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Life out of the Limelight: Understanding the Non-sporting Pursuits of Elite Athletes

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Abstract: Elite athletes are faced with increased training and competition demands. As a result, they are in danger of developing a one-dimensional identity as an 'athlete', may lack life balance, be more prone to burnout, be less prepared to transition into life after sport and fail to recognise that life-skills acquired through sport can be transferred into other settings (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain & Murphy, 1992; Lavallee, Grove & Gordon, 1997). This paper argues that engaging in non-sporting pursuits helps provide a sense of life balance, assists in developing a more well-rounded individual and may enhance and prolong an athlete's sporting career. The purpose of the current study was to identify the types of non-sporting activities that elite athletes engage in on a weekly basis and establish whether these activities had any perceived impact upon life balance, wellbeing, sporting performance and career longevity. Details of weekly activities, perceived life balance and transferable skills were sought from elite athletes across a range of sports at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). More than 90% of athletes indicated that actively engaging in non-sporting pursuits helped to lengthen their sporting career. These non-sporting activities helped provide an outlet from sport, general life-skills and the security of alternative career paths. Furthermore, the majority (72%) of those athletes that were working or studying believed that this aided their sporting performance. The results of this study support previous research which suggests that athletes will gain maximum benefits from their physical training when all other facets of their life are healthy (von Guenther & Hammermeister, 2007). Sporting organisations and coaches should therefore support the development of athletes as a whole person and encourage engagement in non-sporting pursuits to enhance sporting performance, career longevity and wellbeing.

Keywords: Elite Athletes, Identity, Life Balance, Wellbeing, Transferable Skills, Performance

Introduction

WE HEAR OF their sporting exploits, but what do we really know about the life of an elite athlete outside of the sporting limelight? To be competitive at a national and international level, the modern-day athlete must invest thousands of hours of training over many years. But what does the athlete do when they are not training or competing? The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify the types of non-sporting activities that elite athletes regularly engage in and establish whether these activities have any perceived impact upon sporting performance, career longevity, life balance and wellbeing.

Previous research has investigated and acknowledged the importance of athletes undertaking outside pursuits such as education or employment to aid transition into 'normal' life when their sporting career ends (Anderson, 1999). However, few studies have explored what

other activities athletes undertake outside of sport and why they may do so. Even fewer have looked into whether these activities may provide benefits to athletes during their sporting career. We aim to help fill this gap in the literature and in doing so, provide useful evidence and advice to those who have a role in shaping the life of an athlete.

Although there may be a perception by some that exclusive devotion to sport is necessary to achieve optimal performance, others recognise that time away from sport provides athletes with mental and physical benefits which help them feel rejuvenated for training and competition. Danish, Petitpas & Hale (1993) and McKenzie, Hodge & Carnachan (2003) argue that having meaningful interests outside of sport prevents athletes from feeling stale or becoming burnt out, which is in turn beneficial to their sporting performance. For example, former All Black rugby union player Zinzan Brooke has been quoted saying: "Rugby would make me brain-dead if I thought about it around the clock. I keep the enjoyment by breaking away from it regularly" (1997, cited in McKenzie et al., 2003, p. 2). Coaches may also recognise that time away from sport is necessary and beneficial to performance, as illustrated by Wayne Bennett, former coach of the highly successful Brisbane Broncos rugby league team: "Players have to get away from football so when it comes time to play, they're looking forward to the game, the contest. We want them stimulated, not sour" (2002, cited in McKenzie et al., 2003, p. 2).

Those athletes who do wish to pursue activities outside of their sport are often confronted with time constraint issues. However, it has been suggested that young athletes utilise their free time more efficiently than the normal adolescent population. Brettschneider (1999) notes that although athletes have limited free time at their disposal, they are motivated to use it effectively. Possessing good time management skills helps an athlete pursue both sport and educational pursuits at a high level (Burden, Tremayne & Marsh, 2004), as illustrated in a study with elite rugby union players in New Zealand (McCarroll & Hodge, 2004). The rugby players with good time management and organisational skills were 'good' trainers, compared with the 'poor' trainers, who had no commitments other than rugby. Furthermore, those players who had a balanced lifestyle and were involved in outside pursuits were the ones who adhered to their training program and had high levels of training motivation.

