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MEDALS AND DEGREES: FACTORS INFLUENCING DUAL CAREER OF ELITE STUDENT ATHLETES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

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Abstract: *Career planning and goal setting play a significant role in the life of elite athletes gaining critical relevance during the overlapping years with university studies. As athletic career contain a necessary end and cannot serve as a profession for life, all athletes shall go through modification period in their professional lives. The athletic career shall come to an end and elite athletes need to find another profession for which they need to prepare as well. The specialities of this undertake is that the peak or the progressive cycle of athletic career often times overlap in time with high school and university studies. This definitely challenges those young athletes who made the decision to continue their studies at the university level beside their athletic careers. The objective of this study is to explore the main factors influencing the simultaneous realisation of studies and elite sport careers during university years. Part of a complex research approach on dual career in sport this study is aimed to gain information about methods of athletes for managing their dual tasks, the perceived relationship of student athletes to their peers, teachers and coaches, and their position on the relevant policy regulations provided by the university environment. Following the development of research instruments, data collection was conducted by focus-group interviews at the University of Debrecen among student elite athletes receiving sport scholarships (N=15). Level of success in sport, sport type (individual and team) and gender distribution was taking into account. The results shall contribute to the development of a future research instrument in a form of a questionnaire to assess aspects of dual career of athletes in case of larger samples.*

Keywords: *dual career in sport, simultaneous career development, University of Debrecen* (JEL code: Z20)

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, due to the characteristics of top-level sport, the individual career development of elite athletes became more and more important. Athletes have to set goals according to their abilities, interests and future plans, which is one of the conditions of adaptive career development (Koncz, 1998). The successful completion of a dual career primarily depends on athletes, however, it is influenced by several external and internal factors as well (Belcourt, 1996).

A top-level career in sport requires a high performance both physically and mentally. This might result in neglecting other aspects and fields of life in the short term or on a more permanent basis (Fernandez et al., 2005). Balancing athletic, academic and social roles is not an easy task for elite athletes. A Canadian study came to the conclusion that the resource of tension between these three fields lies in defining priorities. Elite athletes always prioritize sport, parallel they also try to meet the academic requirements, which together add up to neglecting the social aspect of life (Miller-Kerr, 2002). The athletic environment might help them or hold them back from accomplishing individual career objectives. As Kun and Szretykó (2011) indicate in their study, *Karriermenedzsment az élsportban* [Career Management in Top-Level Sport], one of the basic conditions is such an atmosphere from which athletes could benefit including the educational institution, the sport association, the presence of the coach, the family and the social relationships.

A critical element in this process for top performance student athletes how to balance individual, athletic and post-athletic goals with academic requirements and conditions provided by university (Koncz, 1998). Success in both athletic and academic fields depends on student athletes' particular athletic goals, motivation, opportunities and also on the process itself (Koncz, 1998).

During an athletic career, in order to achieve short-term and long-term goals aiming at progressive and top-level results, available alternatives shall be considered, and decisions made by athletes, (Kun and Szretykó, 2011). At the same time, their long-term individual improvement should not be neglected, which may serve as a precondition to a normative or predictable transition following the termination of their athletic career (Alfermann-Stambulova, 2007, Stambulova et al., 2009). Aquilina (2013) stated that only a minority of athletes are able

to make a living from their sporting achievements long-term, which also influenced by the characteristics of the particular sport and its support. There are sports where the expenses of preparation and competition are so high that athletes are forced to look for other alternatives to cover the costs. Fernandez et al. (2005) found that *„work/study commitments, loss of motivation, the politics of sport, decrease in performance, finance and decreased enjoyment"* are the main causes for athletic career termination. Therefore, it is essential that top performance athletes should have adequate career strategies. Completed academic studies parallel to the athletic careers may help retired athletes finding new opportunities in their post-athletic lives (EU Commission, 2013). The academic studies and athletic commitment, however, challenge young and talented athletes (Richartz-Brettschneider, 1996). Their lives focus on the academic and athletic career simultaneously, which contain a kind of duality. They are athletes but also students. Both roles require „a full person". In order to produce the best results possible in both fields, student athletes need to develop strategies that help them to fulfil their career ambitions (Burnett et al., 2010).

