

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE DUAL CAREER OF THE STUDENT-ATHLETE

***María José Maciá-Andreu
María T. Morales-Belando
Lourdes Meroño
Antonio Sánchez-Pato
Juan Alfonso García-Roca***
Editors

 *Dykinson, S.L.*

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Telephone (+34) 91544 28 46 - (+34) 91544 28 69
e-mail: info@dykinson.com
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<http://www.dykinson.com>

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besingsg@gmail.com

The Transition from Sport to the Sport Technology-Oriented Business: A Pathway for the Dual Career of the Student-Athlete

MARÍA JOSÉ MACIÁ-ANDREU¹, CARIDAD HERNÁNDEZ-GUARDIOLA¹,
ALEJANDRO LEIVA-ARCAS^{1,2}, FRANCISCO JOSÉ CÁNOVAS-ÁLVAREZ¹,
SOFÍA TORO PRIETO-PUGA^{1,2}, ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ-PATO³
& JUAN ALFONSO GARCÍA-ROCA^{1,2}

¹ *Facultad de Deporte. UCAM Universidad Católica de Murcia, Spain*

² *Centro de Estudios Olímpicos. UCAM Universidad Católica de Murcia, Spain*

³ *Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud. Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain*

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore current elite athletes' future ambitions, to analyse their interest in receiving professional development education, and to know about their views and preferences about the structure of the developed courses towards sport technology-oriented business. 48 Spanish student-athletes (58.3% women and 41.7% men), completed an online questionnaire of 29 questions (Likert scale, degree of agreement from 1 to 5) developed through the Delphi method. The main results showed that respondents mostly agreed that they had adequate skills to pursue a career after retiring from sport (4.35 ± 0.812) although they would like to receive training for their professional development (4.38 ± 0.672) and that this training should be completely online (43.8%) or a combination of online and face-to-face (41.7%). They would also like to stay and work in the sports industry after retirement (4.21 ± 0.922) and were interested in aspects related to technology and innovation (4.21 ± 0.849) among others. The conclusions found are that there is an interest among athletes to be trained in the sector, through a programme that adapts to the characteristics of their athletic life with online resources.

Keywords: dual career, new technologies in sport, sport business, non-formal learning.

1. Introduction

For elite athletes, combining sporting activities with academic or professional projects is often a challenge, sometimes difficult to achieve. The almost exclusive dedication required by high-level sport makes it difficult for athletes to fit their competition and training schedules with the strict limits of the educational system or the business world (Ryba et al., 2015). As a result, athletes are often faced with the dichotomy of choosing between education and sport (López de Subijana et al., 2015), or between sport and business (Küttel et al., 2020). To address this dilemma, athletes can benefit from the dual career pathway model, whose philosophy is based on the idea of reconciling these realities, following the principles of flexibility and commitment to enable an athlete to study, work and train in equal conditions.

Elite athletes have the potential to succeed in the corporate world (Debois et al., 2015). In the business ecosystem, the personal skills that athletes have developed during their sporting career can add significant value (Geranisova & Ronkainen, 2015). Likewise, networks, patronage or relationships they made can help to successfully launch their career in the labor market (Chambers & Lim, 2022). However, without proper education and training, these skills alone are not sufficient. Hence the importance of completing the dual career, as this methodology favors combining these personal skills with a know-how acquired in quality educational institutions.

Another trait that can be valuable among athletes who choose to enter the job market is an entrepreneurial spirit. High-level sport can provide abilities that are compatible with the demands of starting a business. In this sense, the capacity for sacrifice, defeat management, acceptance of effort or teamwork can benefit an athlete's entrepreneurial capacity (Boyd et al., 2021). Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that the drive for entrepreneurship is absent in most dual career training policies and programs (Moustakas et al., 2022).

Within this framework, the Springboard project has been developed with the aim of promoting entrepreneurship spirit among dual career student-athletes through a training curriculum on technology-oriented entrepreneurship based on a blended learning approach. This project aims to develop and implement a training program that helps elite

athletes to transition from sports to the entrepreneurial ecosystem to foster their successful inclusion in the labor market. At the same time, the project foresees to provide the necessary tools to develop a stable and satisfactory life once their sports career comes to an end.

In light of the above, the overall objective of this research was to analyse the views and interests of elite athletes regarding their transition into the sport technology-oriented business after their sporting retirement and specialised training. The specific objectives were as follows: a) to explore current elite athletes' future ambitions, b) to analyse their interest in receiving professional development education, and c) to know about their views and preferences about the structure of the developed courses towards sport technology-oriented business.

2. Method

This research is descriptive, quantitative and cross-sectional. Study participants gave their consent to participate prior to data collection, and were informed about the research objectives and the confidentiality of the data obtained during the study, in accordance with the code from the World Medical Association and the Declaration of Helsinki. This research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Murcia (CE032108).

