Chapter 4
Dual Careers and Athlete Wellbeing

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Introduction

There is a growing body of literature supporting the importance of dual careers in assisting athletes to prepare for their athletic retirement. Indeed, many countries have developed dual career programmes to help athletes combine their sport and academic aspirations. However, the commitment to fulfilling a dual career for an athlete can lead to added anxieties and tensions caused by the likely entrenchment in two environments that are subject to high evaluation. This chapter explores some of the challenges of maintaining a dual career and the adverse effect that this can have on athlete wellbeing.

Athlete voice
Grace's Story

I'm a female beach volleyball player on a scholarship in an American University. I moved here to better my chances of reaching my goals of being a Commonwealth and Olympic Gold medallist, but also to help lay foundations for a career post-sport. Moving to America meant I could get a fully funded college degree plus access to some of the best trainers. There isn't really anywhere in the UK that has set up a programme where you can train every single day in my sport and get a college education at the same time. In America, there's definitely more support for athletes pursuing a dual career. At my university, you have access to coaches, assistant coaches and athlete support personnel. My coaches say that school comes first, so I was always told 'you are a student-athlete, and it is that way round for a reason'.

When I arrived in America, I originally enrolled in a sport science degree. Although I initially did well with my grades, I sensed that the course was going to get harder. This caused me fluctuating levels of stress once I realised what was expected of me academically. I was also stressed about the prospect of not getting good grades, and all of the "what ifs" associated with not doing well academically. I decided that I hadn't flown halfway across the world to be stressed about this. I also knew that I didn't want to come all the way out here to spend every day studying and not being able to get extra practice or enjoy living in a different country. So, as a lifestyle choice I decided to change courses. And I felt that if I hadn't made that change, I would have spent a lot more time studying which was exactly what I didn't want to do, and as I have observed in other athletes, it had the potential to impact negatively on my wellbeing.

My second choice of course was a major in Communications and a minor in Psychology. Apart from my lifestyle choices, this course is a lot easier in terms of workload and it offers me a wider range of job options after I graduate. I'm not 100% sure of what I want to go into, I want to play volleyball as long as I can and then stay in the sport, probably coaching. As student-athlete we are expected to achieve a minimum grade point average (GPA) in our studies. As a result, our academic performance is heavily scrutinised. If you continuously perform poorly in your academic work, you're given mandatory study hall hours or the

requirement to see extra tutors or both. In a couple of instances, we have had girls who have not been allowed to practice with us because their schoolwork wasn't up to scratch. Some girls have had to leave the team because everything just slipped and they couldn't get it back. The constant threat of this is stressful and it impacts on your ability to socialise and relax. But then this year it irritated me that they were all happy because we had a really high GPA, it was like a 3.8 as a team, which is really good. But then we didn't achieve our goals volleyball-wise. And so, to me it's like 'well maybe if people didn't put so much focus on their homework, we might have achieved our volleyball goals'.

In general, although it's the right thing to do, pursuing a dual career is very stressful. I can only work so many hours on campus a week, due to being an international student and obviously I can't get a job outside of campus either. This adds an extra financial stress because you can't earn money, but you still have to spend it! Additionally, having such a busy existence impacts on my ability to socialise and have downtime. I tend to stay in my athletic group, which I think in a wellbeing sense is isolating. In class I'm very friendly with people that sit next to me, but you don't have time to hang out with them unless you have to work on a group project. Their schedules just don't fit with mine.

Even within my athletic group of friends, there's a big difference between pre-season and season. During the season no-one socialises because once you're done with practice, you have to do homework. In preseason, when you have a little bit more energy, and a little bit more time, people have time to socialise with each other more. I isolate myself a little bit, because I have so many things I have to do. I think it can have quite a negative impact on your wellbeing because it feels like the whole time you're not going to be making the mark. All my classmates are supportive although a lot of them typically don't understand what it takes. They just see the occasional practice and our games, but they don't understand all the hard work that goes on in between. They might see us play for an hour, but we had heavy training for this for months. They don't see us when we're dying in conditioning or lifting weights or waking up early to do rehab.

