

Opinions Of Student - Athletes On Dual Career Support And Mental Health Issues

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Abstract:

Background: The Athletes Career Centre of the Croatian Olympic Committee (CRO OC) has launched a project aimed at young athletes in secondary schools that offer special conditions and support for athletes. In 11 Croatian secondary schools, from October to December 2023, we conducted a workshop in each school with invited lecturers - sports psychologists and former elite athletes. The aim of this study is to present an analysis of athletes' responses to anonymous questionnaires on dual career support in the athlete environment and mental health issues in competition.

Materials and Methods: The anonymous questionnaires were completed by 266 students-athletes aged 14-18 years (148 male and 118 female). Descriptive statistics were made for all analysed variables. Differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes were tested using the Chi2 (χ^2) test. If the expected frequency per cell was less than 5 Fisher's exact test was used for all tests, with a significance level of 5% considered statistically significant unless otherwise stated.

Results: The sample comprised 195 students- athletes who were not and 71 categorized athletes, of whom 33 were male and 38 females. One third of the athletes (86, 32.33%) had a problem coordinating and successfully fulfilling their school and sports commitments despite attending a school with special regulations for athletes. The most common factors that influence stress during competitions are: expectations from family, friends and teammates (86, 32.33%), fear of defeat (56, 21.05%), fear of opponents (41, 15.41%) and pressure from the coach (27, 19.15%).

Conclusion: We expected differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes due to higher engagement and expectations, but we found no significant differences in the observed variable. The most common factors that affect stress during competitions are: expectations from: family, friends and teammates (86, 32.33%), fear of defeat (56, 21.05%), opponents (41, 15.41%) and pressure from the coach (27, 19.15%). We found no significant differences between categorised and non-categorised in the observed variables. By organising mental health workshops in schools for young athletes and their teachers, we strengthen cooperation with schools that adapt and support young athletes and encourage them to create a safe environment for a successful DC in sport.

Key Word: student-athlete, dual career, mental health, environmental support

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I. Introduction

Since 2012, all activities of the Croatian Olympic Committee (CRO OC) and its partners in the field of dual careers (DC) have been guided by the "EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes" issued by the European Commission (EC). One of the recommendations was the creation of the National Guidelines for Dual Careers (National Programme for Career Development and Careers after Sport 2014-2020), which we created and which was adopted by the CRO OC and supported by the National Council for Sport. In addition, DC in sport are recognised as an important topic in several national documents: The National Sports Programme (2019-2026) and the new Sports Law to be adopted in 2023. Numerous activities on DC in sport carried out from 2012 to date have focused on several areas: 1. promotion, 2. education, improving policies and regulations, 4. analyzing and publishing the results of studies and 5. projects (supported by the Olympic Solidarity Foundation, ERASMUS+, etc.) The last project launched by Olympic Solidarity was "Mental Health of Young Athletes – Protection and Promotion", which we implemented in 2023. Croatia is famous for its great sporting achievements and we have always said that our athletes are the best ambassadors of Croatia in the world. Like the whole of Europe, we are also very concerned about the catastrophic demographic situation. Today we have

the problem of a shortage of labour on the market, in the future we will have the problem that the number of athletes in competitions and thus the number of athletes at the Olympic Games will decrease. It is therefore important to create a safe environment for the athletes. This includes better co-operation between schools, especially secondary schools, which is tailored to the athletes, their professors and all other responsible stakeholders. According to the IOC Mental Health Action Plan (2023), the mental health of young athletes is a priority in these years and one of the objectives of the five focus areas is to “reduce stigmatisation by developing awareness and promoting attitudes that enhance and promote mental health literacy”. Many famous active or former athletes have reported in the media about how they struggled with mental health problems during their careers. All these facts have prompted the Athletes Career Centre of the CRO OC to launch a project aimed at young athletes in secondary schools, offering special conditions and support for athletes. The main objective of the project is to increase mental health literacy and reduce stigma by raising athletes' awareness of mental health and helpful techniques and informing them about the DC opportunities that the Ministry of Tourism and Sport and the Athletes Career Centre of the COC OC can offer.