Several studies (Miller, 2000; Aquilina, 2013); McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis, 2004); (De Knop et al., 1999); Kun - Szretykó, 2011) have already focused on the relationship between elite student athletes' academic development and athletic performance. Miller (2000) examined this question from the athletes' point of view, and emphasizes the application of adequate methods and strategies for meeting the requirements. Aquilina (2013) found that there is no ideal strategy which would be suitable for everyone, student athletes have to find or develop the most adequate strategies for themselves. According to a research carried out by McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004), the British student athletes interviewed were able to proceed successfully in both academic and athletic fields and harmonize the different roles. Another similar study presented on a Belgian university sample (De Knop et al., 1999) focused on the same question, whether academic studies are possible during the period of top-level performance in the athletic field. Based on the results of this study, it is indicated that the support provided by the university in assisting student athletes to meet requirements successfully, is considered a key element for student athletes in their ability to achieve career goals. The results of a Hungarian research show that interviewed athletes reported a possible change in their athletic career ambition upon their decision to put their studies and preparation for post-athletic life ahead in order to reach long-term life objectives (Kun-Szretykó, 2011).

As in most cases the peak and the progressive cycle of athletic career overlap the years of university studies, it seems that both policies and regulations of universities, and the individual plans, career aspirations and decisions of athletes impact the realization of dual careers of elite athletes. Based on the previous research considerations and findings mentioned above, the following questions might be raised: what kind of strategies are considered to be necessary and relevant to the efforts taken for dual career development by elite student athletes at University of Debrecen, and in what way does the educational institution contribute to the successful realization of athletes' simultaneous objectives. The University of Debrecen, the largest research and academic higher education institution located in the east part of Hungary, developed its own Sport Concept (Bács-Bácsné, 2014) according to the principles of the European Union and created such policies and regulations that assist athletes with their dual career objective (Lenténé-Puskás, 2012). The objective of this study is to explore the external and internal factors, which influence the career ambitions of top performance student athletes studying at the University of Debrecen, with the help of case studies (focus groups) and the relevant literature; to highlight the role of institutional and not institutional factors in realizing career aspirations; and to collect student athletes' experience about the policies that set up conditions and regulations by the educational institution for athletes.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Document analysis was applied to explore the relevant international and national literature of this field and the existing policies and regulations of the University of Debrecen related to support of dual careers in sport. Data were collected through focus group interviews of selected student athletes holding sport scholarships at the University of Debrecen. According to a criteria-pre-set, 22 student athletes were selected for this research. Data collection took place in two groups on different days at the Department of Sporteconomy and Management at the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Debrecen with participation rate of 68% (N=15). Selection criteria was set on individual-team sport, level of success dimension (table 1.) and selected major (table 2.). A maximum of two athletes for each discipline were accepted into the interview group, taking balanced gender distribution also into account.

Table 1: The Distribution of Athletes According to Type and Level of Sport Performance

Level of Sport	Male	Female
Individual sport	4	6
Team sport	2	3
Member of national team (adult category)	2	2
Member of national junior team	0	2
Member of national team (both adult & junior)	0	1
Ranking on European Championship	1	0
First Division athletes	3	4

Resource: own research data

It is to emphasize that the sample included student athletes representing eight different faculties of the University of Debrecen, of which only one provide sport-relevant training (sport management). Accordingly, data collection was not limited only to sport majors; therefore, the diversity of student athlete distribution by major (field of study) created the

Table 2: The Distribution of Athletes According to Year and Faculty (N=15).

	Year				Faculty							
	1.year	***2.year***	***3.year***	***4.year***	***BTK***	***TTK***	***IK***	***KTK***	***ÁJK***	***GVK***	***MÉK***	***NK***
Total	5	3	6	1	2	2	0	1	1	7	1	1
Male	1	1	4	0	0	1	0	1	1	3	0	0
Female	4	2	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	1	1

BTK: Faculty of Arts and Humanities - TTK: Faculty of Science and Technology - IK: Faculty of Informatics - KTK:Faculty of Economics and Business Administration - ÁJK: Faculty of Law - GVK: Faculty of Applied Economics and Rural Development) - MÉK: Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences and Environmental Management - NK: Faculty of Public Health.(GVK and KTK merged by the time of the publication of data under the name of GTK (Faculty of Economics and Business)

Resource: own research data

uniqueness of data collection, thus, the results and applications of this present study. The distribution of student athletes in the interview-groups according to faculty (field of study) and year of studies is presented in Table 2.

