



## Exploring the perceived effectiveness of a life skills development program for high-performance athletes



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore attitudes towards, experiences of, and perceived effectiveness of a life-skills programme for high-performance young athletes from multiple perspectives, including the athletes, coaches, parents, programme facilitators, and sport administrators. Six focus groups were conducted with 54 high-performance athletes from six sports: squash, softball, baseball, netball, triathlon, and surfing. Three focus groups were conducted with parents ( $n = 8$ ) of athletes and a further eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches ( $n = 4$ ) and lead facilitators ( $n = 4$ ) of the life-skills programme. Four semi-structured interviews were also held with representatives from State Sporting Associations (SSAs) from the sports involved. Thematic content analysis revealed seven main themes: *achieving balance and managing stress, time management, goal setting, confidence and control, information overload and repetition, credible role-models, coach reinforcement and follow-up*. The programme was perceived to be moderately successful in developing adaptive behaviours and motives including better engagement in training and in adopting time management and planning skills in contexts outside of sport such as homework and academic study. The programme also fostered the development of skills, attitudes, and motives important for sport success such as goal setting and having confidence to succeed. To improve the effectiveness of such programmes, more emphasis should be placed on the practice of, and engagement with, applied techniques to develop skills with less emphasis on information giving and theory. Facilitators of programmes should also be more pro-active in involving parents and coaches as a way to improve continuity and provide post-program reinforcement and support.

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### Introduction

Youth sport programmes have been recognized to have a positive impact on youth development through helping young athletes to learn about themselves and to develop life skills (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005). Life skills may include physical (e.g., healthy diet), behavioural (e.g., goal setting), or cognitive (e.g., self-talk) aspects (Danish, Taylor, Hodge, & Heke, 2004). The domain of sport has been recognized as a good context for fostering and developing life-skills and an appropriate medium to promote positive youth development (Goudas &

Giannoudis, 2008; Tremayne & Tremayne, 2004). Positive youth development may be fostered in sport through “being taught skills, values, and virtues that help them during adolescence which can also help them thrive throughout life” (Jones & Lavalley, 2009, p. 160). There is evidence to suggest that many of the skills required to succeed in sport are transferable to other life contexts. These skills include problem solving, time management, goal setting, coping with success and failure, and performing under pressure (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Danish et al., 2004). In the present study, we adopted Gould and Carson’s (2008) definition of life-skills as “those internal personal assets, characteristics, and skills such as goal-setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work that may be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred in non-sport settings” (p. 60).

Several youth sport programmes have been developed to foster both life and sport skills and promote personal, social and sport development. Sport United to Promote Education and Recreation

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(known as SUPER) is one example of a life skills programme in sport (for a full description see [Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005](#)). The aim of the SUPER programme is to provide participants with the skills to overcome barriers, set goals and think positively. Research has supported the effectiveness of the SUPER programme in increasing knowledge of and confidence in using goal setting, overcoming barriers, and thinking positively ([Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007](#); [Goudas, Dermitzaki, Leondari, & Danish, 2006](#); [Papacharisis, 2005](#)). In a variation of the SUPER programme, [Papacharisis et al. \(2005\)](#) assessed young athletes in sport skills and typical self-regulation skills (i.e., goal setting, positive self-talk, problem solving). The intervention resulted in successful changes in athletes' adoption of sport skills, and improved confidence to apply life skills relative to athletes in the control group. A second study on physical education students also demonstrated effectiveness in relation to gains and retention on physical fitness (measured by sit-and reach and push-up tests), knowledge and self-beliefs regarding goal setting compared to a control group ([Goudas et al., 2006](#)).

A similar programme, *Going for the Goal*, has demonstrated success in increasing intrinsic motivation for school work and improvements in self-esteem ([Hodge, Creswell, Sherburn & Dugdale, 1999](#)). Two large studies involving between 350 and 479 middle school students respectively have also evaluated the *Going for Goal* programme ([O'Hearn & Gatz, 1999; 2002](#)). Findings from the first demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge of goal setting skills and a significant increase in goal attainment ([O'Hearn & Gatz, 1999](#)). The second study also revealed significant improvements in problem solving skills following the GOAL programme. The *Play It Smart* programme, developed by [Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius, and Presby \(2004\)](#), aimed to improve adolescent athlete's academic, athletic and personal development. Results demonstrated grade point increases, increased participation in community volunteering and increased knowledge and use of health enhancing behaviours. Finally, in the *First Tee* programme, participants referred to ways in which they could transfer life skills learned and developed in programme to non-sport settings ([Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008](#)). A recent evaluation of The First Tee also demonstrated that strategies learned during the intervention, in particular, coping with negative thoughts and emotions, were used both on and off the golf course ([Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla, Bolter, & Price, 2013](#)). Specifically, the skills and strategies that were successfully transferred to other life domains included STAR (stop, think, anticipate, respond) and the 4 R's (Replay, relax, ready and redo).