It is argued that allocating time and actively supporting athletes to pursue and value activities and interests outside of their sporting life helps provide them with a sense of life balance (McKenzie et al., 2003). Improving life balance can provide mental health benefits, which may underlie the effects of training. Cresswell and Eklund's (2006) study into elite rugby union players suggested those players not engaged in something meaningful outside rugby were less likely to experience instances of positive accomplishment and self-esteem from sources other than rugby; which they argued can attribute to player burnout. Previous research has also reported that athletes gain maximum benefits from their physical training when all other facets of their life are healthy (von Guenther & Hammermeister, 2007) and those who are able to successfully balance different components of their life may benefit from enhanced sporting performance, success, and career longevity (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2003; von Guenther & Hammermeister, 2007). This demonstrates that athletes both need, and will benefit from, non-sporting pursuits despite the challenges involved in integrating these with training and competition demands (McCarroll & Hodge, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2003).

Athlete's involvement in activities outside their sporting career can also act to expand their identity beyond the often narrow view of themselves as an athlete. According to inter-

actionist theorists; as athletes behave and see the impact of their behaviour on themselves and others, they develop a sense of who they are and how they are connected to the rest of the social world (Coakley, 1998). In practice, family, friends, educational institutions and the community will socially and externally reinforce the athlete's self-identity. Athletes with an expanded identity may derive a range of benefits, including confidence about the future, increased level of self-esteem, improved attitude to others, greater commitment to excel in sport, improved concentration on sport performance, and reduced anxiety regarding sport performance and life (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006; McCarroll & Hodge, 2004; Price, 2007).

A further implication of a strong athletic identity is evident when the athlete leaves elite-level sport. According to Drahotka and Eitzen (1998), the transition of athletes to a new career has presented a challenge to sport sociologists due to the athlete's loss of the primary source of their identities. Moreover, it has been suggested that athletes with overly-developed athletic identities are less prepared for post-sport careers (Baillie & Danish, 1992) and are at risk of emotional difficulties following athletic termination, where many athletes face an identity crisis (Coakley, 1998; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986). Athletes who engage in education or employment benefit from knowing they have planned for life after sport; therefore are less anxious about their future whilst participating in their sport (McKenzie et al., 2003).

Participating in activities outside of sport may also assist the athlete in developing transferable skills. Transferable skills may be applied to any setting, irrespective of where they were acquired or developed, as they are generally context and content free (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). Previous research has provided examples of skills that are transferable across settings, such as the ability to perform under pressure, to set and attain goals, to be self-motivated, dedicated, and the ability to communicate with others (Danish et al., 1993). Typically, the benefit of acquiring these skills has been considered from the point of view of transferring from a sporting to non-sporting setting. Research into skills acquired in non-sport settings such as education, employment or community work, which could potentially be transferred to the sporting domain is lacking. The current study intends to help address this topic.

There is a great deal of research into understanding the athlete from a physical and mental perspective, but there is a paucity of research into what the life of an elite athlete looks like from an outside-sport perspective and how that impacts upon their sporting life. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of non-sporting activities that elite athletes engage in on a weekly basis and establish whether these activities have any perceived impact upon sporting performance, career longevity, life balance and wellbeing. It is important to gain this information as often those who work alongside athletes, such as coaches, sport scientists and high performance managers may not be aware of what an athlete is doing when they are not involved with their sport, or the potential impact from how athletes spend their sporting downtime. This impact may be positive or negative, depending upon the activity in which the athlete is engaged. Furthermore, the findings of this study can be used to educate both athletes and coaches about the potential impacts of engaging in non-sporting activities.

