

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

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Student-Athletes and their Environment

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Abstract

The sporting career is not a linear path but a heterogeneous trajectory in which athletic growth is strongly linked to the athlete's social, personal and/or academic development, whose mutual interaction can condition sporting success (Debois et al., 2012). Under this paradigm, the dual career of athletes must be understood in its numerous connections with their environment, within and outside the sporting context, with demands and needs, sometimes simultaneous, at different levels of their vital performance (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). This work seeks to explore the multiple relationships of the student-athletes with their environment and how they are structured along different dimensions. It also seeks to explain how these relationships may be altered by a sudden change such as the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 and how athletes involved in the dual career programmes were affected by a dramatic environmental change.

Keywords: dual career, environment, dimensions, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Student-athletes are complex agents who simultaneously perform in several dimensions of their lives in addition to sport (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016). In this context, the dual career must be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves several stakeholders with specific roles, responsibilities and interrelationships in the establishment of a positive support network for the student-athlete (Vilanova, 2009). Building successful programmes is, therefore, highly dependent on the creation of environments that are supportive and inclusive for them (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Different theoretical approaches have been created to define who composes the network of dual career support actors and at which levels they are interrelated. One of the main studies was Aquilina and Henry (2010) who divided the main stakeholders into five interconnected levels: the European Union, States, clubs and federations, universities and athletes themselves. On this basis, Capranica and Guidotti (2016), reformulated the dual career support structure in terms of three dimensions (interpersonal, organisational and global), closely interlinked under the common objective of providing an effective support structure for the student-athlete.

1.1. *Interpersonal dimension*

The interpersonal level consists of the relationships with the immediate environment of the student-athlete (family, coaches, technical staff, teachers and academic tutors).

As for the family nucleus, the influence of parents has been revealed as key to the success of dual career programmes (Tessitore et al., 2021). Studies such as Kristiansen (2017) showed that athletes rely more on the support of their parents than on other agents in their immediate environment such as friends or coaches, especially in the early stages of the dual career. As indicated by Miró et al. (2018), parents are considered by the athletes themselves as a fundamental

referent at the social level by providing valuable emotional support in the form of encouragement, empathy, advice or understanding. It is precisely because of this emotional support that families with a higher socio-educational level contribute to greater success in their children's dual careers (Sorkkila et al., 2017), thanks to the expectations of success they project onto their children and by helping to maintain the necessary motivation to continue competing and studying in parallel (Moreno et al., 2020).

After parents, coaches are often perceived as the next most important personal support agents for student-athletes (Condello et al., 2019). Coaches have a fundamental influence on the athlete's personal development, as they are authority figures as well as role models through the establishment of a trusting relationship between them (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). They are a fundamental pillar within the dual career, as they are responsible for the sporting dimension (Aquilina, 2013). As a general rule, coaches have been found to have a positive attitude towards supporting the dual career of their athletes (Guirola-Gómez et al., 2016). This support increases in cases where the coach has been a former high-level athlete (Kuettel et al., 2018).

The support of coaches is significant not only because they are trustworthy with the athlete's environment, but also because they provide them with a space of trust and personal contact that allows them to face the difficulties that arise from combining an intense sporting career with an academic one (Wylleman et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that the scientific literature contains examples of environments without support for dual careers in which coaches (and parents) are opposed to this type of programmes because they consider that studies may hinder the possible professional commitment of their athletes (Ronkainen et al., 2017). It is in these environments where it is highly difficult to establish a dual career culture that benefits the athlete-student.

Lastly, this dimension also involves teachers and tutors (mentors). Mentoring is considered to be one of the most effective strategies when speaking about dual career success (Hallmann et al., 2020). Empirically, sports mentoring has been proven to be effective in several experiences (Mejías et al., 2021). Projects such as "Tutoresport" of the

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (Mateos et al., 2010), or more specifically the Erasmus+ Sport project named “ESTPORT” (Developing an innovative European Sport Tutorship model for the dual career of athletes) by the Universidad Católica de Murcia (Sánchez-Pato et al., 2017), both in Spain, have proven the great impact of the figure of a sport tutor in universities for the adherence of student-athletes to dual career programmes, especially when they belong to the high level of sport.

In this dimension, gender should be a factor to consider at the interpersonal level when examining the effectiveness of dual career models. Studies such as Ryba et al. (2021) have identified a gender bias in the development of programmes undertaken by student-athletes. Although women show similar motivation to men when starting their dual careers (Aunola et al., 2018), female athletes perceive a lower level of expectations regarding the potential development of their sport career (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2018). This fact causes women to be more stably linked to dual career programmes, giving more value on the possibility of sustaining their livelihood based on their studies rather than on their sport (Fuchs et al., 2016). This has been found in the context of different sports where, unlike their male counterparts, the majority of elite female players planned to continue in the dual career until the completion of higher education or postgraduate studies (Tekavc et al., 2015). In contrast, studies such as Baron-Thiene and Alfermann (2015) pointed out negative aspects of female athletes’ dual careers, as they would receive less emotional support from parents and coaches than male, which may explain why more women than men decide to give up sport to focus on education, work or family (Ryba et al., 2021).

1.2. Organisational and global dimension

The second dimension, the organisational, refers to the relationships of the student-athlete with sports institutions as clubs or federations. In contrast to the interpersonal dimension, there is more resistance to the dual career in the organisational level. The explanation lies in the fact that in Europe high-level sport is mainly organised through clubs

and sports federations (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014), which prioritise the performance of their players over other aspects such as academic development (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). This is compounded by a lack of adequate cultures, flexibility in time management or limited mentoring that can lead to disengagement of athletes from the idea of obtaining an academic degree before reaching their full performance potential (Park et al. 2013).

