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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.

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 'lifespan', 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

decided that individuals who had been, or continued to be, carded athletes for at least two years would be most suited to providing an overview of life within this programme. Additionally, in order to achieve a balance of participants from team, individual and SPARC's 'priority' and 'non-priority' sports, the researcher approached ten pre-selected NSOs requesting access to the contact details of carded athletes who met the criteria for inclusion in the investigation. Eight of the ten sports consented to their athletes being contacted and invited to participate in this investigation. These sports were; basketball, cricket, cycling, field hockey, lawn bowls, rowing, rugby, and squash.

Seventeen athletes agreed to participate in this study. These athletes consisted of seven male and ten female carded athletes from around New Zealand, representing varying ages, competitive histories and carding levels. Specifically, the participants ranged in age from 17 to 45 years ($M = 27.7$ years) and had, on average, 13.35 years of competitive experience within their carded sporting code. Eight of the athletes were classified as being 'seasoned', meaning that they considered themselves to have reached their potential within their chosen sport, while the remaining nine athletes were classified as 'newcomers'. Some of these individuals were indeed relatively new to the high performance environment, while others were athletes still striving to obtain their sporting goals. The participants consisted of one athlete from lawn bowls, two athletes from basketball, cycling, cricket, field hockey, rugby, and squash respectively, and four athletes from the sport of rowing. Each participant had in the past represented, or continued to represent, New Zealand in their chosen sporting code and had, on average, 3.94 years of experience within the carding system. The sample consisted of four past or present World Champions and five Olympic or Commonwealth Games medallists.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most effective way to both explore and examine the athletes' carding experiences. This process not only allowed for direct interaction with the research participants, but, as a method, it also allows researchers to explore events and situations through the eyes of those who have directly experienced the phenomena under investigation (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Millar-Day, 2012). In this instance one-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with each participant in order to provide respondents with an opportunity to freely express their viewpoint. The open-ended procedure ensured a complete coverage of the topics under investigation while maintaining the individualistic nature of the participants' accounts (Chenail, 2011). In order to ensure each participant had an adequate opportunity to share their experiences, it was decided that the athletes would participate in two such interviews over a six month period. In so doing, participants were given the opportunity to further reflect upon their experiences within the carding system and, thus provide additional insight into life within this programme. Likewise, the second interview enabled the researcher to complete an initial analysis of data collected during the first round of interviews and further explore emerging topics during the follow up interviews.

The first round of interviews lasted between one and two hours per athlete and involved a series of open-ended and follow-up questions specifically developed for the purpose of this investigation. This interview guide was created on the basis of the study's underlying research questions and a review of athlete career literature (e.g. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al. 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Specifically, it consisted of six key areas of interest: (a) sport history and background, (b) life as an athlete, (c) impact of carding on life as an athlete, (d) impact of carding on life in general, (e) overall perceptions of carding, and (f) overall perceptions of themselves and others. Although the interviews were semi-structured, the open-ended nature of questions meant that the athletes were empowered to speak fully and freely about their carded athlete experiences. As the interviews evolved, elaboration and clarification probes and prompts were used to further deepen and enrich the athlete narratives.

Follow-up interviews were conducted within six months of each athlete's initial interview. The second round of interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours per athlete and followed the same semi-structured approach that occurred during interview one. New open-ended questions were generated for each athlete in order to more fully explore the themes and responses from each of their initial interviews. All but four of the original 17 participants took part in this second round of semi-structured interviews. Of the athletes who were unavailable, three were out of the country or too busy during the timing of the second round of data collection, while the remaining athlete purposefully chose not to take part after his initial interview. As these reasons primarily fell outside of the athletes' control, and to ensure their carding experiences were still accounted for within the final analysis, it was decided that the data collected from these four athletes' initial interviews would remain part of the overall study.

