



Personal characteristics as predictors for dual career dropout versus continuation – A prospective study of adolescent athletes from German elite sport schools



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The primary objective of this study is to identify the personal characteristics that predict dropout versus continuation among dual career athletes from different sports who attend sports schools. These schools provide an optimal environment for combining an academic education with a sports career.

Methods: At the end of the school year, all 10th graders (52 girls, 73 boys) from five out of six sports schools in Saxony, Germany, completed a standardised questionnaire that measured personal characteristics deemed important for a successful career – personality traits (Freiburger Persönlichkeitsinventar – FPI), goal orientation (Sport Orientation Questionnaire – SOQ), and volitional skills (Volitional Components in Sport – VKS). In addition, demographic and sport-related data were collected. One year later, at the end of 11th grade, all participants again completed the questionnaire.

Results: At Time 2, 37 athletes (29.6%) had dropped out of their sport career, and 88 athletes were still pursuing their sport career. A majority of the dropouts were from individual sports ($n = 31$) and were females ($n = 23$). A logistic regression analysis of physical complaints (higher for dropouts), win motivation and self-optimisation (each lower for dropouts) as significant covariates correctly classified 65% of the dropouts and 92% of the non-dropouts.

Conclusions: Personal characteristics, motivation and volition in particular, played important roles for those adolescent athletes who remained active in their sport. Accordingly, it is suggested that young athletes receive psychological training focused on these specific personal characteristics.

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While pursuing a career in sports can be an exhausting and time-consuming task, at the same time, it is an exciting and enjoyable experience. For those in youth sports, the main challenge is to balance a dual career, i.e., that of a student and an athlete. This challenge means that young athletes have to combine their training and competition with school or another form of academic education. As this task is quite demanding, the topic has resulted in the recent publication of “EU-guidelines on dual careers of athletes” (EU Expert Group “Education and Training in Sport”, 2012), a document that offers recommendations on how to help athletes attain the goal of a dual career.

Even though the concept of a dual career has a longer tradition in American college sports, research on European dual career

athletes, which is scarce, has recently become an area of interest. For instance, Lupo et al. (2015) developed a questionnaire on motivation and administered it to 524 European student athletes. The three subscales the questionnaire measured were student athletic motivation; motivation to pursue a professional career in sports; and motivation toward academic-related tasks (academic motivation). The results indicate no differences with respect to gender, but do show differences between nations (e.g., higher professional career motivation among Slovenian respondents compared to Italian participants) and between performance levels. The questionnaire may be a valuable tool for future research that examines the motivational profile of dual career athletes and could provide advice for sport professionals, coaches in particular, on how to support their athletes' dual careers. Aquilina (2013) conducted an interview study with 18 college and university student-athletes from Finland, France and the UK. These athletes were highly dedicated to their careers and provided reasons for their decisions to pursue a dual career. In particular, the results showed that both

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spheres, sports and education, cannot only be combined but can complement each other, for example, through the physical demands of sport, on the one hand, and the intellectual demands of education, on the other. Dual careers seem to be particularly attractive to those athletes who cannot or are not willing to become professional athletes in order to earn their living from sport. Instead, a bachelor's degree, or something comparable, prepares them for life after their athletic career. Therefore, having the opportunity to earn a college degree, as in American college sports, was regarded by Norwegian soccer players as particularly beneficial (McCormack & Walseth, 2013).

Considering the athletic triangle - athlete, parents, and coach - the EU guidelines note that an athletic career is not only the result of these three social agents in the micro-environment but also a consequence of the wider social environment. Hence, the guidelines are directed primarily towards the social policies of the member states as they should increase the opportunities of athletes to combine education/work and sport. In a recently published book by Stambulova and Ryba (2013), a variety of programmes and solutions for dual-career athletes in different countries are discussed. Additionally, the latest studies on environmental influences on athletes' careers indicate that optimal environments can, at least to some degree, compensate for a lack of personal and social resources (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013).

One example of an optimal environment for adolescent athletes is the sport school, where academic education and competitive sports are combined and jointly supported. Radtke and Coalter (2007) summarise information on sport schools of 10 countries in Europe and overseas. The dropout rates vary considerably among countries. For example, in Sweden, 5–10% per age-class per year dropout from the sport school, while the statistics for Germany suggest higher rates, but lack reliability. Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, and Lindahl (2015) conducted a follow-up study with adolescent dual-career athletes from Swedish sport schools to determine the personal and social resources that can predict the quality of adjustment associated with the transition from a regular school to a sport school. Personal resources were found to be the most important predictors.