2.1. Participants

In this study, 48 Spanish student-athletes participated, of whom 58.3% were women (n=28) and 41.7% men (n=20), and more than half were between 18 and 25 years old (n=25;52.1%), white (91.7%) and with no long-standing illness or disability (95.8%). Concerning their athlete profile, 66.7% of them (n=32) competed in individual sport, the majority had a professional contract and/or compete with the national team (n=38;79.2%) and the biggest competition in which they have taken part was mainly World Championships (33.3%), followed by Olympic/Paralympic Games (22.9%) and European Championships (20.8%). Regarding their education, the majority (56.3%) had a non-

university higher education, almost all of them (91.7%) have received or are receiving training that would allow them to develop a professional career, and just 6.3% of them had the opportunity to receive professional development training, but decided against it (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the sample

Variables		n	%
Gender	Male	20	41.7
	Female	28	58.3
Age	18-25	25	52.1
	26-30	11	22.9
	31-35	5	10.4
	36-40	6	12.5
	More than 40	1	2.1
	Compete in	Individual sport	32
	Team sport	16	33.3
Professional contract and/or compete with the national team	Yes	38	79.2
	No	10	20.8
Biggest sport competition	European Championship	10	20.8
	World Championship	16	33.3
	International Championship	2	4.2
	National Championship	9	18.8
	Olympic/Paralympic Games	11	22.9
Highest qualification	Higher Education degree (Bachelor, Master or PhD)	20	41.7
	Non-university higher education	27	56.3
	High School	1	2.1
Ethnic group	White	44	91.7
	Mixed ethnic background	2	4.2
	Asian	0	0
	Black/African/Caribbean	1	2.1
	Prefer not to say	1	2.1
Long-standing illness or disability that affects or limits day to day activities	No	46	95.8
	Yes	2	4.2
I have received/am receiving training that would allow me to develop a professional career	Yes	44	91.7
	No	4	8.3
I had the opportunity to receive professional development training, but decided against it	Yes	3	6.3
	No	45	93.8

The type of sampling was non-probability by convenience based on the accessibility of the sample and their acceptance to participate in the research. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Over 18 years old.
- Spanish elite athletes.

2.2. Instruments and material

A 29-question online questionnaire was developed to explore current elite athletes' future ambitions (5 questions; agreement Likert scale 1 to 5), their interest in receiving professional development education (9 questions; agreement Likert scale 1 to 5) and their views and preferences about the structure of the developed courses towards sport technology-oriented business (3 questions; multiple choice). The design of the questionnaire was developed through the Delphi method based on the consensus of a group of experts through analysis and reflection on the problem under study. There were 18 experts in student-athlete dual career and technology entrepreneurship from five European countries, of which 11 were working in the field of higher education at university level and 7 were experts from the business industry.

2.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted over a period of six weeks (from 1 November 2021 to 12 December 2021) through an online questionnaire sent to the participants. There was no restriction on participation as long as the participants met the inclusion criteria and there was no academic or financial incentive for them to take part in the study. Similarly, anonymity was guaranteed in the processing and analysis of the data.

2.4. Data analysis

A descriptive analysis was carried out of the quantitative variables (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation). The statistical analysis was performed with the SPSS® Statistics v.27.0 package.

3. Results

The results of this research are presented below, according to elite athletes' future ambitions (5 questions), their interest in receiving professional development education (9 questions) and their views and preferences about the structure of the developed courses towards sport technology-oriented business (3 questions).

The main findings on elite athletes' future ambitions show that they feel they have adequate skills to pursue a career after retiring from sport (4.35 ± 0.812) and that their sporting journey has provided them with assets to pursue a professional career (4.25 ± 0.957). Although the majority agree on having an idea of what they would like to do when they retire from sport (4.17 ± 0.930), this decreases for ideas to develop in business (3.48 ± 0.899) and concerning having sufficient assets to invest in a business (2.60 ± 1.233) (Table 2).