Since moving over here, I think that I emotionally distanced myself from my family. I've always been the very positive one and so when something negative happens I don't want to put that burden on them. Being a student-athlete, you have to learn how to effectively deal with these extra stresses in your life compared to people who are just students or just athletes. We're required to perform higher than the average person in both areas. However, I struggle sometimes as I predominately identify with being an athlete. If I'd stayed back home, I don't think I would have gone to university. And so, I moved all the way over here for beach volleyball – not necessarily to go to school. There are upsides of this dual focus. If I've had a bad day, I remind myself that I'm not just an athlete, I'm not just a student, I'm both. And I'm doing really well. I'm doing what everyone else does plus more. Additionally, I have definitely become more independent since I moved to America. Sometimes that's a very positive thing and sometimes it can be seen as a negative. I think it almost distances me, especially from my parents and friends back home because my life out here is very different to the life I had back home. The pressures and intensity of my lifestyle here. They ask me 'why do you look so tired?' and I'll say, 'I'm doing my best'. For me, the realisation that I can't be all things to all people is tough – I have to be the best version of myself - a good student, athlete, daughter, sister, girlfriend, best friend and stuff like that. Being a student-athlete also provides a good distraction when you're injured and can't practice. Then, I put in extra time into studying and socialising or go to extra rehab or get some extra treatment. And

so, I think having the necessity of still keeping your grades high regardless of whether you're injured or not for me it was a good thing because it was a distraction, it helped me cope.

I cope with this high pressure lifestyle by working hard to prioritise everyday things. Do I have time to go and see my friends or do I need to get my homework done first? Can I see my friends later or is it actually beneficial for me to hang out for a bit, to relax to switch my mind off and then maybe I'll be more efficient when I do my homework later on? Whether that's an assessment deadline or little things like sending like your brother or sister a birthday card in the post, does that need to be done now or can it wait? And it's just deciding like when it needs to be done and what can wait. I also get around this by compartmentalising things. If my practice is going bad or good - that's practice time. And it's like yes you can think about it, but you don't bring that into the classroom and it's the same thing with classroom stuff like you don't bring that out onto the court with you.

One of the things I am concerned about is what happens after I finish my degree at the University. It is like you have been the be all and end all of the college world, as a super high performer – excelling in your sport, excelling in your studies, picking up awards. Then you get into the real world and you don't really know what to do, I worry that I will feel lost, scared and depressed without my sport. You have this internal drive because you're so used to succeeding all the time and for a lot of not reaching those milestones every day can be depressing.

Scholar voice

Theorising wellbeing within the dual career setting

To achieve a holistic development and allow athletes to be best prepared for their future role in society at the end of their athletic career, they are encouraged to combine their sport and academic aspirations (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Roberts, Mullen, Evans, & Hall, 2015; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallares, Azocar, & Selva, 2015). This combination of aspirations is referred to as a "dual career" and is briefly defined in the literature as "a career with major foci on sport and studies or work" (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015, p.1). There is a growing body of literature supporting the importance of dual careers in assisting athletes to prepare for their athletic retirement and adaptation to their post sport career (e.g., Aquilina & Henry, 2012; Ryba, Stambulova, Selänne, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2017). Dual career programmes and services are largely established in the United States of America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Although there are provisions in place in Europe, these range from flexible academic programmes, financial/service support and individually negotiated agreements, rather than fully established and structured provisions. In a way, a dual career does not mean the same for all athletes – it is dependent on the country you reside in, and to a certain degree, your sport. Although the benefits of a dual career approach to athletic and professional development is widely positively acknowledged, there are many challenges to this approach for the athletes on these pathways. For example, as Grace identifies, a dual career for an athlete can lead to added anxieties and tensions caused by the likely entrenchment in two environments that are subject to high evaluation (e.g., Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kentta, & Johansson, 2008; O'Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013; Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2017). Additionally, societal pressures as a result of dual career pursuits can lead to the pressure to make "the right choice" of a post sport career (Ryba et al., 2017). Grace highlights this in her repeated acknowledgement of 'moving half way around the world' for her desire to pursue beach volleyball.

