



Searching for an optimal balance: Dual career experiences of Swedish adolescent athletes



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The paper presents a national level Swedish project aimed at examining adolescent student-athletes' dual career experiences (including sport, studies, and private life) during their first year at national elite sport schools (Swedish abbreviation RIGs will be used) with a particular focus on development of their athletic and student identities. The developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003) served as underlying frameworks.

Design: A longitudinal mixed-method research design was used with autumn-to-spring quantitative and qualitative parts.

Method: Sixteen year old student-athletes, representing 27 sports and 33 RIGs ($n = 261$ in the first and $n = 250$ in the second measurement), completed three quantitative instruments. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 participants.

Results: Results revealed (a) significant changes in the participants' transition/adaptation variables from the first to the second measurement accompanied by rather high perceived quality of adjustment at RIG both at the beginning and at the end of the educational year; (b) significant contributions of the transition variables to the perceived quality of adjustment with personal resources as a key predictor; (c) significantly higher athletic than student identity in both quantitative measurements, but with inter- and intra-individual differences with regard to balancing the two shown by the qualitative data.

Conclusions: The study contributes to deeper understanding of dual career experiences of Swedish adolescent athletes; the authors provide recommendations for psychological dual career support services at RIGs and outline future research in the Swedish dual career model.

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The basic idea of the Swedish sports system is that elite athletes should be able to proceed with a normal life in society once their sporting careers are over.

[Swedish government bill, Prop. 1998/99:107.](#)

Athletes invest into athletic careers during several decisive periods of their age-related and life career development ([Stambulova](#)

& Wylleman, 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and therefore they should be assisted with maximizing benefits of their sport participation (e.g., physical, psychological, social) and compensating for its potential costs (e.g., one-sided development, sacrifices in other spheres of life, injuries). Dual career (i.e., combining sport and education, sport and work) has proven to be a good solution for balancing sport and other spheres of athletes' life and preparing them for the life after sport. In athlete career literature searching for (and obtaining) an optimal balance between sport and other spheres of life is shown (directly or indirectly) to be a factor in preventing athletic dropout and athletic identity foreclosure (e.g., Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Lindner & Johns, 2004; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) and a strategy in coping with the junior-to-senior transition (e.g., Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008; Stambulova, 1994,

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2009; Stambulova, Franck, & Weibull, 2012), the transition to higher level training environments (Poczwardowski, Diehl, O’Neil, Cote, & Haberl, 2013; Verkooijen, Van Hove, & Dik, 2012), and the transition to the post-athletic career (see an overview in Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). In addition, in talent development research it is emphasized that successful athletic talent development environments and their organizational cultures highly support and facilitate athletes’ sport-education balance (Henriksen, 2010).

Analysis of career research in 19 countries around the world undertaken in the recent book “Athletes’ careers across cultures” and a critical review of international career research through the cultural lens (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014) led the authors to formulate a cultural praxis of athletes’ careers paradigm as a set of six major challenges for the future career projects. Among them the two challenges – a holistic perspective (i.e., combining a whole person, a whole career, a whole environment approaches) and careful positioning of the projects in relevant socio-cultural contexts – are of particular importance for the dual career research to avoid narrow focused (e.g., only on student-athletes’ athletic identity) and culture blind projects. The authors (2014) also analyzed various cultural discourses in career research and found the dual career topic being visible in the North American and Australian, and now also in the European career research traditions. Increased interest in the dual career topic in Europe has been stimulated by the recent document “The EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes” (2012). In these Guidelines, national stakeholders are provided with a minimal standard for athletes’ dual career arrangements in the EU countries (e.g., cross-sectorial and inter-ministerial approach at national level, dual career support services on all the dual career stages) and encouraged to develop national dual career guidelines adapted to their respective cultures and based on national research exploring current dual career system and ways for its further development. Keeping in mind that a focus of this paper is on the national level Swedish project dealing with student-athletes’ dual career experiences, several issues relevant to Swedish dual career research, practice and policies are briefly outlined below.

