EDUCATIONAL COUNSELING IN THE DUAL CAREER OF ATHLETES-STUDENTS

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Abstract
The issue of combining the dual career of the student-athlete, and the inevitable and sometimes unpredictable phases of transition that the student-athlete faces, are among the key themes of current European policies. The objective of this study is to reflect, according to the outcomes of several international investigations, on the impact that counseling, intended as a tool to implement individual skills and competencies, can have on student-athletes’ guidance at school and at University. This study focuses on the advantages of helping student-athletes through the support of guidance experts and professional counselors. Moreover, it explores the advantages of applying a holistic paradigm centered on a psycho-pedagogical approach for enhancing life-skills and adaptation capability through sport skills in student-athletes. Actually, the application of this paradigm allows combining sport skills and life skills, by encouraging the students-athletes to develop fully in their multiple dimensions, avoiding the risk of a unilateral development of identity.

Key words: sports, student-athlete, dual career, counseling, transitions.

Introduction
The issue of combining the sports and training life of top-level athletes is at the heart of European dual career policies. The Guidelines of the European Commission highlight that, too often, due to the restrictions of the education system and the labor market, this turns out to be a real challenge requiring high levels of motivation, commitment and responsibility by the athlete (European Union, 2012, p.3). They highlight the need to establish agreements between the sports system, the educational/training sector and the labor market to facilitate this combination. While such agreements have been recently implemented in some countries, in others they are still completely missing.

In addition, the lack of a legal framework or sustainable policies at European level makes it necessary to develop appropriate dual career programs for top-level athletes in Europe, allowing them to pursue future employment prospects, and thus to deal with their post-career through better retirement planning (Ibidem, p.3 and 7). The pursuit of actions that can achieve a good balance between sport, education/training and then employment, means creating the conditions for athletes to "start, develop, successfully end an elite sports career as part of a lifelong career, in conjunction with the combination of education and/or work, as well as of other important domains at different stages of life, like finding a role in society, securing a satisfactory income and developing identity and emotional relationships" (Ibid., p.6).

This means providing athletes with appropriate, flexible and expert support that allows them developing globally all their life dimensions, taking on different roles (eg. athlete, student, worker, parent, partner, etc.), and therefore fulfilling themselves as competent and valid members of society (Sánchez Pato, Isidori, Calderón, Brunton, 2017; Lindahl, 2011). Many studies have focused on the transitions during the sports career, which generally correspond to changes in the athlete's age (Bloom, 1985; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004; Salmela, 1994; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, & Cummings, 2000). Stambulova (2000) described sports career precisely in terms of transitions, i.e. moments or events that can be understood as turning points, which result in the self-change with respect to the world, and which therefore require corresponding changes in behavior. These are often associated with stress and uncertainty, and consequently result in the activation of coping processes (Stambulova et al. 2010). They objectively involve a series of new and additional demands (related to practice, competition, communication and lifestyle) that athletes have to face in order to pursue sports results or to adapt themselves to new contexts at the end of their career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

These transitions can be divided into categories; on the one hand, we can find the predictable and expected ones, i.e. the transition from the lowest to the highest level of a sports career that allow the athlete preparing adequately both physically and psychologically; on the other, we can find those involuntary, unpredictable and unexpected ones, i.e. important events that occur in a person's life and cannot be planned in an athlete's life, like an injury and/or the inability to participate in a major competition/championship (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Studies on successful sports careers and post career experiences have contributed to a better understanding of the main factors influencing both success in sports careers and well-being in post career.
These studies have revealed that the challenges of transition, not only in sports careers but also in other domains and areas of development, are perceived by athletes as interfering factors, influencing them psychologically and psychosocially, and leading to academic, professional and economic repercussions.

The career transition models (Stambulova, 2012, 2010, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Schlossberg, 1981) highlight the importance of having transition resources available in order to positively overcome such transitions, i.e. internal and external factors that facilitate the implementation of coping processes (e.g. previous experiences lived by the athlete, motivation, social and/or financial support).

Among these, social support from others is indicated by athletes as the most important resource at the beginning and at the end of their career.

On the other hand, the lack of specific skills, interpersonal conflicts, and difficulties in combining sport and study/work are among the factors hindering the processes of coping with the changes implied in the transition (Stambulova et al. 2009). This confirms that the close relationship of interdependence between different areas of life can trigger paths that are often non-linear, full of ups and downs, linked both to sports career/athletic development and also to the personal, social and school/professional dimension (Wylleman and Reints 2010; Wylleman, Reints and De Knop, 2013).