Data analysis

The purpose of inductive analysis is to produce a 'true' and thorough account of the original interview narrative, while providing an overall summary of themes emerging from participant's responses (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). By transcribing the interviews, verbatim, the researcher was able to become attuned to the nuances and flow of what each athlete said before beginning the more detailed analysis procedure (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Each transcript was then read several times by the researcher and another colleague in order to further ensure their familiarity with the narratives being represented. These individuals then wrote a preliminary descriptive report, outlining initial interpretations of what each athlete was saying, for each interview. Each participant was given the opportunity to read over and amend, or add to any of their responses. This form of member checking helped to ensure that a true and accurate description of each participant's experiences, opinions and points of view was obtained and considered (Polkinghorne, 2007). The process also ensured that the narrative accounts remained participant driven. Upon receipt of the athletes' checked documents the researcher and her colleague then searched for further themes and meaning that presented within each account of life within the carding system.

The categories that emerged from each athlete's accounts were subsequently used to create to a coherent and comprehensive whole (Maxwell, 1996). Specifically, this process involved collating athletes' responses into a collective narrative for each significant theme. While not all athletes contributed to each and every theme, the resulting topics represented those narratives which were common to the majority of participants. The emergent themes addressed the impact of both carding and elite sport involvement on the athletes' lives outside this environment. In order to ensure that the athletes' voices were heard throughout the data representation process, the researcher chose to present the research findings as a modified realist tale (Van Maanen, 2011). This meant that while she accepted some responsibility over the authorship of the academic text, she did not proclaim to have authority over the views of the interview participants. Consequently, while still representing her own involvement in the process of presenting the athletes' words, the researcher used verbatim quotes from the athletes' interviews to reveal their experiences (pseudonyms were

used to protect athlete confidentiality). These accounts therefore presented a comprehensive view of athletes' individual and collective experiences within the athlete carding programme.

Results

By allowing athletes to share their narratives, and speak openly about their involvement within the carding system, the current research provides an insight into the lived experiences of a previously silenced, yet growing population of New Zealand athletes. Three overriding themes were found to impact athletes' abilities to undertake dual careers. In no particular order they included: (a) lifestyle conflicts resulting from elite sport involvement, (b) athlete career stage and (c) the influence of others (e.g. coaches, managers etc.) within the sport environment. These themes are represented in the following section.

Lifestyle conflict

The athletes in this study had embarked on their respective sporting journeys well before reaching elite levels, with most having participated for an average of 13 years in the sport for which they were eventually carded. This enduring involvement meant that a lifestyle consumed by sport was firmly entrenched by the time they had become part of the NZAS's carded athlete system. Despite this, a desire to maintain some form of a life or career outside of the sport environment resonated through each of the athletes' stories. The debate, however, remained over how realistic it was for this to actually transpire. Jan echoed the thoughts of most athletes when she stated, *"because* [of] *training, a lot of my time is quite limited"*. Thus, despite athletes' best intentions to maintain dual careers, aspects of their lives were inevitably compromised during periods where sport inevitably took priority. Peter recognised this dilemma when he acknowledged, *"You just don't seem to have enough hours in the day to get everything done*."

Stories of athletes' adapting, or placing work and study prospects on hold, in order to pursue sporting endeavours, were widespread. Olympic cyclist, Jamie, ended up changing her entire career path in order to better suit the requirements of her sport:

> *When I first started at this level I was in a full time job … and trying to fit training in around work … After Athens … I decided that if I was going to go to Beijing and have another go I needed to change my whole lifestyle … Now* [I'm in] *real estate* [and my job] *works around me.*

Ben, too, altered his career plans because of his rowing commitments. *"When I first started I thought I could do everything, work and row, everything. But … then you realise that you … have got to make a compromise … If you want to do well then* [training needs to become your] *… job"*. Like other athletes who had not yet reached their performance goals, Ben believed that top level performances could only be achieved by prioritising his sporting commitments above all other aspects of his life. Touting the limited lifespan of an elite sportsperson, Ben explained, "*You have only got a limited shot at this … so it is about giving it all I can while I can*".