The focus group interview was conducted according to a pre-set research protocol targeting three major areas of topic: 1) compatibility of higher education studies and elite athletic performance; 2) opportunities and preferences for elite student athletes at the University of Debrecen; 3) consideration of length and conditions of elite athletic career. Within these main topics complementary sub-topics and facilitating questions were developed to ensure more adequate data collection and enhance the level understanding about the topics discussed. Facilitator was targeting a balanced discussion in which all participants could contribute to all issues discussed. The data were documented by video- and audio recordings. Qualitative analysis methodology was applied. The results were assessed and grouped in each topic, transcriptions and all written material were analysed by Atlas 5.0 qualitative analysis software.

RESULTS

1. Higher Education and Top-level Sport

The focus group interviews provided an interactive platform to gain deeper understanding of student elite athletes' experiences and opinions, Also, to explore the obstacles faced and methods of solutions used by elite athletes while conducting their athletic-academic parallel undertakings. In the group discussions interactive conversations evolved in which participants could express their thoughts and opinions freely. The intensity of data collection was not affected by the fact that the majority of participants had no prior personal connection. In both groups, there was a dominance of seniors, being members of adult- or junior national selected teams in their respected sports.

In case of the first topic discussed it revealed that young student athletes are aware of the nature of athletic career, specifically its unpredictable characteristics in results and length, as it is described by Aquilina (2013). They do know that the course and end of an athlete's career is influenced by many external factors and turn of events. Interestingly most student-athletes beside their athletic goals, they also developed solutions for their post-athletic career life. Accordingly athletes within their 5-year-plan mentioned the qualification for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil, and winning medals at the upcoming World- and European Championships, but also reported clear visions concerning their post-athletic life and occupation.

These responses indicate that athletes, who are approaching or reached the peak performance of their athletic career, come to a point in their lives when an elaboration about the future becomes necessary. The responses showed equal importance and priority given by student-athletes to both athletic and academic engagements, however, clear indication was given that the athletes are aware that one point this balance shall be reconsidered Even athletes, being members of national teams and winning World- or European Championships and clearly giving present priority to their athletic achievement emphasize the important role of seeking to meet requirements also on the academic field. This finding is well-supported by statement of a 25-year-old male athlete achieved 2nd place on youth world ranking list of his sport:

„Sport has always been my first priority and arranged all other things in my life around sport. However, I am also making compromises as I know that studies are important, too."

Accordingly, responses show that the academic performance alongside the athletic career achievements is important for most of the athletes. Student-athletes develop survivor strategies in rather couches manner to balance their dual engagements. For example general competition seasons or preparation periods for world events (European and world championships) influence the approaches taken to academic examination periods. A ten-time World Champion male athlete commented as the following:

"My goals change periodically. I have had to prepare for the exams lately, so they have been more important for me. Though, I do to neglect training either, because later this could become a disadvantage. But when I prepared for the world championship last year, it was obvious that the training stood above all."

Adaptive approaches are well presented by the statement of a sophomore World- and European Champion female athlete, who organizes her semester and subject credits taken according to priorities around preparation and competition periods:

"I registered for fewer courses (taming less credit-hour) in the second semester because the exam period overlaps the most important training period, after which the world championship will take place, so I cannot miss any of those training sessions."

Accordingly, the responses indicate that athletes are willing to make efforts to be able to balance their athletic achievements and academic performance. Athletes report that success needs sacrifices and consciously prepared harmonizing strategies. Balancing both the athletic and academic fields requires good time management. For example, using "time-mirror" method to identify particular time fragments that may be revised for more effective utilization. Among others a 25-year-old male triathlete used this method wanting to find time by re-organizing his daily schedule and commented as follows:

"I managed to develop an effective system for myself. I go to bed on a set time, get up early to do my first training, than I spend time with running errands if necessary. Afternoon I have my other training, and in between I rest, study, work or just spend my time with whatever I want."

2. The Role of Institutional Environment in Higher Education for Athletic Achievements

The University of Debrecen implemented policy regulations related to sport since 2005, which policy considerations also contain elements for support of the student athlete. The present study also aimed the gain information from student athletes on these external factors that are provided by the higher education institution of It was found that subjects prefer a sable and supportive institutional background including support of teachers and peers, also of sport clubs coaches. In order to manage a balance between athletic and academic endeavours all these factors form a joint support net that influence athletic career path during the university years (Lenténé Puskás Perényi, 2014).