The 2012 European Guidelines on policy actions in support of dual careers of athletes are therefore intended to raise awareness among governments, sports bodies, educational institutions and the labor market, in order to create the necessary conditions to facilitate the combination of dual careers of athletes, and to develop an appropriate legal and financial framework and an approach that respects the differences inherent in sports disciplines.

Moreover, the guidelines highlight the importance of preventive interventions that can help athletes become more aware of the challenges related to transition phases, and of the need to develop resources to deal with them effectively and overcome critical moments, by turning ineffective actions into more effective strategies (Stambulova et al., 2009).

These include the professional counseling by career guidance experts, and more specifically by the dual career counselor, just like it currently happens in the Olympic Training Centers (Olympiastützpunkt) in Germany, through the Athletes Study and Career Services in Finland, in the Malmö Sport Academy of the University of Malmö in Sweden, in the Centro de Alto Rendimiento of Sant Cugat in Spain, and through the KADA association in Austria (European Union, 2016).

Counseling and its techniques are employed in the context of the dual career of student-athletes, with the aim of orienting and supporting them in choosing a lifestyle that allows them to combine a sports career with a school/training/occupational one, and to face the transitions in the best way possible, by dealing with the moments of crisis they could involve.

Discussion

Counseling in students-athletes' dual career.

The counseling activity is aimed at orienting, supporting and developing the customer's potentialities, by promoting active and proactive attitudes and stimulating the person’s ability to make choices and decisions concerning the actions to be taken, in order to carry out the project in that particular phase of the life cycle and to preserve or restore well-being. Galimberti defined it as “a therapeutic support action in the decision-making process, with the aim of creating the conditions for making decisions autonomously by taking into consideration conscious factors, such as interests and preferences, economic aspirations, social prestige and deep and unconscious inclinations referring to the basic emotional needs and the mechanisms of adaptation, which underlie the subject's personal dynamics and way of living” (Galimberti, 2006, p. 218). Therefore, it is “a relational competence-based activity that uses communicational means to facilitate one’s own self-knowledge through the awareness and optimal development of personal resources, in order to improve one’s own lifestyle in a more satisfying way” (May, 1991).

More recently, on the occasion of the '20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling' initiative, a definition shared by the major American Counseling Associations was developed, based on the Delphi method described by Kaplan, Tarvydas and Gladding in their work "20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling: The New Consensus Definition of Counseling" (2014). This work described this method as a professional relationship that empowers different individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, well-being, education, and career goals (Kaplan et al., 2014). The counselor's task is to 'encourage the development and use of the customers' potentialities, helping them overcome any personality problems that prevent them from expressing themselves fully and freely in the outside world [...].

The overcoming of the problem, the real transformation, is only up to the customer: the counselor can only lead them to rediscover the freedom to be themselves with empathy and respect" (Rollo May, 1991). When employing counseling as a useful tool to support the athletes in combining their sports career with the different areas/roles of life, it is necessary to rely on an evolutionary and holistic paradigm of reference (Holistic lifespan career).
This paradigm takes into account not only the dimension of the role of athlete, but also its interaction with other factors (psychological, psychosocial, scholastic, academic and professional), in order to support the person in meeting different needs and not only those specifically related to sports (Stambulova, 2000; 2012; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

According to Wylleman, Lavallee and Alfermann (1999), sports career supporting programs should be educational models with a preventive nature, useful for the development of coping skills and resources for the challenges that athletes face every day, for the specific transitions in their sports careers (for example, the across-the-board use of athletes' skills and resources during transitions or when retiring from competitive sports, allowing them to cope with the difficulties inherent in these particular phases) or for those arising in other areas of life but which, however, affect the development of the athletic career (e.g. school/academic career).

The path of reflection on dual career can become a way to stimulate the development of a harmonious identity in students-athletes, by considering all aspects relevant to them and all dimensions of life in addition to sports, i.e., those psychosocial, scholastic, academic, and professional. This facilitates the success of high-class athletes and can support them especially when their performance decreases.

A well-planned counseling services program could encourage athletes to reflect on the stress and challenges arising from the transition phases or from the simultaneous need to respond to demands of the sports, school/academic and personal context (Broughton, 2001).

**Methodology and tools for the counselor in the dual career of student-athletes**

Starting from the 1990s, the need for intervention programs to facilitate the process of change during the athlete's career transitions began to develop (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), and the first theories of career development through counseling began to be worked out (Sharf, 1997). The counselor’s role in the dual career is that of an expert trained to work with the person on issues related to guidance and personalized planning and design, in order to effectively combine sports, study and personal commitments (in our case) and to deal with educational and relational aspects (Harley & Cunningham, 1984; Hinkle, 1994).