Health in general is considered the most important value for every member of society. Children and adolescents deserve special attention, as the resources of childhood and adolescence are linked to the course of well-being in adulthood, where we expect productive individuals who feel personally well and make a responsible contribution to society. According to Šimunković (2022), it was estimated for the Republic of Croatia in 2019 that 11.5% of young people aged 10 to 19 already had a mental disorder. We have found several analyses on mental health of young people before and after COVID-19, but we noticed that there is a lack of studies on athletes, so we would like to encourage others to conduct studies on this topic at the same time. The aim of this study is to present an analysis of athletes' responses to dual-career support tools in secondary schools (or classes) tailored to athletes and responses to mental health problems in competition. The second aim is to determine whether there are differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes – participants in workshops organised in 11 Croatian secondary schools.

II. Material And Methods

Procedure methodology

The Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia have approved the programme of workshops “Mental health of young athletes – protection and promotion” offered by the Athletes Career Centre of the CRO OC and the Centre for Mental Training. Out of a total of 18 secondary schools for athletes in Croatia, 11 schools have expressed their interest in participating in the project. The schools – partners of the project - have obtained the consent of the athletes' parents for their participation and invited one or more active or former athletes who were students at the school and are willing to talk about their personal experiences with DC and mental health problems during their careers. In 11 schools, we conducted a workshop with invited lecturers - sports psychologists from the Centre for Mental Training - in each school from October to December 2023.

The workshops are divided into several parts: introduction to dual careers: about the six categories of CRO- OC athletes (elite, gifted and talented) and information about their rights if they are categorised, minimum standards for DC and support from the newly established Athletes Career Centre. The second part began with stories from invited guest athletes about DC and personal experiences of how they overcame obstacles during their careers. The student athletes then had the opportunity to learn about mental health and some techniques that can help them when they feel nervous. All workshop participants received free online training provided by the Mental Training Centre. At the end of each workshop, the student athletes completed two anonymous questionnaires: one on minimum standards in DC and mental health issues and the other to evaluate the workshops. Finally, they had the opportunity to test their knowledge in a quiz on DC and mental health literacy.

Instruments of measurements

The instrument used was a 31-item questionnaire that collected information on the following points: demographic data (school, gender, age, grade level, sport type), sport participation (sport experience, time spent on sport and grading), problems in DC (change of school or grade level, main problems), DC support in school and sport, DC support in school and sport club, cooperation between school and club, absence from school due to sport commitments, implementation of DC policy in school, and career planning and interest in future education. The last question related to mental health: stress factors during competitions, concentration difficulties during competitions and what motivates them in difficult times during competitions.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were made for all analysed variables. For categorical variables of frequency and relative frequency and mean, standard deviation, minimum, median and maximum for the evaluation variables:

career benefits, satisfaction with the content and organisation of the workshop. Differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes were tested using the Chi2 (χ^2) test. If the expected frequency per cell was less than 5. Fisher's exact test was used for all tests, with a significance level of 5% considered statistically significant unless otherwise stated.

