sustainable. According to Bloom, Grant and Watt (2005) in the developed countries sports account for the 1 - 2% of the GDP. In EU, the sport industry represents an added value of € 407 billion or 3.65% of the EU Gross Domestic Product and 15 million people are directly or indirectly employed in the sport sector (5.4% of the working population) (EU Parliament, Draft Report on the European Dimension in Sport, 2011). Devoting only a fraction of the GDP produced by the sports sector could make dual career programs financially sustainable.

Conclusion

Many important cultural movements pose that education and sports should be complementary aspects in life (Crowley, 2006; EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004) (Camy, 2006; Chappelet & Theodoraki, 2006; EC, 2007). However, many professional and non-professional HPAs face significant difficulties to combine sports and education (Athletes to Business 2011; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Haerle, 1975) because of motivational factors, as well as disadvantageous sport-education frameworks (Athletes to Business, 2011). The present study highlighted that the a personal identity restricted to sport, fatigue (Bandura, 1977; Blum, 2011; Eriksson, 1963; Emrich, et al., 2009; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Ravis et al., 2006), coaches and parents (David, 2005; Gaston, 2003), the prevailing sport spirit and stereotyping (Gaston, 2003; Krebs, 2008), might play a significant role in HPAs' dual career efforts.

More thorough, detailed and multidisciplinary research is needed to illuminate the value HPAs place in dual career, as well as for the aforementioned personal and social factors' influence HPAs' intentions for dual career. Sport sectors that provide dual career services may be financially sustainable through the reimbursement of some portion of the sports' market GDP (Bloom et al., 2005; Camy, 2006; EU Parliament, Draft Report on the European Dimension in Sport 2011), which makes research and practice on HPAs' dual career a feasible target.

Many athletes live in the spotlight, serving as social exemplars of national pride. None of their misdeeds is left unattended. Actions aiming at supporting their education s necessary to make them useful agents of positive social values and representatives of national pride.

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