



## Factors impacting carded athlete's readiness for dual careers



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### ABSTRACT

*Objectives:* The purpose of this study was to explore factors impacting New Zealand carded athletes' ability to engage in careers outside their elite sport involvement.

*Design and Methods:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 carded athletes from eight different sporting codes, followed by inductive analysis of emerging key themes. Modified realist tales were then created from each of these narratives to create a detailed and thorough account of athletes' individual and collective experiences within the carding programme.

*Results:* Athletes acknowledged that despite the support on offer as part of the New Zealand Academy of Sport's carded athlete programme, they were still restricted in their ability to undertake careers alongside their elite sport involvement. In particular lifestyle conflicts, career stage and the sport environment were all seen to impact athlete readiness to adopt dual careers, with many athletes feeling unable, or actively discouraged from undertaking activities outside of their sport requirements.

*Conclusions:* This study highlights the need to ensure career assistance programmes actively support and encourage athletes to achieve both personal and athletic success, as well as educate coaches and officials of the benefits of athletes developing interests away from the elite sport environment. Such changes will not only begin to fulfil the sporting potential of gifted athletes, but also achieve the carding system's goal of developing well-rounded individuals who actively engage in dual careers across their sport participation.

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### Introduction

An athlete's career is typically represented by a succession of stages, which reflect the individual's development over time (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). These stages indicate periods of adjustment and are thought to be common, regardless of the athlete's sport, nationality, experience or gender (Cote, 1999; Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004). The successful negotiation of each stage ensures that an individual reaches his or her full athletic potential. The process by which this negotiation occurs therefore describes what is commonly known as an athlete's career development. A number of researchers have examined the developmental steps required to foster a successful athletic career, resulting in the creation of various models depicting the athlete career pathway. Bloom's (1985) seminal work examining talented performers has formed the basis of many of these models. This research shifted emphasis away from the innate parts of talent

development to instead focus on other aspects of the developmental process (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). Consequently, recent theoretical frameworks examining athlete career development have highlighted the lengthy process through which talent is eventually realised. In so doing, these models emphasise a 'life-span', or 'whole career', perspective to athletic involvement (Stambulova, 2010; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

This shift in focus has also acknowledged how transitions, both from within and outside of the sport environment, can impact upon an athlete's career (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). The term transition has been defined as "an event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Although this definition was developed to describe the concept of life transitions, a number of sport researchers have adapted this definition to fit within the athletic setting (e.g. Baillie & Danish, 1992; Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). While Schlossberg's original definition still holds favour, transitions in sport are now viewed in terms of being part of a process of coping rather than a response to one singular situation, event or non-event

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(Stambulova, 2012; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Similarly, as sports career transitions are influenced by both athletic and non-athletic factors, researchers have advocated that they should be considered alongside transitions occurring in all spheres of the athlete's life (Debois et al., 2012; Erpic et al., 2004; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011, 2013). These important developments in the body of athletic career research have meant that athletic transitions are now considered to be part of a multi-dimensional, multi-level and multi-factorial process.

Embracing this approach, Wylleman et al. (2004) crafted an athlete development model that consisted of four interacting layers focussing on athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/vocational development. By incorporating this more balanced view of an athlete's life, Wylleman et al.'s (2004) model recognises the interactive and interrelated nature of transitions. The potential for multiple transitions occurring at any one time can, however, lead to increased levels of stress being placed upon the athlete (Park, Tod, & Lavallee, 2012; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). As such, Wylleman et al.'s (2004) model proposes that an athlete should be viewed as a person doing sports and emphasises the importance of developing the athlete career in conjunction with other spheres within an individual's life. This more holistic focus suggests that sport psychologists should tailor their approach to "reflect the developmental, interactive and interdependent nature of transitions and stages faced by individual athletes" (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, p. 517).

Sport psychologists have long recognised the need to help athletes prepare for and negotiate these sometimes challenging career transitions (Mateos, Torregrosa, & Cruz, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009). In fact, such challenges have been the driving force behind many of the career assistance programmes established across the Globe. Shifting theoretical views have meant that these programmes have increasingly emphasised individuality and are focused on athletic participation as well as the development of dual careers through the provision of lifestyle support and educational/vocational training (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Park et al., 2012; Stambulova, 2012). For instance, the *EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes* (EU Expert Group, 2012) calls for the adoption of national dual career programmes across the European Union, thus facilitating the promotion of holistic development of all elite athletes at home and abroad.