This study was conducted by the AIS Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program and the National Athlete Career and Education (NACE) program and gathered perspectives from elite athletes about life outside sport. Undertaking this research provides an appreciation of what the life of an athlete looks like and contributes to the understanding of the broader life of an athlete out of the limelight. This paper is intended to be an overview of preliminary results and we are intending to publish additional findings in the near future.

Methods

Following the granting of ethics approval by the AIS Ethics Committee, information on the nature of the study and a link to an online survey were emailed to 463 athletes over 18 years of age. The online survey contained 33 questions and included a mixture of open-ended, closed questions and likert scales. Questions focused upon an athlete's personal situation, weekly activities, life balance and perceived athletic performance.

Of the 463 athletes contacted, 143 (31%) completed the survey online. Of these, 88 (61.5%) respondents were female and 55 (38.5%) were male athletes. Respondents came from 28 different sports; with 73 athletes being from team sports and 70 from individual sports. Athletes were AIS sporting scholarship holders who may also have been involved in professional sports or national teams. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 athletes; this data is currently being analysed and will be reported in future publications.

Quantitative response data from the online surveys were analysed with conventional statistical analysis using the SPSS program. Where applicable, the frequency or mean of responses were obtained. Analysis of the qualitative data from the open-ended questions involved identifying and organising underlying commonalities within the responses, which in turn allowed categories and themes to emerge. From these themes, representative and meaningful quotes were selected for inclusion in this paper. The qualitative data from the questionnaires was used to support and validate the quantitative responses of athletes.

The major limitation of this study is that data is self-reported. Athletes' perceptions may change depending upon personal circumstances such as fluctuations in training load or study/work load, injury, competition results and personal relationships. As they progress through their sporting career, their perceptions or values may also change.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding about the life of an elite athlete by identifying the types of non-sporting pursuits that athletes engaged in and examining whether these activities had any perceived impact on their sporting performance, career longevity, life balance and wellbeing.

Athletes' Sporting and Non-sporting Activities

In this section, we report on the sporting and non-sporting activities that athletes engaged in on a weekly basis and the average amount of time spent on each. Athletes estimated that, upon average, they were involved in sport-related activities such as training, competing, team meetings, recovery, rehabilitation and physiotherapy for 29.4 hours per week; with responses ranging from 10 to 60 hours per week. Those involved in individual sports spent a little more time each week in sport-related activities (32.7 hours) than those in team sports (26.3 hours).

Table 1 illustrates the average number of hours spent by athletes on non-sporting pursuits. Outside of sport, spending time on web-based social networks and/or internet surfing was the activity with the greatest participation rate; with only 12 of the 143 athletes not engaging in this activity. It is interesting to note that the 5.3 hours per week (range of 1 to 30 hours) reported by athletes was far greater than the average of approximately 7 hours per month spent by the average Australian on social media sites (Nielsen, 2010).

The greatest amount of time on an activity outside sport was time spent with partner; with 58 athletes spending an average of 20.9 hours per week (range of 2 to 116 hours). This was closely followed by employment (19.2 hours per week), with time involved in education somewhat less at 13.8 hours per week.

Table 1: The Average Number of Hours per Week in which Athletes Engage in Non-sporting Activities

Non-sporting Activities	<i>n</i>	Average Hours
Facebook / myspace / twitter / internet surfing etc	131	5.3
Watching TV / DVDs	121	7.0
Relaxing with friends (movies, parties etc)	121	6.2
Domestic chores (cooking etc)	111	6.3
Commuting	101	8.3
Employment	97	19.2
Time with family (parents, siblings etc)	86	9.7
Reading	81	3.3
Education (contact hours, study & assignments)	80	13.8
Other physical activities (e.g. cycling, surfing, golf etc)	72	3.8
Time with partner (if applicable)	58	20.9
Daytime sleeping > 20mins	46	6.0
PlayStation/wii etc	21	2.8
Other activities	18	7.0
Volunteer / community work	16	2.5
Time with your children (if applicable)	1	15.0