With regard to sports federations, this is perhaps the stakeholder that is least committed to this model, as they are traditionally the furthest away from the core activity of the dual career (Condello et al., 2019). However, their support is often essential as they can act as intermediaries between athletes and other agents such as universities, clubs or even policy-makers (Morris et al., 2021). In some cases, this position has been used to underpin dual career models. An example of this is the case of Finland, where agreements have been signed between certain academic institutions and sports federations for the generation of favourable environments for dual careers through the provision of the necessary services and joint coordination in the academic and sports planning of the student-athlete (Saarinen et al., 2019).

Thirdly and finally, on the support structure at the global level, the study by Aquilina and Henry (2010) is one of the references when defining the categories of response given by national systems to the demands of student-athletes. Thus, comparing the regulatory frameworks in sport and academic policy of the EU Member States, these authors established four typologies of services available for dual career development: a) State-centred regulation; b) State as sponsor/facilitator; c) Federations or Academies as intermediaries; d) Non-formal or “Laisser-Faire” structures.

Therefore, the scenario in Europe is highly disparate despite the European Commission’s efforts to establish common guidelines for dual career policies (European Commission, 2012). Such a marked difference in European regulatory frameworks is an impediment to the development of a transversal dual career models that can be successfully reproduced in the different territories (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014), which, in the opinion of Capranica and Guidotti (2016), goes

against the principle of equality that should be established for all citizens of the European Community area. In relation to this, Lupo et al. (2015) revealed significant differences between models, especially on issues such as motivation towards sport or academic practice, which is higher in student-athletes from centralised or facilitating states than in non-formal states or those that use federations as intermediaries, which in addition can lead to a higher dropout rate from the programme. This also affects other issues as the right to international mobility among student-athletes who face additional difficulties when undertaking exchange programmes like the Erasmus scholarship programme (Fuchs et al., 2016).

All of this reinforces Kuettel et al. (2020) idea that an analysis of dual career models cannot be conducted without a proper understanding of the environment in which they take place. This has been especially true with the emergence of events such as the outbreak of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus in 2020.

2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student-athlete environment

The COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic was declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organisation on 30 January 2020. It has been one of the most severe epidemiological outbreaks in contemporary times. The quick spread of the disease, the initial lack of pharmacological remedies and the saturation of health systems led almost all national governments to decree forced house confinement for several months (Sameer et al., 2020). Major events such as music festivals, religious celebrations, fairs, world expositions and sporting events were cancelled (Ebrahim et al., 2020). In sport, in addition to professional and amateur competitions, major mega-events such as the UEFA European Championship and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were postponed until public health conditions improved.

Schinke et al. (2020) in analysing the cross-sectional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different elite athletes, established three

critical stages: a) before the postponement of Tokyo 2020, announced on 24 March 2020; b) during the postponement and; c) during the reactivation for Tokyo in year 2021. The first stage was marked by the uncertainty and frustration of the athletes as their training schedules were being disrupted while some of their rivals were able to continue to prepare normally in other parts of the world. As a result there was increased stress leading to loss of sleep (Mon-López et al., 2020) and appetite (Gupta & McCarthy, 2021), as well as increased concern about projected life plans (Pillay et al., 2020).

After postponement, debilitating psychological responses such as burnout syndrome, increased feelings of alienation, insecurity, stressfulness or lack of motivation, increased (Håkansson et al., 2021). On the other hand, the postponement of the Olympic Games was seen by another group of athletes as an opportunity for personal growth and development of other interests beyond sport (Taku & Arai, 2020). This was the case for those with a multidimensional identity such as dual-career student-athletes (Schinke et al., 2020). While studies as Tomalski et al. (2019), identified this population as prone to mental illness, no increase in depression levels during the period of confinement was detected (Hagiwara et al., 2021).

Although Stambulova et al. (2020) pointed to the possibility that the outbreak of the Coronavirus could have decisive negative consequences for student-athletes, the fact is that, in specific national contexts such as the case of Spain, the dual career was perceived positively during the pandemic. In the study by Abenza-Cano et al. (2020), the level of perception of the dual career was compared in two samples of high-level student-athletes: a group surveyed in the pre-Olympic year prior to Rio 2016 and others during the COVID-19 pandemic after the suspension of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The results showed that the COVID group perceived greater benefits of the dual career on their future, which reinforced the idea that this type of programme is an enabler and not an obstacle to the sporting careers of its users, also showing that one of its strengths is the ability to adapt to the circumstances of the student-athletes, however extreme and adverse these may be.

In this sense, the pandemic has also brought other benefits to athletes. According to Jaenes-Sánchez et al. (2021), the confinement was used by some athletes to strengthen their bonds of friendship and companionship with the rest of their teammates or with the technical staff. This is relevant because, as Graupensperger et al. (2020) stated, there is empirical evidence that those student-athletes who received greater social support during the confinement reported better health and psychological well-being. It also served to increase athletes' commitment to their training plans, even if they had to be adapted to the mobility restrictions in place (Moscoso-Sánchez et al., 2021). Finally, the pandemic helped to reinforce the role of student-athletes as role models by exhibiting tacit compliance with the rules under the state of alarm (Wilczynska et al., 2021).

3. Conclusions

The dual career, as a holistic and multifactorial phenomenon, cannot be understood without an analysis of the student-athlete's environment and the multiple relationships that develop within and outside it, both on a sporting, personal, cultural and political level. This is especially relevant when it has been observed that environmental conditions can change suddenly and dramatically. This leads to the reflection that student-athlete support initiatives, whether governmental or privately initiated, must take into account the circumstances of the environment in the design of their support programmes. Similarly, knowledge of the student-athlete's environment should be key in customising the assistance they receive, which will undoubtedly contribute to the ultimate success of dual career models.

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