In most cases athletes indicate that the supportive instruments, such as individual schedule for class attendance and exams, sport scholarship, accommodation at dormitory, tuition fee reduction, offered by the university contribute to the fulfilment of their dual career ambitions. Elite athletes' responses reflect their positive attitude towards the different forms of support. For example the individual schedule for class attendance and exams contribute to the athletes' successful academic progress..

The research also shows, however, a paradox. Several elite student athletes, members of the national junior selected team seldom or never accessed this opportunity. The use of these supportive instruments showed some relations with the level and type of sport athletes played, the chosen major, and the teachers' flexibility and understanding. It seems that athletes in individual sports can schedule their training around their studies easier, than athletes doing team sports. Team sport athletes seem to face more challenges in general due to the inflexible training schedule, which is also influenced by facility availability and schedules of coaches and other team members. Also frequent travels in teams, and impulsively changing times and locations of games play a role. Athletes with lower number of training sessions did not consider using such support.

Unlike class and exam instruments the sport scholarship is a form of support that is well-appreciated by all the athletes. As reported, this financial support may contribute to cover daily expenses but in some cases of athletes competing in non-Olympic individual sports also the expenses of competitions. A 23-year-old male European Champion athlete stated:

"I save my sport scholarship and when there is a competition coming, if I have the opportunity, I rather use that money to able myself to participate."

Even though that teachers and professors being in contact with student athletes during university years may also play a key role in carrying out athletes' academic performance strategies successfully. Interestingly, the responses show that, except in a few cases, teachers and professors are not acquainted with elite athletes on their courses. As the subjects stated they are not aware of the kind of sport athletes do or their achievements; athletes do not think that the professors would know about their difficulties in balancing a dual athletic and academic careers. A particular case of negligence towards athletes' out-of-curriculum activities was also mentioned in which circumstances to meet academic requirements was made even more difficult for an athlete. According to the experience of student athletes, teachers knowing of or about athletes, or having done sport themselves were far more supportive and tolerant towards athletes. Therefore it is easier for athletes to perform and perform better on the courses of these professors.

The academic requirements student athletes have to fulfil are the same for all students at the university regardless of their athletic engagements. The support may be given to athletes by teachers and professors provide them with scheduling flexibility; they may be exempt from classes or set individual framework for completion of the given requirements. This requires athletes to take responsibility and be committed to their academic activities. In connection with this issue, a 25-year-old male athlete (2nd on world ranking list in his sport) mentioned the following:

"The professor informs me about the terms and requirements that I keep in mind to complete of course. I know that I should not forget. The professor gave me some support so I feel obligated to give something in return."

As mentioned, there are some among the athletes who do not use the benefits provided by the university and do not particularly need that teachers know about their athletic career and achievements. These athletes feel that they can manage the balance of academic and athletic requirements without much difficulty. It shall be mentioned that this successful coordination show a pattern by sport, by number of training sessions, which need further exploration.

Moreover, interview results revealed that student athletes' academic performance is also supported by their peers. In lot of cases peers provide athletes with notes or exam topics, and sometimes joint study sessions. Based on the responses

it can be concluded that student athletes feel that they are respected and looked up by their peers. Due to athletes' different schedules, interests, and responsibilities they rather make friends inside the athletic circle, and spend more time with other athletes. The relationship between athletes and peers is also influenced by the number of students in a class. If there are less students on a course, relationships seem to be formed easier as students get to know each other faster which help to build personal relationships.

Furthermore, the interview also targeted to gather information about the perceived role of sports club and coaches by student athletes. Naturally, the achievements and athletic success are influenced – among others- by the support of the sport club and the coach. The athletes interviewed also highlighted that in their dual endeavours a relationship based on mutual acceptance and trust between an athlete and a coach is extremely important. It creates a backup but fundamental source of support to achieve and maintain the balance. According to the responses, the majority of coaches have a positive attitude and support athletes' dual career ambitions. This is reflected in athletes' training schedules intended to be built around their academic responsibilities, or in reduced training hours or occasions. Among coaches of interviewed athletes there are some who are considered to be real educators as they call athletes' attention to risk connected to athletic careers and emphasize the importance of education based on also their personal experience. This thought is supported by the answer of a sophomore World- and European Champion female athlete:

"My coach always told us that the athletic career will not last in our entire life, so we have to do it and love it until we can, but after that we have to go and find a work. He has always said that studying alongside sport is possible."

