



Pressures to perform: An interview study of Australian high performance school-age athletes' perceptions of balancing their school and sporting lives



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 December 2012

Received in revised form 13 June 2013

Accepted 19 June 2013

Keywords:

School-age athlete
High performance sport
Perceptions
Pressures
Dual life
Australian

ABSTRACT

High performance school-age athletes struggle to balance the demands of their sporting and educational roles. They are like “hyphenated” individuals striving to deal with more than one life. This investigation examines the views of talented athletes who are full-time school students to elicit their perspectives of how they deal with the pressures to perform in these two different arenas. Previous published research on this topic has not included athletes' views or “given voice” to school-age high performance athletes' perceptions of how they balance two full-time lives. This study incorporated a cross-sectional design using qualitative techniques in an interpretivist paradigm. Data collection was through interviews using Livescribe™ pen. NVivo 9.2™ was used to analyse interviews from nine current and 10 former school-age high performance athletes ($n = 19$) across a range of sports. Findings were categorised into five themes: physical, social, educational, psychological and economic issues. In particular participants in this study identified specific problems they experienced with physical and social issues of: tiredness, nutritional awareness, procrastination, and personal sacrifices. All participants indicated they wanted to pursue both their education and sport, reinforcing the *Element* theoretical construct that doing both connects their sense of identity, purpose and well-being. Implications for policy and practice in schools and in sports are discussed with a view to identifying the characteristics that define an ‘athlete friendly school’. Research findings from this study also provide suggestions about how these young athletes, their parents, and teachers can optimise the dual-demands and pressures on these athletes' lives.

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1. Introduction

There were 17 school-age athletes in the Australian London Olympic team (Australian Olympic Committee, 2012). This is the highest number of school-age athletes included in an Australian Olympic team since the start of the modern Olympics in 1896 (Chatziefstathiou, 2007). The increasing number of such children in Australian high performance sport is a reflection of a national trend. For example, the Australian Sport Commission (ASC) reported that a total of 700 Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) scholarships were awarded to high performance athletes in 26 sports in 2012 (ASC, 2012). Four hundred and seventy three of these scholarships were awarded to school-age athletes in that year compared to only 142 being awarded to school-age athletes in 2005 (ASC, 2012; Eggin, 2006). All of these athletes were under 18 years of age and expected to fulfil their requirements as school students and as high performance athletes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). The term

high performance school-age athlete is used to define these people. This term reflects the theoretical construct of the “hyphenated individual” (Fine & Sirin, 2007) being those individuals who have two to three lives around their ‘hyphen’. This investigation had the same aim as the Fine and Sirin study which was to give voice to, and develop understandings of, these ‘hyphenated’ young people.

Previous literature on this topic has identified a number of potential and anticipated problems, primarily with regard to the challenges of managing two full-time roles and the potential impact this situation may have on the athlete (Radtke & Coalter, 2007). The first of these problems was time availability and management (Penney & Hay, 2008). Meeting and handling the demands of training and performing, and those of the school curriculum is a function of time management (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Other challenges facing these athletes include the need for them to develop exceptional social cognitive and organisational skills at a young age to accommodate both their academic and sporting demands (Burden et al., 2004; Cheng et al., 2006; Finney, 2001; Gurkan, 2009; Helsen, Starkes, & Van Winckel, 1998; McKenzie, Hodge, & Caranachan, 2003; Palmer, 2010; Penney & Hay, 2008; Radtke & Coalter, 2007; Walshaw, 2010). Anderson and Butzin (1974) have

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suggested that fatigue resulting from training and competition demands may temper athlete motivation to engage in a high level of academic undertaking. Another problem experienced for many was travel (Spillane, 2009). This is also a considerable financial and time constraint for families, especially those from rural and remote areas when accessing training and sporting venues (Fabiansson & Healey, 2007; Spillane, 2009). Social factors can also impact on these athletes. Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) conducted a study on the Norwegian Olympic Youth Team ($n = 29$, aged 14–17, sport: handball, track and field, swimming, and judo). They investigated how participants experienced competitive and organisational stress during the European Youth Olympic Festival in July 2007 and how these athletes coped with stressors. The findings from this study revealed the need for “social support for adolescent athletes, and underlined the importance of a good coach–athlete relationship in order to perform well and enjoy the competitive experience” (p. 694).