III. Result

The anonymous questionnaires were completed by 266 young sports students aged 14-18 years (148 male athletes with an average age of $x = 16.48$, $SD = 1.02$ and 118 female athlete $x = 16.49$, $SD = 1.07$). The sample comprised 195 young athletes who were not categorized and 71 categorized athletes, of whom 33 were male and 38 females. We did not calculate significant statistical differences related to athletes' gender and categorisation at the 5% significance level, but they exist at the 7% significance level ($hi2=3.293$; $st.sl.=1$; $p=0.0696$). The majority of athletes who participated in the workshops are 3rd grade students (142, 53.38%); most athletes (143, 53.76%) trained in one of the sports (volleyball, basketball, football, handball, hockey). Most of athletes have a sports career of 10 (40, 15.04) or 11 (44, 16.54%) years and train daily (157, 59.02%), while 72, 27.07% train several times a day. In line with the results of previous studies (Caput-Jogunica, 2007; Caput-Jogunica and Jazbec, 2021), in this study one third of the athletes (86, 32.33%) had a problem coordinating and successfully fulfilling their school and sports commitments despite attending a school with special regulations for athletes. The main problem they reported was the lack of time to study effectively after training, especially when they were tired. Less than 10% (22, 8.27%) of the athletes stated that they had changed schools and/or classes due to sports commitments. The majority of them changed because of a larger number of absences or because of a change of club or training ground. Athletes stated that they had received the most support from their family (210, 78.95%). In second place were their friends (72, 27.07%) and their coaches (55, 20.68%). Only 20% (53, 19.92%) of the athletes who participated in the workshops confirmed that their sports clubs take care of their education (a larger number of them stated that there are meetings with parents (26, 9.77%) or co-operation between their coaches and professors at school (22, 8.27%).

For this article, we will analyze the questions about the factors that affect stress during competitions and determine focus and motives during difficult times (Table 1). The most common factors that affect stress during competitions are: expectations from: family, friends and teammates (86, 32.33%), fear of defeat (56, 21.05%), opponents (41, 15.41%) and pressure from the coach (27, 19.15%). Of the other responses, equally common are unfair judge decisions (19, 7.14%), unplanned situations (19, 7.14%), while 16, 6.02% stated that they did not experience any stressors.

Table no 1 Results on stressors in competition and differences between non-categorised (Non-categ.) and categorized (Categ.) athletes

Stressors in competitions	Non-categ.	Non-categ.	Categ.	Categ.	Total		
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Fear	41	15.41	15	5.64	56	21.05	Fisher's exact test Chi2=4.5019; df=7; p=0.7659
Expectation from others	63	23.68	23	8.65	86	32.33	
Injustice	16	6.02	3	1.13	19	7.14	
Opponents	28	10.53	13	4.89	41	15.41	
Insufficient preparation	2	0.75	0	0.0	2	0.75	
Pressure from the coach	22	8.27	5	1.88	27	10.15	
Unplanned situation	12	4.51	7	2.63	19	7.14	
No stress	11	4.14	5	1.88	16	6.02	
Total	195	73.31	71	26.96	266	100.00	

Table 1. shows the descriptive measures of stressors for categorised and non-categorised athletes, and we found no statistical differences. Loss of concentration (focus) during competition was reported by 98 (36.84%) athletes due to poor performance or the situation, while 73 (27.44%) athletes reported lack of strength or fatigue as the cause. Concentration problems before the competition were reported by 39 (14.99%) athletes and 58 (21.88%) stated that they had no such problem but were always concentrated. We found no significant differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes ($Chi2=1.164$; $df=4$; $p=0.8840$) (Table 2).

Table no 2 Analysis of responses on the topic of loss of concentration during competition and differences between non-categorised (Non-categ.) and categorized (Categ.) athletes

Concentration/competition	Non-categ.	Non-categ.	Categ.	Categ.	Total	Total
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Beginning of the performance	18	6.77	8	3.01	26	9.77
Poor performance/situation	74	27.82	24	9.02	98	36.84
Lack of strength and fatigue	30	11.28	14	5.26	44	16.54
Concentration does not fall	54	20.30	19	7.14	73	27.44
Thinking about other things	19	7.14	6	2.26	24	9.41
Total	195	73.31	71	26.69	266	100
Chi2 test	Chi2=1.164; df=4; p=0.8840					

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked the athletes what motivates them in difficult times during competitions. The majority of them (75, 28.2%) answered: support from family, friends and teammates or the successes of their role models in sport, while for 73, 27.44% of athletes the motivation is winning and achieving the goal. A slightly smaller number of athletes (39, 14.66%) responded that they find motivation when they remember the whole efforts that they have made. As in the previous ones' tables, we found no significant differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes regarding motives which help them in difficult times at competitions (Chi2=4.589; df=4; p=0.3321) (Table 3).

