

Is pursuing a dual career (actually) beneficial for athletes' mental health?

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With this article I like to spur the discussion about dual career and mental health and recommend:

- The academic and sporting schedule should be well balanced, with coaches and teachers having an overview and understanding of the total demands that athletes face in both spheres. Flexibility to adjust either the academic or sporting agenda in certain periods is needed and this should be coordinated by a qualified dual career support provider
- It is not enough to acknowledge that a dual career is demanding and highly stressful in certain periods. Athletes need to be specifically supported and equipped with tools and competencies to cope with these demands. Tailored intervention programs that support athletes in enhancing their time management skills and coping strategies could be beneficial
- Since mental well-being is a part of any culture of excellence and an important resource for a sustainable and successful career, student-athletes' mental health should be monitored frequently to detect early signs of potential athletic and academic burnout by a qualified person
- Social support from parents, peers and the sporting environment is a key for open communication. Athletes need to feel that they can talk honestly about their perceived pressure and struggles. This could also reduce athletes' stigma for help-seeking when they face mental health issues such as depression or eating disorders

As a former dual career athlete, a researcher in the field, and as a career advisor for prospering athletes, I usually highlight the many potential benefits of a dual career (i.e., combining sport with education or work). For example, a more balanced lifestyle, a multidimensional identity, gaining competences to prioritize and plan, and better chances for the future after the sports career are the usual topics that emphasize to athletes and their entourage. However, following a dual career often comes along with an intense time effort and expectations (and pressure) from different stakeholder around the athlete. These stakeholders (e.g., coach, teachers, parents, peers) have often contrary interests and agendas. Juggling with these different demands might be overwhelming for many athletes, and the total perceived stress might exceed the athletes' coping competences, hence leading to burnout, dropout or different mental health issues. Reflecting about my own dual career, I experienced that my sporting results often affected my motivation to learn and hence my overall well-being. Nevertheless, I am convinced that my dual career approach helped me to learn how to prioritize and made me learn how to use my time efficiently. I also learned how important it is to take breaks between the different tasks, which keeps my (mental) well-being on a high level.

In this article, I try to give a short summary of some studies that investigated athletes' mental health in combination with dual career. It is the goal of this article to spur further discussion about this relevant topic that involves many athletes (*and* their environments) in many countries.

What do we know about dual career AND mental health?

Even though the topics of dual career and mental health have been somehow explored in the past, there has so far not been a distinctive focus on dual career in combination with mental health. Mental health in elite sport has received more attention in recent years, but the subject has mostly been exploited from a rather negative conceptualization of mental (ill-)health. Researchers were mostly interested in the prevalence of depressive or anxiety symptoms in elite athletes and tried to find correlates between mental illness and potentially influential factors.

Workload, stress and mental health in Danish elite athletes age 17-21

In our current investigation with Danish elite athletes (Larsen & Kuettel, 2019), we asked the athletes to indicate their perceived stress levels in sport, education/work, and in the private domain. On a scale from 1-5, athletes with the age 17-21 indicated that they are most affected in the educational domain (3,7), and less in sport (3,3) and in private life (2,8). On average, this group of athletes have a total workload of 50 hours per week of which 26 hours is study related, training takes 20 hours, and 4 hours are used for jobs to earn money. Many athletes have 60+ hours of time effort for their dual career per week. Given that the demands in school and sports are increasing in the developmental phase in connection with critical career transitions (e.g., starting a university study; step from junior to national team squad) occurring at the same time, it is not surprising that symptoms of anxiety and depression are highest in this particular age group when compared to younger (up to 16) and older (age 22-26) athletes.

The academic and sporting schedule influences athletes' mental health

Since 2012, the European Commission outlined its suggestions for the promotion of dual careers and development in a socially responsible manner. However, university students are also vulnerable to mental health difficulties, with the transition away from home, lack of traditional social support, and increasing academic stress being examples of contributing factors. A longitudinal study by Sheehan et al. (2019) investigated the plausible influence of academic and athletic schedule on mental health and motivation. In their study, student-athletes' mood, sleep quality, and depressive symptoms were highly correlated with the workload at the university in combination with an intense competition period. The authors suggested that coaches should consider ongoing psychological monitoring to ensure that the student-athletes are prepared for the athletic and academic demands at the university.

Is the dual career a potential reason for athletic and academic drop-out?

A number of different tools have been employed to measure athlete burnout, with varying success. In the case of student-athletes, the contexts of sport and school constantly interact, and therefore, as Sorkilla et al. (2017) argue, sport and school burnout should be concurrently investigated, as the sources of stress are context-specific (i.e., in school context the source of stress is school, whereas in sport context the source of stress is sport). Hence, they tested a new scale for measuring sport burnout symptoms with a Finnish student-athlete sample. While recognizing the limitations of their study (cross-sectional, season timing, context), the instrument was found valid and reliable for assessing adolescent student-athletes' sport burnout symptoms in a dual career context. Even though the study did not mention a direct connection between burnout in sport and school, the instrument could be used to monitor student-athletes on a regular base.

Is there a need for intervention programs?

Sallen et al. (2018) showed that an intervention program for elite student-athletes can improve resistance to chronic stress and thus enhance athletes coping resources and their well-being. In a quasi-experimental design, they provided a 90min workshop once per week over a 10-week period to an intervention group of 128 student-athletes, introducing different stress reduction, time management, and coping strategies techniques. Measured at three different time points, Sallen and colleagues could show that the intervention group increased their stress-related knowledge significantly and hence were reacting better to stress. The effect was still significant in the follow-up three month after the intervention indicating the long-term effect of the workshop. However, the authors also mentioned the transfer from the knowledge to athletes' daily lives is a huge challenge. Hence, they propose that the transfer to everyday life should be supported more efficiently.

So what?

Given the relative paucity of studies about dual career *and* mental health of athletes, more investigations are needed to explore the relationship between athletes' dual career and the relation to their mental health and drop-out. There is no question that athletes who want to excel in their sport and their studies set high demands and standards to themselves, but also demand adequate support from their environment. However, there are different dual-career mindsets about how to optimally support dual career athletes in different cultural contexts, and the programs and financial support varies substantially in different European countries, for example between Denmark, Switzerland and Poland (Kuettel et al., 2018).

We (in the research unit Learning and Talent in Sport) tend to apply a holistic and ecologic approach concerning talent development and dual career, emphasizing that athletes need to be understood as humans that are embedded in a context in which different influential people interacting around them. We believe that mental health is not only the athletes' own business!

Do you want to know more about this topic?

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Or visit the Learning and Talent in Sport (LET'S) homepage:

https://www.sdu.dk/da/om_sdu/institutter_centre/job_idraet_og_biomekanik/forskning/forskningsenheder/learning+and+talent+in+sport

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