In the following prospective study, we chose a sample of young athletes from sport schools in Saxony, Germany, that offer school education through grade 12 (similar to high schools). Upon their successful graduation from a sport school, the athletes have the option to continue with higher education, e.g., attend college or a university. The sport schools do not only provide academic education, but they also provide training and coaching in a variety of sport disciplines. After passing an entrance exam for their particular sport, talented young athletes can enrol in the school and be part of an educational environment whose goal is to support them in their academics as well as in their sport. Therefore, sport schools are expected to encourage athletes to pursue a *dual* career. This means that, in theory, all athletes experience similar conditions in their respective school environments in that the schools' ideologies and facilities are apt to combine sport with academic school education. While it is recognised that every student may perceive the school environment differently, depending on his or her own view, there is reason to believe that there are some similarities in the schools' organisation and goals that should successfully contribute to a dual career of sport and academic education among all students of sport schools. Furthermore, given that there are alternatives to sport schools, namely regular high schools, it is assumed that parents are supporting their young athletes to pursue a dual career as the parents allowed their children to attend an elite school of sport rather than a regular school. Based on the assumption that the participants of our study received parental and school support for

their career, the main differences between the participants were assumed to lie in their personal characteristics. Accordingly, the primary objective of our study was concerned with the pre-conditions of the successful continuation of a dual career with respect to student athletes. More succinctly, are there personal characteristics (personality traits, goal orientation, volitional skills) that may contribute to either dropping out or pursuing a career in sport?

Dropping out from a sport means the premature termination of a sport career before the athlete reaches his or her peak performance level in the respective sport (cf. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). As the age for peak performance in most sports is in early adulthood, career termination in childhood and adolescence is regarded as premature and the athlete is thus categorised as a dropout. In addition, in some studies (e.g., Bußmann & Alfermann, 1994) the athletes are asked to define themselves as dropouts. To date, only a few studies have focused on adolescent or young adult dropouts from elite sports. In a recent review, Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2013) summarised 126 studies over the past four decades of elite athletes regarding their career transitions from sports. Most of the studies were concerned with retirement from sport, and only seven focused on dropping out of a sport and its correlation with the quality of career transition. Two studies reported, "those who terminated their sport career at a younger age expressed higher career transition difficulties" (Park et al., 2013, p. 33). Additionally, six out of seven studies indicated "a negative association between disengagement/dropout experiences and the quality of career transition, and only one showed no association with the quality of career transition" (Park et al., 2013, p. 36).

Studies about dropping out are typically retrospective studies, conducted with former athletes who were perceived as talented and thus belonged to squads or other select groups of athletes. Herein, we will present a *prospective* quantitative study with student athletes from five elite sport schools. As all participants in the study were students of sport schools, the school environment is held as more or less constant. Therefore, we neglected the environment as a factor and instead focused on the personal characteristics of the athletes as predictors.

Talented athletes possess certain personal characteristics necessary, even in optimal environments, for them to excel in their sport. Herein, we focus on these characteristics. First, it is essential that elite athletes develop a physical toughness, one that includes a tolerance for pain (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). Gould et al. emphasised a number of additional characteristics deemed important for a successful career in sports, such as a high degree of achievement motivation, a high level of confidence and a low level of anxiety. The high physical demands of regular training and participation in competitions combined with the athlete's drive for success contribute to the athlete's attitude of toughness regarding his or her own body. In support of this assumption, Bußmann and Alfermann (1994) demonstrated that, compared to non-dropouts, female junior track and field athletes who dropped out not only perceived competitions during their active sport career as less challenging and enjoyable, but they also reported more physical complaints as based on the Freiburg Personality Inventory (FPI) (cf. Fahrenberg, Hampel, & Selg, 2010). Thus, in their study, personality variables contributed to the girls' decisions to continue or discontinue their career in sports. Kotnik, Tušak, Topič, and Leskošek (2012) examined personality variables among Slovenian Olympic athletes, and they, too, administered the FPI, but they did not find the expected gender differences, except with respect to masculinity.

As injuries are a common occurrence among elite athletes, injuries and health concerns are often cited as reasons for career termination, and moreover, such injuries are negatively related to

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