



A British university case study of the transitional experiences of student-athletes



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Within Great Britain, increasing numbers of elite sport performers are attending higher education institutions. The current study presents an exploration of the transitional experiences of these individuals at a specific British university. Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model on transitions faced by athletes and Stambulova's (1997, 2003) athletic career transition model were used to provide the theoretical foundation of inquiry.

Design and method: An instrumental case study design was adopted to provide an in-depth analysis of student-athletes' experiences at a university. The case university was selected based on its provision of elite sport support services. To acquire a holistic understanding, interviews were conducted with current and recently graduated student-athletes from the university, and focus groups were run with university staff (viz. administrators, coaches, and support staff). Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic framework approach.

Results: Elite student-athletes at the British university were found to experience simultaneous athletic, academic, psychological, and psychosocial transitions. To overcome the transitional demands, student-athletes were found to draw on a variety of internal (e.g., self-awareness) and external (e.g., academic flexibility) resources and to implement coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support). Potential barriers to successful transitions were also identified (e.g., parental overprotection).

Conclusions: These findings advance the limited existing literature on British university student-athletes' transitional experiences and suggestions are provided for how other universities can enhance provision for their elite student-athletes.

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Within Great Britain, university student-athletes represent a population of growing interest and importance to sport researchers and policy makers. This elevated attention is due, in part, to the significant number of talented and elite sport performers attending further and higher education institutions (Haley & Saghafi, 2012; Podium, Universities UK, & British Universities & Colleges Sport, 2012) and to the increased awareness of the demands faced by athletes during these years (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). To elaborate, universities are increasingly becoming 'hubs' for athletes as they can provide the support and flexibility that best enable performers to continue

their sporting career (Aquilina, 2013). For example, Aquilina (2013) noted that universities may afford greater access to, and provision of, established support networks, facilities, and flexible academic programs. Furthermore, during the years of 18 and 21 athletes from most sports¹ experience a normative transition from youth to senior aged competitor (Stambulova, 1994) and attempt to become a mastery level performer (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004); a facilitative university environment can aid this development. Indeed, between the 1992 Barcelona and 2012 London Olympic Games, 65% of British gold medalists had been to university (British Universities & Colleges Sport, 2012).

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¹ It is acknowledged that the transition may occur earlier in athletes participating in sports where peak performance is achieved before biological maturity (e.g., figure skating, women's gymnastics).

The simultaneous transitions in academic (i.e., high school to university/college) and athletic development are likely to be stressful for student-athletes as they experience strain from numerous and competing demands (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Petitpas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 2009). The athletic transition from development to mastery performer, for example, may result in an athlete struggling to meet on-field (e.g., training) and off-field (e.g., parent) expectations (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Stambulova, Franck, & Weibull, 2012). Furthermore, the academic transition to higher education may lead to changes in place of residence, increased distance from friends and family, and new personal and academic responsibilities (Lowe & Cook, 2003; MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Academic and athletic transitions are not the only developmental changes to occur at this time, however, as athletes also experience potentially stressful and impactful changes in their psychosocial and psychological development (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). For example, psychosocial transitions occur in the nature of relationships held with parents. More specifically, parents have been shown to provide vital emotional support for athletes traversing difficult transitions during their career (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008); however, when moving to university, an athlete's access to this support may be reduced and parental influence may be replaced by support from other sources (Falls & Wilson, 2013). Late adolescence is also a significant period for psychological development with individuals challenged by various developmental tasks (e.g., accepting one's physique) that shape their self-identity (Rice, 1998). For many student-athletes, sport is likely to play a significant role in this process as their sport involvement intensifies during these years (Coakley, 1993) and their perceptions of the importance of sport has been shown to peak at this time (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985).