Table 2. Elite athletes' future ambitions

Variables	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree / disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	M±SD
	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	
I have an idea of what I would like to do when I retire from sport	1(2.1)	2(4.2)	5(10.4)	20(41.7)	20(41.7)	4.17±0.930
I have ideas that I would like to develop into a business	1(2.1)	5(10.4)	17(35.4)	20(41.7)	5(10.4)	3.48±0.899
I believe my sporting journey has provided me with assets to pursue a professional career	1(2.1)	2(4.2)	5(10.4)	16(33.3)	24(50.0)	4.25±0.957
I feel that I have adequate skills to pursue a career after retiring from sport	0(0)	2(4.2)	4(8.3)	17(35.4)	25(52.1)	4.35±0.812
I have enough assets if I wanted to invest in business	11(22.9)	12(25.0)	14(29.2)	7(14.6)	4(8.3)	2.60±1.233

In relation to the results about the athletes' interest in receiving professional development education, almost all of them agree that they would like to receive this type of training (4.38 ± 0.672). In this regard, they mostly express their interest in learning how to use social media for professional purposes (4.31 ± 0.748), getting inspiration from other athletes who have developed in the business industry (4.29 ± 0.898) and in aspects related to technology and innovation (4.21 ± 0.849) among others. Regarding their preferences for where they would like to develop their careers when they retire from sport, the majority would like to stay and work in the sport industry (4.21 ± 0.922), with a majority disagreeing with the preference not to work in any sport-related organisation (1.85 ± 1.072) (Table 3).

Table 3. Interest in receiving professional development education

Variables	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree / disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	M±SD
	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	
I would like to receive some professional development training	0(0)	0(0)	5(10.4)	20(41.7)	23(47.9)	4.38±0.672
I would prefer to own a business rather working as an employee	1(2.1)	4(8.3)	21(43.8)	11(22.9)	11(22.9)	3.56±1.009
I would like to learn how I could set up my own business	1(2.1)	2(4.2)	5(10.4)	23(47.9)	17(35.4)	4.10±0.905
I would like to be able to use my sport knowledge to mentor sport businesses	1(2.1)	2(4.2)	6(12.5)	19(39.6)	20(41.7)	4.15±0.945
I get inspired seeing how former athletes have developed in the business industry	1(2.1)	1(2.1)	5(10.4)	17(35.4)	24(50.0)	4.29±0.898
I would be interested to learn how to use social media for professional purposes (LinkedIn, Twitter, Insta, FB)	0(0)	0(0)	8(16.7)	17(35.4)	23(47.9)	4.31±0.748
I am interested in technology and innovation	0(0)	3(6.3)	4(8.3)	21(43.8)	20(41.7)	4.21±0.849
I would like to stay and work in the sport industry when I retire from my sport	0(0)	2(4.2)	10(20.8)	12(25.0)	24(50.0)	4.21±0.922
I would prefer not working in any sport-related organisation	24(50.0)	12(25.0)	9(18.8)	1(2.1)	2(4.2)	1.85±1.072

Finally, with regard to their opinions and preferences about the structure of the courses developed towards sports technology-oriented business, most of them prefer online-only courses (n=21; 43.8%) or a combination of online and on-site (n=20; 41.7%). In relation to the maximum number of hours they can spend per month on these courses, almost half of them say more than six hours (n=23; 47.9%), followed by four to six hours (n=14; 29.2%). Lastly, regarding their learning preferences in terms of how the content is delivered, most of them prefer a combination of videos and practical activities alone or in combination with other resources such as readings and audios (n=27; 56.3%).

4. Discussion

The specific objectives of this study were to explore current elite athletes' future ambitions, to analyse their interest in receiving professional development education, and to know about their views and preferences about the structure of the developed courses towards sport technology-oriented business.

With regard to the first objective, to explore the future ambitions of elite athletes, it was found that the respondents felt that they had the right skills to pursue a professional career after retirement from sport. In relation to this, it is important to remember that, within the study sample, the vast majority claimed to be undergoing training for their future career. In this line, the studies by Tekav et al. (2015) and Torregrosa et al. (2015) found that athletes who opt for a dual career seem to be better integrated, have a more balanced life, tend to find a rewarding job at the end of their sporting career and are more prepared for life after sport. In addition, dual career athletes have a better adjustment to life after retirement, as they plan their sporting retirement better and have better prospects for future employment in a shorter time (European Commission, 2012).

It is contradictory in the results that athletes believe that their sporting career has provided them with assets to pursue a professional career, but consider that they are insufficient to invest in a company or

business, which may be due to the fact that athletes have not known how to manage the assets that their sport has provided them with. One of the external barriers that the athlete may encounter in his or her career transition is external pressure, which can lead to a lack of focus on financial matters. In order to solve this problem, an external resource for the athlete would be his or her ability to accept the support of other people, such as coaches or family members, in this area (Stambulova, 2003).

While the majority of the respondents agreed that they have an idea of what they would like to do when they retire from sport, this decreases in terms of business development ideas. This data is consistent with the results of the 2022 Athlete Solidarity Entrepreneurship Programme, which supported 31 Olympic athletes through the three phases of the programme and where only 11 of the Olympic athletes went on to develop their businesses. In view of the above, and in order for dual career implementation to be successful, it is necessary to consider the athlete from a holistic and multidimensional point of view, where six mutually influencing levels of development are related: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational, financial and legal, where change in one inevitably leads to modifications in the others (Wylleman, 2019).