Many of the athletes rationalised such decisions and accepted them as part of the necessary commitment needed to reach their sporting goals. Nick confessed: *"That is* [just] *what you have got to do to succeed"*, while Cam stated, *"If you dedicate something solely to one direction … you are better off … you have less distractions"*. These justifications revealed the existence of the dominant performance, or "*whatever it takes*", narrative. Thus despite a widespread desire to maintain lives outside of their elite sport arena, many athletes felt compelled to minimise external distractions rather than attempt to establish a dual career alongside their sport involvement. Helen exposed this predicament when she stated, *"I do get concerned when people have to give up things* [because of their sport] *… Some people do end up being very, very one dimensional"*, while also going on to say, "*It is not realistic for athletes to say "I have got this great career and I have got all these wonderful friends" because you just don't have time*". She demonstrated this struggle by sharing a hand-written list of friends that was hanging upon her fridge. Having sat down with her husband the night before the researcher's visit, Helen had attempted to take stock all of people she had lost contact with during her build up to the Commonwealth Games. The list mostly contained names of friends not involved in hockey and was written to ensure she reconnected with each of these people now that her sport was no longer her priority.

Career stage

As evident by Helen's shifting priorities, the stage of the athlete's career strongly influenced the place sport held within each individual's life. While seasoned athletes were eventually confronted with the idea that a sport-only identity was actually unsustainable, relative newcomers to the elite sport environment readily embraced this solitary focus. Despite the availability of career development services within the NZAS system, these recently carded individuals, and those athletes still seeking to obtain their sporting goals, appeared reluctant to pursue any form of a dual career. Beth, a fresh-faced novice in New Zealand's elite rowing squad, encapsulated this trend when she stated, "*Pretty much everything is on hold because of rowing … Rowing is our job at the moment … Every decision we make has to be based on … rowing"*. One reason for such stoic displays of commitment during the early stages of one's elite sport career was the athletes' overwhelming desire to fit into this new and exciting world.

For Beth, this meant leaving behind friends, family and a partially-completed University degree in order to move towns and begin the rigorous training schedule expected of New Zealand Rowing's high performance squads. She shared that most major decisions in her life were now controlled by what "*other people* [believed] *we need to do to achieve our goals"*. While she had very little influence over her daily schedule, Beth's unwavering dedication appeared to occur without any consideration for her future. "*There is never an open forum … We are all told what to do and we do it … In terms of what it means to me* [and my life after sport] *I guess I don't even think about it"*. Feeling indebted for her selection, and reluctant to rock the boat, Beth, like most newcomers, was willing to forgo almost anything in order to become a part of the elite sport environment.

Although recently-carded athletes, like Beth, firmly believed that an exclusive and absolute focus on their sport was necessary to ensure elite sporting achievement, athletes entering the later stages of their career did not share a similar outlook. Instead, experienced individuals, and athletes who had managed to meet their sporting objectives, credited a more holistic view of life with enhancing both their athletic performance and enjoyment. Thinking back on his crew's build up to the recent World Champs, Nick stated, "*We had quite a big balance in our lifestyle* [and] *I think that is why we actually went really well"*. He added, "*You have got to have other things to do"*, and suggested that sacrificing life balance in the name of sporting success was neither advantageous, nor sustainable. Peter, Lucy, Mia, Helen, and John expressed similar sentiments about their own performances. These athletes believed that sporting goals were best served when pursuing other interests alongside their athletic dreams. Peter recalled, "[I achieved and enjoyed my sport more when I was] *having a life outside of hockey.*

Finding time to work and see my wife … Not having hockey control my life".

Similarly, Helen felt that balanced, or more holistic lifestyles, diminished the emotional trauma common when athletes became injured, de-selected or suffered from disappointing performances. She shared, *"Early on* [in my career] *I would get named, get dropped, get named, get dropped. And it wasn't until …* [I] *created other avenues, so if I didn't make it …* [that I relaxed and things got] *easier"*. Establishing a dual career meant disruptions, like de-selection, had little effect on Helen's overall sense of self-worth. Holly, too, believed in the importance of developing a life away from sport after witnessing rugby-mad ex-players struggle when their careers ended through eventual sport retirement. *"My friends that have stopped playing … found that transition quite hard … they just couldn't let go"*. Having experienced the fragilities of their respective athletic careers first-hand, Helen and Holly highlighted the risk athletes take by focussing exclusively on their sport.