More than half of the athletes were engaged in some form of higher education, with 61 (43%) undertaking part-time study and 19 (13%) involved in full-time study. Sixty-three (44%) were not studying. Given this, athletes were then asked whether they believed they had time to combine education and/or work with their sport and more than three-quarters (77%) stated that they did. Further analysis revealed that 84% of those engaged in part-time study believed they had time to combine education and/or work with their sport, whilst 74% of full-time students and 71% of those not studying also believed there was time. This generally positive perception that despite potential time constraints, there was time to balance sport with career/education pursuits is perhaps echoed in athletes' rating of their balance between sporting and non-sporting pursuits. Using a scale ranging from 1 ("very poor") to 10 ("excellent"), athletes on average rated their balance as 6.5 out of 10. These results lend some support to previous research findings that even at the level of elite sport, athletes are able to not only successfully manage, but also derive enjoyment from, the challenges of training, competing, studying and/or working (Burden et al., 2004).

Benefits of Non-sporting Pursuits

The majority of athletes (72%) studying or working believed that their sporting performance had benefited from them undertaking education/employment during their sporting career; whilst 15% believed it was unaffected and 13% thought it had suffered. When the impact was considered from the reverse direction, 59% of athletes considered that their education/employment had benefited from them participating in elite sport, 12% thought it had not been affected and 29% believed that it had suffered. These figures are in contrast to a study with US university student-athletes where 65% believed their grade point average would be higher if they were not involved with sport and only 11% believed it would be lower (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

Not only did athletes suggest their performance was positively impacted by their engagement in non-sporting pursuits, the vast majority (90%) also stated that these activities helped to lengthen their sporting career; a finding which should have significant relevance to those with a vested interest in keeping high-performing athletes in the sport system. In terms of specific activities, the majority of athletes felt that spending time with family and friends positively influenced the length of their career. This supports the recommendations of previous researchers who have urged that athletes be encouraged and allocated time to spend with family and personal relationships to promote long-term wellbeing and aid athletic performance (Douglas & Carless, 2006). A hockey player in the current study illustrates the importance to her of spending time with family and friends:

Spending time outside of the hockey world I think makes me appreciate it more when I am in it and gives me a chance to regroup and refocus. Spending time with friends and family when I am back in my home state is something that I love and find refreshing, it gives me the pep I need to want to play on and play well. (Female, Hockey).

In line with the findings of Hickey and Kelly (2008), a large number of athletes stated that undertaking education helped them stay in sport, whilst undertaking employment was also perceived to have a positive impact on the longevity of their sporting career, as this rower asserts:

Work and Friends - I believe a balanced life is the key to longevity in sport. (Female, Rowing).

Many athletes made reference to the benefits of participating in other physical activities outside of their usual sport, such as golf, surfing and cycling, whilst relaxing and daytime sleeping to aid recovery were also frequently mentioned. Although taking time out for passive recovery may not be viewed by family and friends as a useful activity or part of a 'real job'; it is essential to most athletes' daily program (Forsyth & Catley, 2007) and was clearly perceived by some athletes in this study as positively influencing the length of their sporting career.

Conversely, the most commonly cited non-sporting activities for negatively influencing the length of an athlete's career were excessive drinking and parties. Athletes recognised that these types of activities affected their performance in training the next day. Physical activities and extreme sports resulting in injury were also cited.

From athletes' responses, it was evident that the major benefit of engaging in outside pursuits was the distraction they provided. In line with the findings of McKenzie et al. (2003), a large number of athletes in the current study mentioned that outside pursuits provided another focus or break from sport, as expressed by this netballer and rower:

Yes, mentally I need something else so I don't get bored or stale at training. (Female, Netball).

Definitely, it keeps me level headed and makes sure I have a break from the bubble of the rowing world otherwise I would start to go insane (Female, Rowing).