Whilst athletes enrolled in higher education have the opportunity to compete at multi-sport international and continental university sport events (e.g., Universiade, World University Championships, Pan-American University Championships, European EUSA Games), considerable differences have been reported worldwide in the provision of dual career programmes and services, mainly due to country-specific cultural and organisational regulations in the field of sport and education (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016). Australia (Australian Government, 2018), Canada (Canadian Sport Institute, 2018), New Zealand (Ryan, Thorpe, & Pope, 2017) and the United States (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018) have formalised dual career programmes, whereas African, Asian and European student-athletes are presented with a multiplicity of national approaches to dual career support ranging from flexible academic programmes and financial support to individually negotiated agreements when possible (e.g., Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). As Grace demonstrated, this difference in recognition and support of dual careers across the five continents has driven student-athletes to seek out the opportunity to fulfil their academic and sporting goals outside of their home country. Research by Condello, Capranica, Doupona, Varga and Burk (2017) explored the global dual career experiences of student-athletes competing at the 2017 Summer Universiade in Taipei (Taiwan). They reported; (1) a difference between continents for the time spent in sport and university engagement, and in transferring from home to the training venue; (2) a higher amount of time in sport engagement for individual sport student-athletes compared to their team sport counterparts; (3) a difference between university major categories on the time spent in university engagement; (4) a difference between continents regarding the athletes' familiarity and awareness of dual career policies, programmes, measures, initiatives and availability of policy documents that facilitate their elite sports and studies pathways.

Grace spoke of how she felt she had no option but to seek out dual career opportunities in the United States as there was no comparable provision for student-athletes in Europe in her sport – beach volleyball. Whilst the dual career scholarship programmes on offer through the college system in the United States are attractive for international student-athletes like Grace, it meant that she had to relocate internationally, distancing herself from her primary support network - her family. She reflected on how this had encouraged her to become more independent and resilient, but that it had also had an adverse impact on her wellbeing as she had become self-reliant to the point of not asking for support when she needed it.

Once enrolled in her dual career programme, Grace illustrated the precarity of her position as a student-athlete on a scholarship at an American university and the constant pressure to make a minimum GPA to keep her place at the college and her scholarship. Ultimately, this pressure led her to change the course she was studying for - one that was "easier" as a measure to protect her wellbeing. This approach to study by student-athletes is in fact a trend, identified by a number of journal articles. For example, Schneider, Ross and Fisher (2010) observed that may college administrators believe that student-athletes choose the path of least resistance (less competitive majors) so they can maintain their eligibility on their programmes. In fact, it has been noted that academic administrators are complicit in this practice (e.g., Crepeau 2006). Opting for the easy option of study is noted regularly in the student-athlete population. Whilst the majority of athletes in Navarro's (2015) study suggested that their academic endeavours were important, often their choice of major did not align with their career aspirations. Sadly, this tokenistic engagement with a field of studies is not what a dual career approach was aimed at, and ultimately this could impact on the long-term wellbeing of the athlete where they remain fundamentally unprepared for a life post sport (e.g., Cosh & Tully, 2014; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selanne,

2015). Arguably the college system (or indeed any high performance sport system) needs to ensure the long term wellbeing of athletes are appropriately served, and that the system does not simply serve to ameliorate the immediate circumstances to drive performance. A life-long duty of care is required.