Among the intervention tools, the one proposed by Bardaxoglou (1995, 1997) is particularly interesting, and can be used, in particular, in the transition phases. The first part concerns an analysis of the self-perception of the athletes' life, who are asked to use drawing to depict their own lives and then to list the ten most important events they have experienced, referring to their own values and opinions and the role they have played in each one. The second part requires athletes to represent their future by completing a spiral and using their experiences as the foundation and starting point of a new life cycle (whether sports-oriented or not), and by envisioning ten important events for their future.

This tool can be useful because, in a preventive and supportive perspective, it can be important to plan actions in order to improve the athletes’ awareness of their current or future needs, and in order to help them developing all the necessary resources to face them effectively.

Other important tools of intervention are those indicated by Chalaididis (1995) who, based on the outcomes of studies on the counseling paths for athletes in the transition phase carried out with high-level Greek and French athletes, suggests providing the following: individual sessions for the analysis of personal problems and identity conflicts, both during and after career transitions; discussion groups allowing people to share and reflect together on common problems; psychodrama techniques for implementing and elaborating conflicting issues. The counsellor should also help the students-athletes develop coping strategies that enable them to deal with unexpected and unforeseen events and with the end of their sports career itself, and to overcome the loss of sources of satisfaction and their identification as a sports 'heroes', by facilitating the "readjustment" of other spheres of their lives (Chalaididis, 1997).

Finally, among the effective strategies to help athletes in their career transitions, the Five-Step Career Planning Strategy (5-SCP), worked out by Stambulova (2010), sets up a system of counseling aimed at helping the athletes increase awareness of their past experiences, their current situation and future prospects, and helps them face the transitions in different life dimensions. Therefore, 5-SCP involves planning a career that deals with all dimensions of the athletes' life, and not just with sport or education/training/work. It consists of 5 steps, the first four of which (Create a framework, Structure your past, Structure your present, Structure your future) concern the mapping of athletes' past experiences, current situation and perceived future. The last step, i.e. Bridge your past, present, and future, involves the integration of the athlete's past, present and future projected into a career and life strategy.

According to what suggested by the different strategies proposed in order to draw a synthesis, which is not meant to be exhaustive, below the fundamental objectives and processes to plan effective guidance counseling interventions aimed at:

- Developing self-awareness in students-athletes through the development of a meaningful link between past, present and future, which is essential to set personal and professional goals and actions necessary to achieve them.
To do this, it is important to support the students-athletes in the self-exploration of their life history, and therefore of their experiences, resources and skills that they recognize, acquired not only in sports and school-training careers but also in primary and secondary relationships (with family, friends, teammates, schoolmates, teachers, coaches and other figures that are significant to them). It will also be important to explore needs, interests and desires, as well as objective constraints, in order to restore the feasibility of what will be the objectives to be achieved for an effective combination of the dual school/training and sports careers;● Supporting the students-athletes in the development of a program that will allow them improving their lifestyle by combining sport with other activities, planning the timing and finding the necessary motivation to re-establish and/or maintain a condition of well-being in all their life dimensions;● Emphasizing the resources and skills developed by the students-athletes through the sports career (e.g. commitment, effective interpersonal, emotional and communicative skills, organizational skills, orientation to goals, flexibility, team working, problem-solving, problem-setting, leadership, creativity and divergent thinking, effective management of time, energy, stress and failure, decision-making, critical skills, and so on) that can be conveyed and used in other contexts, such as in those school/training/professional and personal ones, in a circular interchange aimed at enhancing life skills and at responding to educational and training needs. This will also enable the preparation of their post-athletic career (Cosh and Tully, 2014; Aquilina, 2013);● Avoiding the risk of a one-sided development of the athletes' identity by supporting them in exploring other roles, like in the social, educational, school or professional context. Therefore, it will be necessary to encourage the students-athletes to search for possible forms of balance that allow them engaging also in school/training, friendly and family life, and to experiment in activities different from sport. Moreover, due to the potential difficulty of coping with the loss of status at the end of a sports career (Bellantonio, 2018), while adopting new roles (at professional, social, family and other levels) and new lifestyles, subsequent educational interventions may be necessary. These considerations show the importance of the counselor's support to facilitate the process of transition to a different professional path at the end of a sports career (Wylleman, La vallee, Alfermann, 1999);
● Designing socio-cultural integration interventions to support students-athletes who leave their country for sports reasons, and who are confronted with traditions and values different from their own ones.