A student-athlete's ability to manage and overcome the demands they experience during these concurrent transitions is likely to determine whether they are successful as a senior performer (Bennie & O'Connor, 2006; Hollings, Mallett, & Hume, 2014; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Bennie and O'Connor (2006), for example, found that elite track and field athletes who were able to overcome athletic challenges, such as a lack of initial senior level success, were more likely to remain in sport compared to those who were not. If not coped with effectively, the multifaceted demands faced by student-athletes can also have implications for academic performance, mental health, and psychosocial development (Ferrante & Etzel, 2009). In relation to the issue of psychosocial development, the time commitments associated with athletic pursuits can leave little time for student-athletes to foster and nurture relationships outside of their sporting milieu (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003). Without these broader social networks, student-athletes are more likely to feel and be perceived by others as detached from the rest of the student cohort (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). This separation, in addition to the elevated social position (e.g., celebrity status) often held by student-athletes, may lead to unstable and shallow relationships and, ultimately, social isolation (Ahlgren-Bedics & Monda, 2009; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992).

In light of the multifaceted transitions experienced by student-athletes at this age, and the impact of these changes on their success and psychosocial well-being, it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been growing calls to support these, and other, individuals who opt to continue their sport alongside study or employment (see, e.g., Desprez et al., 2008; Preece et al., 2004). In response to these calls, researchers have increasingly followed Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) holistic approach and examined athletes' transitions in nonsport areas, alongside athletic changes (see, e.g., Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015; Ryba, Stambulova,

Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015). Furthermore, a growing number of researchers (see, e.g., Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2014; Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015) are utilizing career transition explanatory models to explain the factors that influence coping and the subsequent success of a transition. One such model is the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 1997, 2003). Within the model, a transition is depicted as a process comprising of an individual's effort to cope with a set of demands through the mobilization of internal (e.g., an athlete's knowledge) and external (e.g., social support) resources. Hindering a successful transition are barriers (e.g., an athlete's lack of skills, interpersonal conflict). If an individual effectively overcomes the demands, then they are proposed to experience a successful transition. Conversely, ineffective coping will lead to a crisis-transition and will require an intervention.

Despite the increase in transition literature and the development of potentially relevant conceptual models, Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2013) observed that relatively few studies conducted on athletes' transitions in the United Kingdom (UK) have employed a theoretical framework. Notable exceptions sampling university student-athletes are Aquilina (2013) and MacNamara and Collins (2010). MacNamara and Collins (2010) used Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model to inform their interviews with elite British track athletes before and after their transition to university. Similarly, in her multinational study into the opportunities and constraints for dual role athletes, Aquilina (2013) used Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) model to inform the researcher's approach to the interview process. Within both studies, the challenges faced by dual role athletes (e.g., balancing academic, athletic, and social commitments) and the potential resources for managing these demands (e.g., motivation to fulfill potential) were identified. Sampling and reporting issues, however, limit the generalizability of both studies. To illustrate, MacNamara and Collins (2010) interviewed six athletes and triangulated their responses against those provided by significant others and a talent development manager. The study therefore provides a useful insight into the transitional experiences of British track athletes, but it does not encapsulate the experience of student-athletes from other sports at the various universities. Furthermore, although Aquilina (2013) achieved cross-cultural validity through triangulating British student-athletes' responses with individuals from France and Finland, the study is restricted since no information is provided about where the student-athletes were based or whether the opportunities afforded to them were typical across British universities.

The critique made of Aquilina's (2013) study is particularly salient to the understanding of British university student-athletes' experiences because individuals' experiences vary markedly depending on which university they attend. Although high academic standards are expected of students across all British universities, the assistance student-athletes receive to maintain excellence in both academic and athletic domains will vary based on the institution. To elaborate, in 2001, nine multi-sport high-performance centers (HPCs) were established in the UK to support athletes' holistic development and a number of these centers are located on university campuses (English Institute of Sport, 2015). Elite student-athletes who enroll at these institutions are therefore more likely to have access to support and provision (e.g., sport lifestyle advisors) than student-athletes are at other sites (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Indeed, McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004) identified a lack of support and understanding as one of the three areas of concern for elite student-athletes at a 'traditional' British university (i.e., where courses include classics, law, medicine, and science). However, to date, McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis' study represents the only investigation into the experiences of elite student-athletes at a specific British university and a lack of

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