

The life of being a student-athlete: What am I sacrificing and why?

Text: Dr Monja Human

Introduction

The sport psychology article in the Medallist Volume 1 (2017) focused on *"Elevate to greatness": By balancing both your Sport and Academic careers*. Athletes often have to balance dual careers; being the sport setting, where they are known as athletes as well as their academics, where they are known as students. These two spheres require time, energy, commitment and both have performance demands. However, it can easily happen that coaches, teachers, lecturers, sponsors and organisations neglect to see them as *people* first! This implies that role players, organisations and institutions need to take an interest in the whole person with her/his life situation and not only what the athlete can offer to their sport or how the student can perform academically.

A developmental psychology perspective

As young people, these student-athletes also face everyday transitions linked to their age. Developmental psychology draws our attention to the developmental phases of early, middle and late adolescence transitioning into being young adults.

Student-athletes in these developmental phases are busy with the developmental task of searching for their identity, therefore engaging in a process trying to discover who they are as people. They can have multiple identities by being a student, athlete, friend, brother, sister etc. Identity formation starts in secondary school but identity achievement rarely occur before they are 18 years old. Student-athletes in tertiary institutions are also still busy with this

process. This process consists of trying out different behaviours and appearances in an attempt to get to know them self thus discover who they are. They start defining themselves based on their social relationships.

During this search for identity they often appear egocentric. This refers to a self-conscious desire to feel important in their peer groups and enjoy social interactions and acceptance from others. It is in fact this component that is a normal part of early, middle and late adolescence that most student-athletes need to sacrifice. Student-athletes cannot have "normal" social lives like their peers because of their commitment to sport. Here are some of their comments that are heard on a daily basis: "I dread every Friday evening because I know my friends are going to invite me to go out with them and every Friday night I have to decline their invitations. My usual reason is that I have training the next morning and have to make sure that I get enough sleep". Megan shared that "my friends rejected me and said I can contact them again when I have time for them. This hurt me because I really want to do everything that they are doing but I never have the time like they do".

Role players in the broader system

Adolescents and young adults need to explore different possibilities and integrate different parts of themselves. The environment of the student-athlete plays a huge role in their identity development. Different role players seem to contribute to the development of their identity formation:





Family

Student-athletes try to balance being more independent whilst still preserving the caring relationships of their family, especially their parents. Parents can often be the athlete's biggest supporter or sometimes their biggest enemy due to the amount of pressure that they put on their child. Jackson, a 18 year old athlete shared the following: "I am always looking forward to go home for my one week holiday. During that time I want to spend time with my family and friends because I don't see them often. However, when I am home things get complicated. My family complains and say I don't do things with them because I also want to see my friends. I wish I could split myself in two and keep everyone happy." Furthermore, student-athletes often sacrifice family time, dinners, family weddings and so on for training and competitions.

Peers

Peer groups are essential to identity, social and general development of student-athletes. Here they also develop skills such as empathy, sharing, communication and leadership. Peers can influence student-athletes in a positive manner such as academic motivation or healthy habits. However they can also have negative influence by encouraging unhealthy behaviour such as drinking or undisciplined behaviour.

This aspect of identity development and social development is often neglected due to the demands of sport. This is also most probably the biggest area where student-athletes feel deprived of. They feel that they are always sacrificing going out because they need to sleep early or recover properly. They can't join parties, eat unhealthy food or drink alcohol because they are training the next day.

Social media

Learning to communicate with others is an important social skill learned whilst being a student-athlete. Social media is a form of communication that is very popular be it email, text messages, phone or other. Student-athletes are heavy users of the newer forms of communication especially social network platforms such as Facebook etc. They are also using online technology to experiment with emerging identities and to broaden their peer groups. Some student-athletes often prefer this way of communicating because they often can not physically attend functions or parties due to heavy training loads or being overseas. This can lead to them spending hours until late in the night communicating with friends hence not getting enough sleep and rest to attend to their recovery needs. Because their identities and self-esteem can be fragile at times it might happen that random comments on social media get interpreted as negative. This influence and can be detrimental to their self-believe in both sport and academics.

Some ideas.....

Being aware of these challenges discussed so far can lead all role players (institutions, coaches, teachers, lecturers, managers, professionals) and the sporting system as a whole to pro-actively assist student-athletes with their developmental tasks. Here are some ideas:

- Teach psycho-social skills like self-awareness, managing performance processes, goalsetting, general social skills, coping with adversity in sport and life, coping with and managing injuries, handling transitions from secondary education to tertiary education, time management, how to use social networks as a resource (Hendriksen, Larsen, Storm, & Ryom, 2014).
- Activate all support systems by identifying the key figures in the athlete's life.
- Move away from only an individual approach to a holistic approach by involving all role players like coaches, sport science and medical unit

personal, parents and broader organisational structures.

- Acknowledge and enhance the high performance culture in which they are operating.
- Make interventions specific to the need of each sport by paying attention to detail.
- Provide education and guidance on the use of social media especially in their competition season.

Conclusion

A very famous South African Olympian athlete shared the following: "My friends always invite me to their functions and parties and I always say no. They get angry with me and say that one day I will be old, alone and due to my own doing never had experienced a student's care free social life. My reply is always to say that I am fine with that because one day they will be old and then they never had the opportunity to experience the feeling of standing on a podium with a gold medal around your neck. There is no party in the world that can comes close to giving you that experience."

Balancing sport, academics and life can be challenging. However, student-athletes have the choice where they want to spend their time, energy and commitment. This is a choice that no one can make for them. However, guidance and advice can provide the necessary direction. It is all about priorities and seeking support where needed because "where there is a will, there is way!"

References

Hendriksen, K., Larsen, C. H., Storm, L. K., & Ryom, K. (2014). Sport psychology interventions with young athletes: The perspective of the sport psychology practitioner. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 8, 245-280.