Table no 3 Analysis of motives in difficult times at competition and differences between non-categorised (Non-categ.) and categorized (Categ.) athletes

Motives	Non-categ	Non-categ	Categ	Categ	Total	Total
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Effort invested	25	9.76	14	5.26	40	15.02
Support from the environment	58	21.81	18	6.77	76	28.58
Goal achieved	50	18.80	23	8.65	73	27.44
Challenge	45	16.92	13	4.89	58	21.80
No motives	16	6.02	3	1.13	19	7.14
Total	195	73.31	71	26.69	266	100
Chi2 test	Chi2=4.589; df=4; p=0.3321					

IV. Discussion

Sports performance is crucial for athletes and mental health is one of the elements that influence sports performance. According to Gomati and Satish (2024), good mental health can significantly increase an athlete's ability to perform at their best. About half of all common mental health disorders occur before the age of 18, including mood disorders, anxiety, eating disorders, substance use and neurodevelopmental disorders. Despite numerous studies on mental health problems, studies on the mental health of young athletes are still under-researched (Purcell et al., 2023). The initiative of the CRO OC in 2023 aims to strengthen cooperation with secondary schools with sports classes and to educate young athletes and their teachers in schools about DC support and the importance of mental health for athletes who need it. In this study, we analysed the factors that influence stress during competition and determined the focus and motives of un-categorised and categorised athletes during difficult times. We wanted to know whether we could identify differences in stress factors during a competition and motives in relation to categorisation status but we not found it. The most common factors that affect stress during competitions are: expectations from: family, friends and teammates (86, 32.33%), fear of defeat (56, 21.05%), opponents (41, 15.41%) and pressure from the coach (27, 19.15%). The family, friends, teammates or successes of their role models in sport motivates athletes in difficult times during competitions. How to explain that we not found any statistical differences related to stressor factors between young categorized and non-categorised athletes?

One of the reasons for this is the nature of the sample, which largely consists of team sports (sports games) that can later be categorised as individual sports according to the criteria and system of competition. Another possible reason is that, according to EUROSTAT, the Republic of Croatia occupies a high position among European countries where young people aged 30 or more (33.4 years) live with their families and can therefore feel more secure in terms of logistics, which includes material conditions, nutrition, transport and other things necessary for a successful dual career in sport. In a study we conducted only on Croatian categorised athletes (aged 16-17 years), we found only one significant difference between genders: in training frequency,

with more male athletes training several times a day than females, and statistical differences in interest in an academic career (Caput-Jogunica et al., 2024). As we mentioned in introduction part, we had serious problem demographic problems which will be reflected in the future in sport: decrease number of young athletes. Most young athletes, especially women, give up their sports careers during high school. One of the reasons for this is to prepare for graduation in order to enrol in the desired degree programme. This is consistent with the results of research conducted on categorised athletes and the difference by gender.

Early intervention in the form of information about professional support and special conditions in a DC as well as basic techniques for coping with stress during competitions and in sport and everyday life is important and necessary. By organising mental health workshops in schools for young athletes and their teachers, we strengthen cooperation with schools that adapt and support young athletes and encourage them to create a safe environment for a successful DC in sport.

Further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how the DC workshop and the mental health promotion tools presented impacted the athletes who participated in this project and whether there are differences between them and other athletes in sports schools who were not involved.

V. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate which dual career support tools are used in athletes' environments, how they deal with stressors and which motives help them in difficult situations during competitions, and whether there are differences between categorised and non-categorised athletes. In comparison with previous studies we have confirmed that one third athletes have the problem to fulfil dual career obligations even though they are in school tailored to athletes. It is a worrying fact that only 20% (53, 19.92%) of the athletes who participated in the workshops confirmed that their sports clubs take care of their education. Athletes Career Centre future activities should be focus on the activities that will improve cooperation between different stakeholder who are responsible for dual career support in athlete's environment and according to evaluation results it is important to continue with workshops for young athletes about mental health issues.

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