Many athletes also stated that outside pursuits provided them with a sense of balance. Previous research (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2003) suggests balance in life is integral for athletes to remain fresh, motivated and prevent burnout. Furthermore, those athletes able to balance different parts of their life may derive maximum benefits from their training and enjoy greater sporting success (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2003; von Guenther & Hammermeister, 2007). This was supported by athletes in the current study who stated:

It's personally very important to me that I have non-sporting pursuits. It enables me to perform better when needed as mentally I'm relaxed (Male, Short Track Speed Skating).

It helps me balance my sporting pursuits and makes me appreciate coming back into competition. (Female, Football).

You need a balance in your life, to keep yourself fresh. Because if you are focused on your sport 100% of the time you will burn out and lose motivation. (Male, Beach Volleyball).

Some athletes also recognised that other pursuits helped them develop an identity outside of their sport and made them a more well-rounded person:

I don't place very much self-worth or satisfaction on my sporting achievements so it's very important to have something else to gain these feelings of pride and satisfaction from. I would go completely insane if sport was the only thing in my life; I'm sure I would become completely obsessed with training and competition/results and probably burn out/have a nervous breakdown very quickly. (Female, Water Polo).

It is clear there are risks associated with a one-dimensional identity that, if not mitigated, will have implications for the athlete and potentially the sporting organisation. As discussed earlier, developing or expanding their identity will provide athletes with many benefits both during their sporting life and in their transition to post-sport life (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006; McCarroll & Hodge, 2004; Price, 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009).

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, athletes also frequently mentioned that engagement in non-sporting pursuits helped them develop greater teamwork and social skills and enhanced their ability to interact with different people and personality types. Other perceived

benefits of engaging in non-sporting pursuits included experiencing relaxation, enjoyment and fun away from sport, as well as giving athletes perspective and keeping them grounded:

Yes, they [non-sporting pursuits] give you experience and exposure to different people and environments which is important for personal development. (Female, Cricket).

Non-sporting pursuits give me a lot of enjoyment and if I'm a happier person, generally I perform better in my sport. (Female, Cricket).

We also investigated whether athletes believed they had gained any skills or knowledge from their non-sporting pursuits that they could transfer and apply to their sporting environment. The most commonly cited skill was time management. Time management skills have previously been reported as "an important issue determining [rugby] players' training motivation and adherence" (McCarroll & Hodge, 2004, p. 7); therefore, it could be argued that developing and transferring this skill to the sporting environment may assist in improving performance. Many of the other skills commonly listed, such as commitment, communication, dedication, organisation, planning and social skills (Danish et al., 1993; Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000) have previously been identified as skills that could be transferred from sport to work or other areas of life. However in the current study, athletes indicated that these skills were transferred to the sporting environment from non-sporting pursuits. Having experience or exposure to an environment that allows athletes to acquire and develop skills that can be transferred across settings will help them achieve success both within and outside the sporting domain.

Many athletes studying degrees such as sport science, nutrition, physiotherapy or psychology stated that they were able to apply knowledge specifically gained from their studies to their sporting career. Athletes recognised that this knowledge could assist them in areas such as training and recovery, injury prevention and rehabilitation, improving diet for performance and enhanced psychological skills. Acquiring knowledge or skills in these areas whilst being involved in elite-level sport has the potential to improve an athlete's sporting performance and career longevity.

Although athletes may acquire valuable skills in settings away from sport, it has been acknowledged that a major barrier to skill transfer is a lack of awareness of the psychological and physical skills that one possesses and how they could be applied in other settings (Danish et al., 1993; Mayocchi, 1997; Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000; Petitpas et al., 1992). Therefore, it is important to help athletes recognise that they may have acquired skills from their non-sporting pursuits and encourage and support them in transferring these skills to the sporting environment to aid their athletic performance.