According to Ratten (2010), entrepreneurship in sport is dynamic and impacts a number of management areas such as business strategy, crisis management, new sport development, management, product innovation, promotional strategies, social issues, sustainability concerns and technological developments. It is therefore not surprising that the entire study sample shows interest in receiving professional training in this area, in technology and innovation and in the use of social media for professional purposes (Véjar, 2021).

The respondents have a preference to pursue a career in the sports industry when they retire and disagree with the idea of not working in any sports or sports-related organisation, which may be related to a high identification of the participants with their sport. In the study of Mudrak (2010), the retirement process and outcomes of the surveyed athletes seem to be closely related to their athletic identity. The impact

of athletic identity was paradoxical, as it represented an important motivational factor that supported individuals' participation in intensive sport practice, but at the same time, it complicated the individual's coping skills during the period following withdrawal from competitive sport. When the athletes in the study felt they had achieved their athletic goals, they remained active as coaches or referees even after their competitive career ended and the negative impact of a strong athletic identity dissipated during the retirement process. However, even for them, the process of retirement from competitive sport, in which they had invested a significant amount of time and effort, was demanding but because they remained active in sport, albeit at a different level, they did not have to significantly change their self-perception and more easily accepted the role of a successful retired athlete. In this regard, emotional problems stemming from a strong athletic identity are quite common in athletes retiring from competitive sport (Lavallee & Robinson, 2006), although several strategies can facilitate a more adaptive withdrawal from elite sport, such as easing retirement, accessing necessary social supports, accepting an identity based on past rather than current performance levels (Stier, 2007), planning retirement so that the end of the career is not so dramatic (Stambulova, et al., 2003), feeling satisfied with the successes of previous career goals (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004), and approaching retirement as a transition to the next stage of the sport career (Torregosa et al., 2004).

Regarding the objective of finding out athletes' views and preferences on the structure of courses to be developed oriented to sports technology and business creation, most of them prefer only online courses or a combination of online and face-to-face courses. In Europe, talented athletes tend to abandon sport and prioritise education to prepare for future job opportunities (Amara et al., 2004; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT], 2007) or postpone obtaining a degree from the age of 24. This is largely due to the fact that the sports training system is usually disconnected from school/university education, often creating barriers for young athletes in the full development of their athletic and student status. Therefore, it is necessary to promote policies that combine education and training for dual career development of student-athletes (Lupo et al., 2015) and meet the individual needs of

athletes, taking into account their age, sport specialisation, career stage and economic situation (European Commission, 2012). Previous research (Adler & Adler, 1985; Purdy et al., 1982; Webb et al., 1998), had indicated that athletes who chose a dual career did not perform well academically, but it has subsequently been found that when these athletes are given the opportunity to have a flexible study plan, their academic performance is as good as those of other students (De Knop et al., 1999), and even higher than the general reference population even though they needed more time to finish their studies (Albion & Fogarty, 2003; Conzelman & Nagel, 2003; González & Torregrosa, 2009; López de Subijana et al., 2015; Muniesa et al., 2010).

The maximum number of hours that almost half of the athletes in the sample set for training courses per month is more than six hours, followed by the option of four to six hours. It should be noted that in order to achieve athletic excellence, athletes have to dedicate 20-30 hours per week to training and competition, while students dedicate about 30 hours per week to achieve an academic career (Aquilina, 2013). Young elite athletes face difficulties in balancing their sporting and educational or work commitments, as the goal of succeeding at the highest level of sport requires intense training and numerous trips for competitions at home or abroad, which is difficult to reconcile with the challenges and constraints in the education system and the labour market (Capranica & Millard Stafford, 2011; Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003; European Commission, 2012; Moreno Castellanos et al., 2018). This significant time mismatch means that the labour integration process of high-level athletes may be compromised if they are not provided with the appropriate methods, tools and strategies to cope with it (Puig & Vilanova, 2006; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Tshube & Feltz, 2015).

Finally, as for the discussion of the results, the majority of athletes prefer content-based learning that combines videos and practical activities, alone or combined with other resources such as readings and audios, so these preferences are in line with the different proposals for training courses at European level offered for elite athletes within the Erasmus+ call.

5. Conclusions

This research analyses the opinions and interests of elite athletes with regard to their transition to the sports technology-oriented business after their retirement and the conclusions found are that there is an interest among athletes to be trained in the sector, through a programme that adapts to the characteristics of their athletic life with online resources, an open programme duration and individualised tutoring. Based on the needs expressed by athletes, it would be interesting to receive training in the field of management and investment of their assets during their sporting careers and the creation of networks between athletes to generate ideas, carry out business plans and promote the visibility and example of athletes who have developed in the business sector.

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