Financial pressures faced by parents and felt by high performance school-age athletes also relate to the costs associated with registration fees, equipment, competing and training (Berger, O'Reilly, Parent, Séguin, & Hernandez, 2008; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Several researchers have linked these financial pressures to the secondary issue of being ‘time-poor’ (Crawford, 2009; Olds et al., 2004). These authors state that being time poor is a greater problem for parents with low incomes because they have to work more hours to raise necessary funds. This then results in less time to support their children in being available to drop off, pick up and attend all the training and competitions expected for their child. Mixing with adult athletes has also been identified as a problem for athletes still at school (Coleman, 2009). High performance school-age athletes often train with adult squad members, and perhaps of greater concern, to mix with them in adult social environments (Mullis, Byno, Shriner, & Mullis, 2009). This has sometimes resulted in exposure to inappropriate use of alcohol and drugs, occurrences of sexual misbehaviour and even sexual abuse (Coleman, 2009). The unfortunate outcomes of such exposure include the younger athletes’ inability to cope with training and school commitments, and with what would be regarded as normal social behaviour for someone of their age (Weiss, 2002; Wilson, Stavros, & Westberg, 2008). Similarly, there have been reports of high performance athletes being bullied at school. Atkinhead (2009) revealed how Tom Daley an artistic diver who won gold at the European championships, was bullied on his return to school. The extent of this bullying was so stressful for Tom that he moved to another school.

Despite studies investigating the issue of balancing school and sporting commitments, the athletes’ views of how they combine their dual endeavours are not evident in existing research publications. Hence the research question underpinning this study revolved around how these high performance school-age athletes cope with the full-time demands of high performance sport, schoolwork, and the other demands of adolescent development. In particular, the aim of this study was to examine school-age athletes’ personal views about their dual lives. It was hypothesised that their perspectives would lead to more comprehensive indications of how best to support such athletes at school, at home and within their sporting roles. The published empirical research around the topic has taken a problem-centred approach but the uniqueness of this study was to listen to what the athletes themselves said about their lives.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Nineteen participants were selected for in-depth interviews in this study. Of these, nine were current (C) and 10 were former (F)

Table 1
Demographics of current school-age athletes (6 = females:3 = males).

Participant	Schooling model	Age	Gender	Sporting attributes
C1	Government	16	F	NTID ^a Kayaking
C2	Specific pathway	17	F	Age level Dance
C3	Non-Government	15	F	Age level Gymnastics
C4	Non-Government	17	F	National Surf Life Saving
C5	Non-Government	17	F	International Ocean Ski Paddling
C6	Non-Government	15	F	Age level Swimming
C7	In-school scholarship Government	15	M	Age level Rugby League
C8	In-school excellence Non-Government	17	M	Age level Water Polo
C9	Home schooled	17	M	International Surfing

^a NTID: National Talent Identification squad.

high performance school-age athletes. The nine current athletes were still at school and aged between 15 and 17 years (participants C1 to C9). The 10 Former athletes were those that had left school, i.e. over 18 (participants F1 to F10). The nine current athletes (C1 to C9) still at school competed in a variety of high level sports including, surfing, water polo, rugby league, swimming, ocean ski paddling, surf lifesaving, gymnastics, dance and kayaking (Table 1). Six of these athletes were from individual sports and three were from team sports. One unexpected participant in this group was a 17-year-old home-schooled athlete who provided a very different perspective with regard to schooling issues compared to other current participants. The 10 former athletes (F1 to F10) had left school, were all over the age of 18 and were able to provide their reflective experiences of being a high performance athlete whilst at school. The 10 former school-age athletes had been involved in a variety of sports including surf lifesaving, water polo, rugby league, royal lifesaving, swimming, soccer, sailing, surfing and kayaking (Table 2). Committing these athletes to interview was difficult as they had extremely hectic schedules, often combining high level sport with other demands such as family, sponsorship and work. For example, one interview of an adult surf lifesaving iron woman had to be conducted on the beach where she was training. All participants gave consent based on full information provided, and the promise of being de-identified. To that end all participants have been coded numerically.

Table 2
Demographics of former school-age athletes^a (6 = females:4 = males).

Participant	Schooling model	Gender	Sporting Attributes
F1	Government	M	Water Polo: Olympic level
F2	Government	M	Kayaker: Olympic level
F3	Government	F	Surf Life Saving: International
F4	Non-Government	F	Surfing: World Champion
F5	Government	M	Sailing: International level
F6	In-school scholarship Government	F	Association Football: International level
F7	In-school Excellence Government	F	Royal Life Saving: International
F8	Non-Government	F	Surf Life Saving: National level
F9	Non-Government	F	Swimmer: Olympic level
F10	In-school scholarship Government	M	Rugby League: International

^a All over 18 years of age.

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