Combining an athletic career with education is demanding even for the most talented student-athletes and since only a small proportion of athletes will obtain elite status, student-athletes need to strive for success in both domains in order to facilitate transition into the labour market (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). Grace spoke of how she was expected to perform at a higher level in both her sport and her studies in comparison to "the average person" who was either a student or an athlete. Whilst she found this constant pressure stressful, she took great pride in successfully managing a dual career (although recognised this management was harder with a more challenging major i.e. sport science) and in the recognition she received from her peers as being a "super high performer". She identified strongly as being a student-athlete and voiced her concern about how she would cope outside of the college system; although the notion that to 'cope' would be her default emotional strategy, might indicate a need for Grace to develop and deepen her ability to consciously tolerate stress. This continual striving for success was Grace's modus operandi and she was worried that without sport and academia as metrics to assess her progress she would feel "lost, scared and depressed". Whilst both volleyball and university provided a competitive arena in which Grace could realise these successes, there were times when she felt overloaded and the constant pressure to perform impacted on her wellbeing. This pressure can result in sport and academic burnout, which has been defined as sport/education related exhaustion (i.e., chronic fatigue due to pressures in sport/studies), cynicism toward the meaning of sport/education (i.e., indifferent or distal attitude toward one's own sport/studies), and inadequacy as an athlete/student (Sorkkila et al., 2017). It has been suggested that burnout can develop when the demands experienced (e.g., high training loads and competition/academic demands and assessments) constantly exceed the available resources such as social and family support (Smith, 1986). This may place student-athletes (who have high demands as they strive for success in two domains) at risk of experiencing burnout.

Research suggests that the domains of sport and education are highly intertwined and that one is likely to affect the other. For example, it has been reported that student-athletes' exhaustion in education spills over to sport (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). Moreover, high success expectations in one domain have been shown to protect student-athletes from burnout symptoms in the same domain but be positively related to burnout symptoms in the other domain and a reduction in wellbeing (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016). Indeed, Grace talked of the delicate balance of managing her academic and athletic commitments and her concerns that if this tipped one way or the other it would be very hard to get it back. She shared her teammates' experience, of falling behind in studies, the impact this subsequently had on her volleyball and that despite her best efforts she had to drop out of the scholarship programme.

The narrowing of post-sport career choices

Whilst dual careers may seem attractive to athletes in that they provide an opportunity to obtain a university degree whilst participating in high performance sport, it has been suggested that sport narrows the influences necessary to explore a breadth of future career possibilities and that this can have a negative impact on athletes wellbeing after retirement (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017) and on career readiness. Research suggests that athletes may stay

in sport as a future career as it is a familiar environment or choose a career that shares characteristics with sport (Roberts, Mullen, Evans, & Hall, 2015). When asked about her career aspirations after graduation, Grace said that she wanted to remain in America to play beach volleyball professionally as long as her body would allow her to and that after she retired from playing, she would like to remain in the sport in a coaching capacity. Beach volleyball is not currently supported as a professional sport in the UK so both her athletic and coaching career aspirations would be limited if she returned; a weighty thought not conducive to good mental health. Whilst she was studying for a degree in communication this was seen as a way of accessing support to further her volleyball career rather than as a conscious career choice. Studies of career related challenges for graduating student-athletes have identified issues such as arrested career development and athletes' sense of uncertainty about the future (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998), grief and loss regarding the transition to a nonathletic career post college (Lally, 2007), and identity foreclosure (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Indeed, universities, national governing bodies and student athletes have become increasingly concerned about the readiness of student-athletes to enter the workforce after graduation.

Certainly, student-athletes invest a significant amount of time and energy into their sport which detracts from time they could commit to exploring and preparing for potential careers (Sandstedt, Cox, Martens, Ward, Weber, & Ivey, 2004). Student-athletes often dedicate up to twenty hours per week - the equivalent of a part-time job - in official practice time on their sport (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014). Although, this figure may be conservative as many athletes also spend additional hours on unofficial mental preparation and personal training to maintain or improve their performance (Wieberg, 2011). Given that fewer than two percent of college student-athletes in the United States actually go on to play sports at the professional level the extensive hours spent on their practice rarely translate into post university employment (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014). This challenge of focusing extensive time and energy to achieve excellent sport and academic performances may disadvantage student-athletes in their ability to prepare themselves for a transition into a non-sports career (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Parham, 1993). It could be argued that this is due to the time constraints the dual role presents, therefore student-athletes are less likely to engage with valuable career development opportunities such as part-time employment and internships.