The implementation of educational-guidance counseling interventions to facilitate the combination of dual careers will trigger changes in the other dimensions of the student-athlete's life which, as a person and thus as an open system, will inevitably be influenced in his/her complexity (systemic interdependence). For example, exploring new social roles as part of identity development interventions in the student-athlete may contribute to choosing a new lifestyle, and to enhancing or developing further life skills. Consequently, the combination of different types of interventions is encouraged to best meet the particular needs of each athlete, by taking into account the specific characteristics of each one (for example, the degree of maturity, resources and needs) in the design of the interventions themselves. Especially in the transition phases of the sports career, these interventions are based on supporting the athlete in exploring his/her background, current situation, needs and future plans (Stambulova, 2012).

Therefore, in the dual career, an educational-guidance career counseling will be used as a tool for the customer-centered interview, which, through active listening, is aimed at discovering and understanding the situation and/or the problem faced by that particular individual in that specific existential moment, in order to help him/her evolve personally to give him/her back autonomy and a greater sense of dignity and self-esteem (Pombeni, 1996). Consequently, the methodology will be aimed at self-exploration, self-understanding and, finally, at the planning of actions necessary for the realization of the individualized project. This will involve rebuilding the life story and, therefore, the personal experiences, the person's school/training path and his/her career and experience as an athlete, in order to learn about and clarify the different aspects and dimensions of his/her life and to understand and develop a greater degree of awareness. This allows us to assess resources and skills, i.e. to explore personal and social resources, life skills and sports skills that the athletes acknowledge, as well as their constraints, frailties and weaknesses, allowing us to understand their needs, desires and expectations (Stambulova, 2012). At this point it will be possible to design an effective way to combine the dual career, in which the athletes-students will be supported by the counselor in building realistic and achievable goals, both at general (in a first phase) and specific (in a later phase) level, and in the consequent planning of actions to be taken to achieve them.

In the transition from one phase of the personalized project to another, the students-athletes will be asked to make a self-assessment of the objectives achieved, the resources used and the skills and life skills acquired or enhanced, as well as the difficulties encountered, the possibilities of overcoming them and the strategies that can be put in place. Thus, the counselor will assist and support them throughout the process, also by involving their whole life system (family, teachers, coach, teammates, schoolmates, friends, etc.), who are a point of reference for them and will be able to promote the combination of the students-athletes’
double career, thanks to their own resources, responsibilities and skills (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012). Thanks to the counseling path, therefore, the athletes are given the opportunity to use the skills of the counsellor as a support to the skills they already possess, in order to achieve the desired goals in the ways and times that suit them most. This will strengthen the students-athletes’ coping and empowerment skills, by assessing the possibility of combining the different dimensions of life and by also developing their autonomy and responsibility level when it comes to make choices.

Conclusion

This study underlines the need to adopt an evolutionary and holistic perspective for a better analysis of the dual sport and school/training career in which the students-athletes are involved, so as to build strategies useful to promote its proper combination and to effectively face the challenges and consequent critical issues they face both every day, and during the transition (predictable and unpredictable) phases of their sports and post-career path. Starting from this perspective, this study highlights the importance of employing educational-guidance career counseling to help the students/athletes find the best form of combination that will allow them to adequately engage not only in the sports career, but also when interacting with other areas of their life. These include all those experiences and activities that are relevant to ensure a complete formation, so as to foster the development of a harmonious and multidimensional identity. This study, moreover, highlights how it can be useful to integrate a further approach in the evolutionary and holistic perspective, i.e. the psycho-pedagogical one, centered on the strengthening of life-skills through the recognition and enhancement of sport-skills acquired in the athletic field, which can be conveyed outside it and used in the athlete's school, academic, professional and personal dimension, by adapting and integrating them.

Through the support of educational-guidance counseling paths, therefore, the students-athletes are given the opportunity to use the skills of the counselor as a support to the skills they already possess to facilitate the achievement of the goals desired, in the ways and times that suit them most. This will allow strengthening their coping and empowerment skills by assessing the possibility of combining the different dimensions of their life, overcoming and dealing with the critical issues of the transition and post-career periods, and developing their autonomy and responsibility level when it comes to make choices.

Therefore, as pointed out in the Guidelines of the European Commission (European Union, 2012) regarding the importance that the professional counseling of career guidance experts could have for students-athletes, it would be desirable that all European countries work to integrate and disseminate those educational-guidance career counseling programs, already widely spread in Germany, Finland, Sweden, Austria and Spain, which represent best practices in this field. This is essential to facilitate the combination of dual sports-education/training careers for all high level athletes in Europe, necessary to ensure a global development of all dimensions of life and the assumption of different roles (as athlete, student, worker, and so on) and, therefore, their full realization as competent and valid members of society (Lindahl, 2011).

References

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