First, dual career practice in Sweden has started much earlier than related research, and was initially stimulated by media narratives about elite athletes who experienced adaptation difficulties upon retirement (Eriksson, 2007). To decrease the risk of athletes’ retirement crises, the Swedish Sports Confederation established national elite sport schools (RIGs) where talented adolescent athletes of about 16–18 years old could practice sport, go to school, and live on campus⁵. Since the 1970s when the first RIGs were established, the Swedish RIG-system has expanded and was complemented by a number of regional and local certified sport schools that are closer to the athletes’ homes and allow them to live with their families and stay in their sport teams/clubs. Currently, the RIG-system consists of 51 RIGs across the country (Stambulova & Johnson, 2013) with some RIGs being specific to one sport and others covering several sport disciplines. The RIG-system is a main avenue for athletes to reach the Swedish national/Olympic teams. For example, eight Swedish Olympic gold medalists in Sochi-2014

(men’s and women’s skiing relay teams) are former RIG student-athletes. All RIGs also provide educational programs allowing the students to proceed to the university level after graduation. Therefore, the RIG-system can be defined as a network of dual career programs facilitating adolescent Swedish athletes’ combination of sport and studies.

Second, the dual career research in Sweden that has been “delayed” compared to the dual career practice at RIGs is aimed at the evaluation of the existing RIG-system and providing recommendations on how to improve it. This research has progressed in relation to the *winning in the long-run* philosophy developed by the Swedish Sports Confederation. In this philosophy the *long-run* implies athletes’ future when retiring from sports and the *winning* means to retire being well prepared for it. The basic tenet of the *winning in the long-run* is to facilitate athletes’ careers in sport and life in a socially responsible manner. That is, to provide idiosyncratic, flexible, and competent support to talented athletes, so that they can realize their potential not only as athletes, but also as individuals to become competent and valued members of the society (Lindahl, 2011; see also the epigraph). Currently, *winning in the long-run* can be seen as an underlying philosophy of the RIG-system in Sweden.

Third, the particular importance of research on athletes’ dual careers at the RIG-level can be explained by the stage in adolescent athletes’ athletic careers as well as in their psychological, psychosocial and academic development (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). In sport, 16–18 year old athletes approach or begin their junior-to-senior transition. This transition is known for its challenging nature and high dropout rate partly due to a difficulty in combining sport with other roles and activities in life (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2012; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014; Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004). In their psychological development adolescent athletes face exploring and constructing their self-identities and planning for the future (e.g., Lally & Kerr, 2005). In their psychosocial development they learn about how to maintain and benefit from their relationships with peers, coaches, and parents (e.g., Smith, 2007; Wylleman, De Knop, Verdet, & Cecić Erpic, 2007). In academic development they make a transition to a higher and more challenging level in education. Therefore, the RIG-system is seen as a solution to keeping the talented athletes in sport, while providing them with an opportunity to get good education and become *winners in the long-run* able “to proceed with a normal life in society once their sporting careers are over” (see the epigraph).

International dual career research (e.g., Aquilina, 2013; Elbe & Beckmann, 2006; Emrich, Fröhlich, Klein, & Pitsch, 2009; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, & Visscher, 2009; Wylleman, Reints, & Wanter, 2007) and relevant Swedish studies (e.g., Engström, 2011; Gustavsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007; Lund & Olofsson, 2009; Uebel, 2006) have examined adolescent athletes’ dual career experiences and demonstrated both the benefits and the costs of combining sport and studies during the adolescent years. Among the benefits the authors mentioned balanced lifestyle, reduced life stress, multiple personal identities protecting athletes from one-sided development, positive effects on athletes’ self-regulation, positive socialization effects, better career/retirement planning, and higher employability after sports, to name a few. At the same time, many situational conditions (e.g., financing, quality of coaching and teaching staff involved, organizational policies and cultures) influence whether dual career programs actually provide these benefits or contribute to potential dual career costs (e.g., student-athletes’ overload and an increased risk of injuries, overtraining

⁵ Living conditions for student-athletes at RIGs vary: some students live on campus in single or double rooms, and others live in rented apartments alone or together with other students (all necessary equipment is available in the apartments or on the campus). School lunch in Sweden is free for all and organized by schools, whereas breakfasts and dinners can be the students’ own responsibility. RIGs are financed by the Swedish Sports Confederation, Sport Federations, the Swedish School authority organization (Skolverket), and local communities. Parents don’t pay (i.e., money is not an issue) but they traditionally keep in touch with the student-athletes. Distance from home varies from student to student.

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