Previous research and athlete development programs alike have advocated for athletes to be involved with career and education programs (Anderson, 1999; Hawkins & Blann, 1994; Hickey & Kelly, 2008; McGregor-Bayne & Burgin, 2004; McPherson, 1980; Stambulova et al., 2009; Price, 2007). Alternative career paths and personal development opportunities will help prepare athletes for the future, as well as make the transition from elite sport less traumatic and provide them with a fallback should they be forced into premature retirement (Anderson, 1999). Accordingly, athletes in the current study recognised that undertaking education or employment whilst competing helped them establish a career and earning po-

tential for 'life after sport'; with some deriving benefit now from the peace-of-mind it gave them:

Makes you feel like you are setting something up in the future which can relax you and allow you to concentrate on the sport easier. (Male, Canoe Slalom).

I see my sporting life as a short-term experience, whereas I see my career, of which I will be making a living off, as the majority of my life. Therefore I choose to work towards my career as well as make the most of my short sporting life. (Male, Swimming).

Athletes' responses supported the findings of previous research which has warned of the dangers of exclusive devotion to sport (Sparkes, 2000). Furthermore, this illustrates that if athletes have the opportunity and inclination to be involved in a range of activities outside their sporting life, they will stay in their sport longer, be better performers, as well as more well-rounded and happier individuals. Moreover, given the influential role a coach has in an athlete's life, it is urged that coaches recognise the importance of life balance and developing the whole person by allocating specific time periods to personal and professional development programs in order to realise the above benefits.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to learn more about an elite athlete's life when out of the sporting limelight and the perceived impacts of engaging in outside pursuits on their sporting performance, career longevity, life-balance, and wellbeing. This study ascertained that the majority of athletes spent their time away from sport with their partner, engaging in education and/or employment or on the internet. The vast majority of athletes spoke about the positive impact such activities had on their sporting life; notably, these pursuits provided them with a necessary break from their sport and a balance in their life which was likely to keep them performing better and remain in sport longer. Furthermore, many athletes were mindful that exclusive devotion to sport was likely to lead to loss of motivation and burnout. In addition to the short-term sporting benefits, many athletes could also see the bigger picture and spoke of longer-term career alternatives and benefits. This study argues that it is of significant importance for athletes to have time away from sport to spend with family and friends and for activities that provide both relaxation and stimulation outside the sporting environment.

This research and previous studies suggest that athletes gain maximum benefits from their physical training when all other areas of their life are healthy. Therefore, it is important that both sporting organisations and coaches support the development of athletes as a whole person and encourage engagement in non-sporting pursuits in order to enhance an athlete's sense of life balance and wellbeing. This should ultimately help an athlete enhance their sporting performance and enjoy a longer, more successful sporting career. Furthermore, a substantial amount of money is invested in sport and elite athletes. To see the return on this investment it is desirable to keep athletes in sport for as long as possible. This study provides some insight into factors that will encourage and assist athletes to remain in their sport.

It is apparent that accompanying the shift to the concept of a full-time amateur elite athlete are a number of characteristics and issues that need to be understood to ensure the experiences of the athlete not only enhances their playing ability but also addresses their education,

identity, life-skills, post-sport opportunities and general wellbeing. The data obtained by this study provides new knowledge and insight into understanding the life of an elite athlete outside of sport. Learning about the perceived benefits athletes place on a life outside of sport helps us to understand why their life is constructed that way and why those in the sporting industry need to continue to promote a life away from sport. This paper is an overview of preliminary results and we are intending to publish additional findings in the near future.

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Dr. Nathan Price is the Manager of the National Athlete Career and Education (NACE) program at the Australian Sports Commission where he works to develop initiatives to support elite athletes in their personal and professional development. He completed his PhD at the University of Wollongong, Australia, researching the career development, education and planning of elite athletes in preparation for a life after sport. His key area of interest is the integration and involvement of elite athletes into higher education and training with a special focus on their professional development and preparation for life after sport.

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