While significant attention has been given to professional athletes' transition out of sports, comparatively little research has focused on the transition of student-athletes into post university employment (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015). Recent research by August (2018) suggested that career readiness was related to four key qualities; optimism, resilience, adaptivity and the recognition of overlapping skills, knowledge, and personal strengths required for sports and work. Indeed, there are a growing number of 'performance lifestyle' practitioners in the UK that provide support to athletes to help them develop their careers outside of sport (e.g., Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018). There is a call for more work on career exploration with athletes to help inform future career directions earlier (Di Maggio, Ginevra, Laura, Ferrari, & Soresi, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009).

Grace is one of approximately 400,000 student-athletes competing at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institution. In recent years academic support centres have been created at universities across the United States in response to the outrage over the reported lack of academic resources for student-athletes (Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014). Furthermore, the NCAA reform policies have introduced penalties for the athletic

departments that fail to meet the required academic minimums. Indeed, Grace spoke of how her coaches told them that they were identified as "student-athletes not athlete-students" for a reason, because their primary focus should be on their academic rather than athletic pursuits. Whilst Grace identified predominantly as an athlete, she felt under constant scrutiny – constant surveillance - to maintain a minimum GPA and the threat of not being allowed to train if her academic work slipped was a source of immense stress; it is unsurprising that Grace's wellbeing began to suffer.

Although the threat of penalties has encouraged athletic departments to increase their academic budgets, hire additional staff, and build specialist academic centres it may have had an adverse impact on the wellbeing of student-athletes (such as imposed isolation in Grace's situation). Whilst on the one hand they encourage student-athletes to focus on their studies and provide access to academic support, concerns have been raised around the separation of student-athletes from the student body (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Grace talked about how little interaction she had with the other students on her course because of her lack of spare time as she tried to manage both roles.

The coping mechanism that Grace had developed for managing the pressure of being a student-athlete was to follow a strict daily routine to ensure she was giving her best in both her academic and athletic objectives. If she deviated from her routine, she would become increasingly anxious that her ability to maintain high levels of performance in both domains would be compromised. She spoke of the impact this anxiety had on her sleep, diet and mental health. However, it is worth acknowledging that this need for adherence to such a strict routine may have long term implications for her wellbeing and place her at a higher risk of experiencing conditions such as overtraining syndrome and burnout. Decisions on whether or not to socialise with friends was determined by a cost-benefit analysis of the potential impact it would have on her academic and athletic commitments. She spoke of how isolating this was and the negative impact her lack of social support outside of her athletic group had on her wellbeing. She said that in her first year at university she "emotionally distanced" herself from her family back home as she found this easier than telling them that she was struggling with the intense demands of being a student athlete – this account mirrors the experiences of elite swimmers in Tekavc, Wylleman, and Cecić Erpič's (2015) study on dual careers. She always felt the need to present the "best version of myself" and that she was always the positive person in the family and that being anything other than that was difficult to communicate. Furthermore, she felt that with being at university on the other side of the world there was little they could do to help, and she did not want to worry them.

Conclusion

As Grace has eloquently demonstrated, the need to constantly balance two significant areas of development and achievement (sport and higher education) has the potential to have a significant impact on the student-athlete's wellbeing – arguably presenting both times of thriving and times of surviving. The factors that Grace described had an impact on her dual career development and arguably caused additional threats to wellbeing in the short-term over and above pursuing an athletic career in isolation. Those factors included the additional stress and opportunity of relocating to the USA to pursue a dual career, the concerns over the precarity of her position as a student-athlete, the delicate balancing of two distinctly important areas of her life which both attract equal amounts of evaluation, and the social isolation and emotional distancing as an inherent consequence of such a pressurised existence. Whilst the evidence for the benefits of a dual career is strong in the long-term, it is

suggested that much more work is undertaken to ensure that athletes embarking on a dual career have their short-term wellbeing needs met to allow them to maximise the intended positive outcomes.

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