Sport environment

In some circumstances, however, it was not solely the athletes who were responsible for this narrowing of focus. People within sport environments were also found to strongly influence whether the athletes would, or could, choose to participate in more than just their athletic pursuits. Many of the rules and regulations set out by respective NSOs specifically addressed the level of commitment expected of athletes competing in high performance programmes. This meant NSO's and coaches invariably exerted some control over whether athletes could explore careers away from the sporting arena. Some athletes described their support staff as outwardly encouraging them to develop lives outside their sport environment. Both Ben and Nick spoke highly of the fact that their rowing coach had encouraged them to explore and sight-see during down-time while competing in the European regatta series. And rugby player Lucy stated, "*The Black Fern management are very supportive …* [If I say] *"I am not dealing with the balance here" … they can say "perhaps you can try this" …* [Helping me out] *rather than* [watching] *me just crumbling under the pressure*".

More often than not, however, coaches and NSOs were seen as being unsupportive of athletes pursuing careers outside of the elite sport environment. Despite being encouraged by his coach, Ben was aware that not everyone within Rowing New Zealand shared such sentiments. Recalling a previous conversation with his high performance manager, Ben revealed, "[My manager] *said "Balance is good* [but only] *up until a point … They don't give out Olympic medals to people with balanced lives""*. Additionally, Beth, another rower, felt that the sheer logistical difficulty of taking part in activities outside of her sport showed Rowing New Zealand's failure to consider athletes' lives beyond what was necessary for their sport. Having approached her coach to discuss fitting university studies around her training, she found his response particularly unhelpful. "*I went up to … the coach to find out … what times we would be training so that I could pick my uni timetable and he said "oh, I am not really sure"*. In the end Beth *"just sort of* [had to] *assume"* what her training loads would be like and later found out that there were a multitude of clashes, stating, *"so I am … stuffed"*. She even admitted that at any stage her coach *"could just say "oh, we are now going to start training three times a day" …* [Which means] *you can't* [really] *do anything except for rowing because … you have to be available …* [So] *you* [end up living] *session to session"*. This lack of consideration for activities outside of rowing left Beth with little doubt that her effort to pursue university studies, while maintaining her place within the high performance programme, was unsupported by many within the New Zealand Rowing organisation.

Other athletes, too, believed that NSOs, coaches and the NZAS staff sent clear and explicit messages about the commitment levels expected when participating at the elite level. Kate, a 17-year-old female basketball player understood that being part of the Basketball New Zealand's carding programme meant that *"you have to put basketball* [first because] *you are not allowed to play any other sport"*. While yet another rower shared, "[The managers at Rowing New Zealand have said] *"You are here to row and it shouldn't matter what else you do" … they want to control everyone"* (Nick). Such perceptions were common across the participants, with many resolutely accepting that some degree of powerlessness went part and parcel with the elite sport lifestyle. Even so, there were still those athletes who wanted acknowledgement of their lives outside of sport; *"I* [wished] *that coaches understood … that you have got other parts of your life and … that we can not sacrifice everything for our sport"* (Holly).

For Holly, this integration meant considering both work and family commitments when planning and scheduling sporting requirements. However, Helen also felt that integration should involve coaches and managers looking upon players as a whole people, rather than just solely as athletes. *"You are forgotten the minute you are* [no longer needed … That] *concerns me when players devote everything* [to their sport … NSOs] *could may be do … more about seeing people not just as athletes*". As seasoned athletes, both Holly and Helen wanted to feel that they, and their interests and lives outside of the elite sport environment, were considered and valued. Unwilling to accept that pursuing sporting dreams meant sacrificing other life goals these two athletes believed that sporting bodies should care more about the diverse needs of individuals.

Discussion

When SPARC launched its high performance sport arm, the NZAS, it did so with the aim to ensure New Zealand elite athletes fulfilled their potential, both on and off the international sports field (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). The athlete carding programme was implemented with this goal in mind. After being in place for more than a decade, the current research project set out to explore whether SPARC's dream of establishing holistic elite athletes was becoming a reality. Despite proclamations by the NZAS that its programme does in fact allow for, and actively encourage the holistic development of those in the programme, this was not clearly evident across the athletes' narratives.

