

“Elevate to greatness”:

By balancing both your Sport and Academic careers.

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Athletes often have to balance dual careers; being sport and academics. These two domains require time, energy, commitment and both have performance demands. The experience of having to develop and maintain these two careers simultaneously is shared between the athlete and various role players on a daily basis. These role players often consist of - but are not limited to - psychologists, coaches, lecturers, managers, parents and other professional support staff.

Here are some of their stories:

Jonathan, 20 years old, male

“Everyone expects me to perform! Let me share what my day was like today. I woke up early in the morning to go to training. Whilst I was waiting for my coach, I quickly read through my work, because I write a test at 10h20. I wanted to study the night before, but I felt too tired after my third training session for the day. I fell asleep behind my books. When I woke up it was 23h20 and my body was aching. I just changed my sleeping position from my desk to my bed. After my test I went to gym. Afterwards, I grabbed something to eat whilst I was rushing back to class. I attended three of my lectures and made it just in time for my third training session. I was invited to a friend's birthday party, but I was just too exhausted to attend. I had to apologise again, because I also missed it last year due to a training camp in preparation for Rio. Please help me, I feel exhausted!”

Jo-Anne, 22 years old, female

“I am scared! I lay awake at night worrying about my bursary. I therefore, don't recover well. My coach is not happy with me because I am not running the times that I am supposed to be running. I desperately want to perform like I use to, but I just don't know how I am going to meet all these demands. They said if I don't pass all my subjects this semester I might be at risk of losing my bursary. We don't have the money to repay this. My sponsorship also called me last week to inform me that I am currently not meeting their requirements. Luckily they gave me three months to get my act together. I desperately want to perform like I use to but I just don't know how I am going to meet all these demands!”

Jonathan and Jo-Anne are neither unique nor the only athletes experiencing these challenges. They communicated clearly that they want to perform in both their sport and their academic careers. Furthermore, having a life and attending to their social needs are supposed to be such a natural part of their developmental age, yet it seems to be a luxury to these athletes. Athletes like Jonathan and Jo-Anne struggle to incorporate their studies into demanding training programmes and competition schedules. They further need to deal with fatigue and face financial concerns. They constantly have to make sacrifices in their lives in an attempt to be successful. Searching, striving and obtaining an optimal balance between sport, education and life is probably one of the toughest challenges that these athletes face on a daily basis (Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner & Lindahl, 2015).

Finding the optimal balance

Finding this optimal balance is important because it can assist athletes with the following:

- Staying motivated

It is important that athletes remain motivated to perform well in both careers (sport and academics), as this will help them to maintain their sense of identity, be focused on their purpose and enhance their overall well-being.

- Prevent role engulfment

Role engulfment is where one of the student-athlete roles is emphasized at the expense of the other role. Usually the athlete role is given prominence over the student role, as the former can bring instant stardom and financial relief in the short term, while the student role is often seen as a long-term goal that only needs to be realised once an athlete's sporting career has been terminated voluntarily (e.g., retirement from sport) or involuntarily (e.g., injury through sport) (Gayles & Backer, 2015).

- Retirement from their sport career

Athlete's retirement from sport without the necessary support might influence their psychological functioning and well-being. This can lead to experiences of depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, alcohol and/or substance abuse.

- Prevent premature athletic dropout for some athletes

Premature athletic dropout occurs when athletes become too overwhelmed with attempting to balance between sport and academics, and ultimately have to quit. Often the athletes are assisted financially through bursaries, sponsors and/or endorsements - so dropping out forces them to seek job security and financial stability instead.

Choice and responsibility.....

Despite the fact that these athletes have made the **choice** to participate in dual careers, there is still a significant **responsibility** entrusted to the role players and the athlete's environment to assist and support them in their journey. Ultimately the aim is to facilitate the development of the athlete's individual competencies, in the hope that it will allow them to achieve excellence in both sport and academics. "Elevate to greatness" can therefore be used as a metaphor in encouraging athletes to find the optimal balance between sport, academics and life, so that they can develop into well-rounded human beings and in due course fulfil a meaningful role in society. Where do you stand in assisting them, balancing their dual careers and thereby, empowering them to "elevate to greatness" in sport and academics?

References

Gayles, J. G. and A. R. Baker. 2015. Opportunities and challenges for first-year students-athletes transitioning from high school to college. *New Directions for Student Leadership* 147: 43-51.
Stambulova, N. B., C. Engstrom., A. Franck., L. Linner and K. Lindahl. 2015. Searching for an optimal balance: Dual career experiences of Swedish adolescent athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 21: 4-14.