A limitation of these studies is that no direct measures of life skills were taken and there is considerable evidence that knowledge and motivation alone do not necessarily result in subsequent behaviour change (e.g., [Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2005](#); [Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014](#); [Snihotta, Premeau, & Araújo-Soares, 2014](#)). A similar point has been echoed by [Hodge, Danish, and Martin \(2013\)](#) stating that most evaluations of life skills interventions give “no indications that either knowledge can be applied or that the self-beliefs resulted in actual behaviour change” (p. 1131). Another gap in the literature on life skills interventions is the inclusion of high level performance athletes, and this is a strength of the current study. In one of only a few studies that have conducted with high-level athletes (at least county level, some international), [Jones, Lavallee, and Tod \(2011\)](#) reported improvements in perceived use of communication and organizational skills in sport. However, the study by [Jones et al. \(2011\)](#) did not explore whether participants transferred life skills across to other life domains. A particular strength of the current study is its focus on whether participants use life skills taught on the programme in other life domains outside of sport. Following research demonstrating the

effectiveness of life skills interventions through sport, more recent work has attempted to identify which life skills are most needed by young athletes. In a survey of high school coaches, [Gould, Chung, Smith, and White \(2006\)](#) found that poor communication skills, a lack of motivation and discipline, and failure to take responsibility were the main areas that required development in young athletes and would lead to better personal and social outcomes. A further study used focus groups to explore the life skill needs of adolescent athletes from a range of perspectives including coaches, parents, student-athletes and sport directors ([Gould, Carson, Fifer, Lauer, & Benham, 2009](#)). The life skill issues identified as important included: dealing with increased pressure, handling unhealthy parental involvement, restructuring inappropriate attitudes about winning and the meaning of success, and resisting pressures to use and abuse tobacco, alcohol and drugs. In order to meet these demands, and keep the life skills programmes focused on adaptive outcomes of to athletes, [Gould and Carson \(2008\)](#) suggested that a robust life skill set would include time and stress management skills, character development and decision making skills, communication skills, leadership skills, links to positive adult and peer role models, and general confidence and self-efficacy. In a more recent study with those who coach young athletes, [Vella, Oades, and Crowe \(2011\)](#) found that coaches saw themselves as responsible for the development of many positive outcomes in athletes including character, competence, confidence, psychological capacities, connection, and life skills. It's noteworthy to point out that the theme of life skills was the second most frequently cited outcome fostered by coaches with character being their most frequently cited intended outcome. Another study involving coaches in high school and community settings found that self-confidence and respect were the most frequently reported life skills taught by the coach ([Trottier & Robitaille, 2014](#)). The addition of life skill components indicates a shift in focus from purely sporting outcomes towards a more holistic approach to coaching young athletes.

The present study aimed to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of a life-skills programme, known as *Developing Champions (DC)*, which focuses on the key aspects of life skills deemed as important in previous work ([Gould & Carson, 2008](#)). The DC programme was developed through a partnership between the Department of Sport and Recreation (DSR), a division of the state Government of Western Australia, and the Western Australian Institute of Sport (WAIS) as a life skills programme for emerging high-performance young athletes. The population of athletes is school-age children and adolescents and therefore need to balance the challenges of regular practice and training, competition, and stress demands of their sport alongside those of their academic work, and social and family relationships. Research has identified that learning to deal with increasing pressure and expectations and counteracting inappropriate attitudes and expectations about winning and the meaning of success are key life skill issues and concerns faced by today's high school athletes ([Gould et al., 2009](#)). This makes the target population of high-performance athletes a primary target group for life skills interventions such as the DC programme that aims to assist athletes in coping with the demands of their lifestyle as a high-performance athlete and also provide them with skills to effectively manage their time and emotions and improve coping skills. The DC programme was designed to help develop psychological skills in young high-performance athletes and provide them with key self-regulation and coping skills to perform at their best in sport, whilst maintaining a balance between sport, academic studies and a social life. The aim of the DC programme is to assist aspiring young athletes to engage in adaptive behaviours in sport (e.g., training, competition) and outside of sport (e.g., home, school, and social life) and make positive decisions, which will enable them to successfully enter and then progress along the

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