The type of sport – if it is an individual or team sport – has a strong influence the implementation of dual athletic and academic careers. In case of team sports, coaches do not have much space for flexible solutions or compromises due to fixed training times, the number and diversity of team members. As interview results show, skipping a training session (due to academic reasons) in a team sport, may result in less playing time on upcoming games, or even in a drop-out from the starting team. Therefore, more athletes in team sports consider applying individual study schedules to avoid class attendance. This support instrument, therefore, allows the participation on training sessions for team athletes, thus, continuous athletic development and achievements.

3. Consideration of Length and Conditions of Elite Athletic Career

Athletes' decision about athletic career termination is influenced by several factors, such as the type of sport. In terms of the age of an athletes the peak of athletic career, the age for best individual achievement differs in various sports. For instance, due to sport-specific requirements and rules athletes in gymnastics or ice-skating can reach their peak of athletic career relatively early age. In case of other disciplines, such as long-distance running, fencing or badminton, the peak might be reached in a later age. According to the opinion of a marathon runner interview participant, which is also supported other research findings; the most optimal time for individual record in marathon running is between the age of 27 and 32. A female track and field athlete, member of the national junior team, mentioned the option open for return following childbirth and maternity leave.

Besides, athletes are aware that individual anthropometric parameters and physiological capacities are also important. A male athlete in endurance sport reported the following:

"The length of an athletic career also depends on body dimensions, cardio-vascular and regeneration abilities. Also important how an athletic career is carefully built over the years, if it is built at all."

Based on the responses, the time period at the end of the high school years, influenced by the future plans and visions for athletic careers, play a critical role. Also athletes must decide during the mentioned period how and where to continue their studies. Some athletes might prioritize studies over sport, which might lead to the termination of an athletic career. Among influencing factors athletes mentioned family support, parents and later spouses were named critical pillars for maintaining and continuing high performance sport. Moreover, national sport policy and finance of a specific sport were mentioned. Athletes consider the capacities of their sport for reaching athletic excellence internationally and the options for creating a living from sport earnings when making long term decisions about continuation or termination.

According to interview results the most frequently mentioned termination risks that influence the length of athletic career was injury. Even though the athletes reported firm and definite plans in their athletic carers for the next five years, they consider the option of an injury, and consciously prepare for post-athletic life as well. The responses reinforce the importance of short- and long-term plans in an athletic careers and post-athletic occupational possibilities, which may ensure that athletes could manage situations caused by sudden termination as well.

It should be emphasised that the despondence diversify and show a pattern according to characteristics of the sport played and the level of engagement that sport requires from the athlete. These variables include the specifications of the given sport, such as being team or individual sport, a sport on the program of the Olympic Games or not, and the intensity or the characteristics of international competition systems by sports. Also, the success level of athletes in their specific sport, the number and the amount of training a day and week required indicate a significantly influence. In addition, the chosen major and faculty of the university seem to be a key factor. Athletes studying in sport-related fields seem to face fewer struggles with their studies than those taking up other majors not relevant to sport (Lenténé Puskás-Perényi, 2014). Student-athletes' objectives and ambitions at a given period reported to be affected by the competition systems and their timing of different sports.

SUMMARY

As part of a more comprehensive research on dual careers in sport this study explored the factors that play important roles for student athletes in realizing career ambitions and objectives. It also aimed to reveal the experiences and perceptions of athletes concerning regulative sport policy of an institution in higher education, specifically, the University of Debrecen. This study also searches for sport related variables that may influence the course and the termination of top athletic careers with the goal of using this information in the development of a questioner research instrument.

Paralel with the findings of previous studies (Fernandez et al., 2005; Alfermann-Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Aquilina, 2013) the results of this study show that student athletes in higher education find dual career development necessary in their lives and they are taking responsibility for both their athletic career and post-athletic occupation. Therefore, they are making an effort to prepare consciously for the post-athletic life. The successful realization of career objectives, however, is extensively influenced by the characteristics, type and level of sport played by the athletes, and also by the chosen major at the university. Furthermore, it was found that goal setting and coordination strategies are necessary to be developed by elite athletes in order to successfully maintain athletic performance and complete academic requirements. Matching the two fields needs effective time management. In terms of the external environmental, among the affecting factors of athletic career, the different forms of supportive instruments provided by the institution, the contact-system developed between teachers and students, and the role of coaches were found to be dominant. The qualitative methodology used in this present study served as an effective tool for the development of questionnaire research instrument serving future quantitative data collection.

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