In particular, while all of the interviewed athletes appreciated the assistance provided by the carding programme (e.g. access to free medical and sport science assistance, scholarships for tertiary study and links to recruitment agencies), many still felt as though the programme did not do enough to encourage athletes to undertake dual careers. Specifically, carding initiatives such as centralised training programmes, performance-based funding and a strong focus on the monitoring of training accomplishments overtly encouraged a dedication to the athletic lifestyle at the expense of other life pursuits. Additionally, heavy training and NSO requirements meant that the carded athletes had limited time, energy and opportunity to explore work or study. Of specific concern were the high number of athletes who spoke of being at the mercy of their coaches and NSOs. With training and competition schedules entirely outside of their control, these athletes were left feeling increasingly powerless within both their sport and personal lives.

This lack of autonomy was most apparent in those athletes new to the carding programme, or approaching the peak of their careers. Eager to please those in charge of their sport environments, most gave little attention to what their lives might be, or become, beyond

their sporting participation. In so doing, it appears that these athletes were either unable to imagine, or were not conscious of, the impact that their elite sport lifestyle was having on their personal development. Subsequently, these newcomers were reluctant to pursue career opportunities away from the elite sport environment. A similar reluctance has been evident in other studies conducted around the world (e.g. Aquilina, 2013; Kelly & Hickey, 2010; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), however, while such views may indeed be prevalent, this solitary focus may not, in fact, be necessary for achieving sporting success.

Specifically, a number of the more seasoned athletes within this study described greater levels of enjoyment and better performances after adjusting the place and value that sport held within their lives. Consequently these individuals actively embraced opportunities to establish careers away from the sport arena. These results further support Carless and Douglas' (2013) assertion that athletic success is still possible when physical training is pursued in conjunction with personal development in other life areas. Similarly these athletes' experiences strengthen the position of researchers (e.g. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Stambulova, 2012) who suggest that athletic performances benefit from a more holistic approach to athlete development.

Differences in athlete readiness to explore a dual career does however mean that education and assistance in this area needs to be tailored towards the needs of athletes throughout all stages of their sporting careers. In particular, as every athlete enters, moves within and exits the elite sport arena with different expectations, motivations and experiences, it is important that the carding programme gives due consideration to these individual differences. While the carding programme has attempted to take on some of this responsibility, most athletes still felt ill-equipped when facing the prospect of post-sport careers. Consequently, the NZAS needs to ensure that personal development, regardless of the athlete's career stage, remains at the forefront of its high performance programmes. Workshops and educational resources outlining the importance of focussing simultaneously on both personal and sporting goals should be made available to all individuals involved within the carding programme. Likewise, the NZAS could engage high profile athletes who have successfully developed dual careers to share their experiences with these individuals. Such changes will help promote the concept of dual careers to those athletes and sporting bodies that are yet to see this as a viable option within the elite sport environment.

This is particularly important as many athletes within the current study described situations where they were actively discouraged, and in some cases prevented, from exploring opportunities outside of their chosen sport. Some researchers have suggested that as revenue is often contingent on obtaining international sporting success, coaches and administrators are far more determined to achieve positive results than create well-rounded athletes (Henry, 2013; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Therefore, despite the NZAS championing the ideals of holistic athlete development, its' policy of performance-based funding may be severely limiting the likelihood of this actually occurring. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to re-examine the way in which New Zealand's elite athletes are currently being supported. Specifically, more emphasis could be placed upon enhancing personal development alongside sporting performance when allocating funds to national sporting organisations. This could mean that NSO's are asked to account for how they develop their players both in, and outside, of the sporting arena before being granted NZAS funding.

Finally, while further research is needed to explore personal developmental across the various stages of athletes' sporting careers, it is critical that athlete development programmes consider these unique requirements in order to best meet individual needs. Additionally, any future research in this area should create space for athletes' voices within its research design. In so doing, researchers will provide athletes with the opportunity to assign meaning to their own lived experiences, thus allowing for a unique insight into the lives of elite athletes. Such research has the potential to strengthen current career development programmes, as well as facilitate the emergence of culturally-relevant alternative frameworks that prioritise the well-being of the athletes alongside their on-field performances.

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