No decrease in athletic performance has been associated with participation in such programmes (Aquilina, 2013; Price, Morrison, & Arnold, 2010). Rather, some studies have actually suggested that developing one's personal and sporting self simultaneously fosters excellence that would not be possible with just a singular focus (Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Henry, 2013; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Price et al. (2010) found that time away from the rigours of competitive sport provided athletes with both mental and physical rejuvenation. Similarly, Aquilina (2013) identified that athletes performed better upon achieving balance outside the elite sport environment. These results challenge the culturally dominant performance discourse and suggest that athletic success is in fact possible when physical training is pursued in conjunction with personal development in a dual career (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Despite such revelations, some athletes remain unwilling to embrace opportunities outside of their sport, instead choosing to divert their energies to those transitions and issues immediately relevant to their lives (Aquilina, 2013; Gorley, Lavallee, Bruce, Teale, & Lavallee, 2001; Kelly & Hickey, 2010; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009). When athletes do however, begin to consider their sporting immortality there is often a marked increase in post-sport career planning (Park et al., 2012). A study by North and Lavallee (2004) found that 79% of elite athletes who believed that they would retire within the next one-two years had

begun to make plans for this retirement. These athletes were also far less likely to want to increase the time they devoted to their training, instead suggesting that work outside their sporting careers was becoming increasingly important. Such research, therefore, indicates that establishing a dual career is important to athletes; however, the age at which this planning begins varies greatly and depends on the career stage of the individual athlete. Additional differences also exist depending on the sport and gender of the individual concerned. Because these factors reveal that athletes approach planning for their retirement differently, the timing of any career development intervention is therefore crucial to its eventual success (Park et al., 2012).

Such results highlight the need to further explore whether current career development programmes are providing adequate resources to meet the demands of each individual's sport experience. As every athlete comes into and leaves the sport environment with different expectations and experiences, it is important that intervention strategies take these individual differences into consideration (Wilding, Hunter-Thomas, & Thomas, 2012). One such intervention is the New Zealand Academy of Sport's (NZAS) carded athlete system. Since its establishment in 2002, Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) and its high performance sport arm, the NZAS, have directly impacted the lives of New Zealand's elite athletes through this talent selection and development programme. Athletes become carded after being identified as talented by their National Sporting Organisations (NSOs). These athletes are then provided with varying levels of access to the NZAS's coaching, career education, sport science, and medical services. A proportion of these athletes are also provided with direct financial assistance to help cover the cost of their training and living expenses. In the year leading up to the 2012 London Olympic Games around six hundred athletes were part of the NZAS carding system (Carded athlete list, n.d.).

Although developed with the intention of ensuring that New Zealand's athletes fulfil their potential both in and out of the sporting context, no research has explored what athletes actually think about the system in which they play a central role. This is perhaps surprising given the impact that such policies can have on the lived experiences of those they affect. Similarly, consideration is yet to address whether the carding programme is indeed promoting athlete growth and development as it suggests. This is important, as while participating in elite sport can be extremely beneficial for many athletes, other individuals may be denied important experiences after prioritising their sport participation over other aspects in their life. Of additional concern is the control that the carding system exerts over New Zealand's talented athlete population. Once part of this system, athletes are confronted with various external pressures and performance expectations which impact on their daily choices. Despite this, SPARC and the NZAS have ignored the significance of such decisions beyond their influence on an individual's athletic potential. It was therefore the focus of the current research project to address some of these outstanding questions. Specifically, the aim of the present study was to examine the experiences of selected New Zealand carded athletes and consider the extent to which SPARC's vision of a holistic athlete was becoming a reality. In so doing, the researcher was particularly interested to hear what factors were impacting carded athletes' ability to engage in careers outside of their elite sport involvement.

## Methods

### Participants

In order to ensure that research participants had sufficient lived experience and knowledge of the entire carding system it was

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