

Dual Career Experiences of South African Olympic Athletes

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Abstract

The National Sport and Recreation Plan in South Africa has designated twenty-three universities as hubs for Olympic student-athletes in the advanced stages of long-term athlete development. In the contemporary world of sports, Olympic athletes face stringent requirements, necessitating unwavering dedication to achieve excellence. However, financial rewards for sustaining a livelihood through sports are limited, and the support systems for post-retirement financial and psychological impacts are scarce. This underscores the importance of athletes pursuing dual careers or preparing for post-athletic endeavors while actively engaging in high-level competition. This study seeks to comprehend the experiences of a cohort of South African Olympic athletes in higher education, focusing on the concurrent development of their academic and sporting pursuits. Employing a qualitative interpretive research design, the study involved the purposeful sampling of fifteen South African Olympic athletes from diverse sporting codes, including track and field, swimming, hockey, and rowing. Data were gathered through ten semi-structured interviews. The findings illuminate the multifaceted challenges Olympic athletes face in balancing academic and athletic commitments. Financial constraints pose a significant hurdle to a successful dual career, exacerbated by the demanding travel schedules inherent in elite sports. Effective time management becomes imperative as athletes navigate intense training regimens, frequent travel, and academic responsibilities. The experiences of Olympic higher education student-athletes underscore the importance of extended academic programs, financial support mechanisms, and a robust sport tutorial system. These recommendations are necessary to facilitate the successful pursuit of dual careers, ensuring that student-athletes can navigate the complexities of academic and sporting aspirations.

Keywords: Dual Career, Higher Education, Olympic Athletes, Student-Athletes, University Sport

Introduction

A dual career can be briefly defined as a career with major foci on sport and studies or work (Stambulova and Wylleman 2015). This is a growing topic within the sociology and psychology of sport since it attracts institutions' interest due to the importance of transitions within sports careers (Lopez-Chamorro and Simón 2018). Student-athletes with dual careers are more successful when transitioning from sport to working life than athletes focused solely on sports. Ryba et al. (2017) and Aquilina (2013) described the presence of an alternative focus as a relief from the pressures of sport that provide perspectives for the student-athlete. The requirements placed on student Olympic athletes in contemporary sports are such that they increasingly need to dedicate themselves to excellence. This implies that most of their time is devoted to developing sporting careers, with fewer opportunities to develop other aspects of their lives. The reality facing many Olympic athletes is that few are sufficiently financially rewarded, allowing them to make a living from sport. Even fewer can rely on measures from their own countries to assist with the financial and psychological impacts of retirement from sport (Stambulova, Stephan, and Jäphag 2007). This emphasizes the need for athletes to have dual careers or prepare for post-athletic careers while still participating at elite levels (Torregrosa et al. 2015).

Talented elite athletes have the right to combine sport and higher education in South Africa and in other nations where this has been determined. Both careers are relevant to empower them for future roles in society at the end of their competitive sports participation. In the 2020–2025 South African Sport and Recreation Strategic Plan (Sport and Recreation South Africa 2020), twenty-three public universities are viewed as critical stakeholders in providing education, conducting research, and offering scientific support for the optimal development of elite athletes (Burnett 2018). Most South African universities have strict requirements for student-athletes to perform academically and in sport to qualify for student bursaries, accommodation, and scientific support (Burnett 2018). Universities are training hubs for sporting excellence and factories for Olympians. South Africa has two student-athlete track and field competitions: the Varsity Cup and University Sports South Africa (USSA).

The Varsity Cup is a semiprofessional league consisting of eight institutions that broadcast on national television, have media exposure, and benefit from its profit (Varsity Sport, n.d.). Some universities also have junior clubs and high-performance schools where talented learners earn bursaries, get special training, and have flexible schedules that allow them to go on tour and attend national camps; this approach prioritizes their competition programs. USSA is the controlling body of all sports played at tertiary institutions in South Africa. USSA has complete control and jurisdiction over all student sports events and tournaments organized under its auspices (University Sport South Africa 2020).

This study sought to develop an understanding of the perspectives that Olympic athletes had for developing academic and sporting careers simultaneously. It identified the challenges they faced and how these could be overcome while developing insights for practitioners and policymakers. A qualitative methodological approach and a holistic athletic career model were used to obtain the relevant data needed for this study. The research questions for this study sought to answer the dual career experiences of Tokyo 2020 Olympic athletes in South Africa and the support systems in place at higher education institutions to assist Olympic athletes following dual careers.

Student-Athletes and Dual Careers

Student-athletes are consistently confronted with ongoing challenges, such as low graduation rates in education. Nonrevenue-producing sports teams are often structured in a way that enables student-athletes to combine sports participation with academic and social development. This combination is most likely to occur when student-athletes enter universities with positive attitudes about higher education and the value of qualifications (Coakley 2021). Student-athletes who are part of successful teams may train harder and define athletic success as important. Still, most of them take education seriously and try to maintain a balance between academic and athletic commitments. The student-athletes who exhibit this effectively are those who have the following characteristics: (1) past experiences that consistently reaffirm the importance of education; (2) social networks that support their academic identities; (3) perceived access to career opportunities following graduation; and (4) social relationships and experiences that expand confidence and skills apart from sports (Coakley 2021).

There has been a growing emphasis on supporting athletes in pursuing dual careers. This increased attention can be attributed to various factors, primarily the acknowledgment that athletes often engage in dual careers. Student-athletes, as highlighted by the European Commission (2007) and Stambulova (2012), experience numerous individual and societal benefits. Maintaining a dual career has been recognized for helping individuals navigate transitions from junior to senior levels of sport and higher-level training environments (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, and Spink 2008; Stambulova, Stambulov, and Johnson 2012). Studies by Henriksen and colleagues (Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010; Larsen et al. 2013) emphasize the importance of supportive environments in successful

athletic talent development and facilitating athletes' engagement in dual careers. Specific advantages of balancing education alongside sport include positive socialization effects, increased employability, reduced stress, and positive effects on athletes' self-regulation (Ryba et al. 2017). At the individual level, significant attention has been directed toward the impact of a dual career on athletic identity and its consequences for athlete dropout and post-sport life (Lally 2007; Lavalley and Robinson 2007; Van Zyl 2018). Maintaining a dual career contributes to a balanced life, preventing the development of an exclusive athletic identity, which has been associated with difficulties during transitions out of sport (Grove, Lavalley, and Gordon 1997). Notably, athletes with a strong athletic identity experience a longer duration of emotional and social adjustment to post-sport life compared to those with multiple identities (Erpič, Wylleman, and Zupančič 2004; Grove, Lavalley, and Gordon 1997).

Torregrosa and colleagues (2015) found substantial benefits for Olympic athletes who engaged in dual careers, including better retirement planning, ease of transition, active coping strategies, and improved access to social support. Beyond cognitive and emotional adaptation, financial considerations also play a crucial role in athletes' post-sport lives, as most athletes cannot sustain themselves solely on earnings from their sporting careers for an extended period of time (McCormack and Walseth 2013). While athletes may assume they can secure well-paying positions as coaches or administrators after retirement, these opportunities are limited (McCormack and Walseth 2013). Athletes may initially be uninterested in planning for athletic retirement, but personal experiences underscore the importance of early preparation for post-athletic careers (Aquilina 2009; European Commission 2007). Given athletes' potential reluctance, establishing supportive structures for maintaining a dual career becomes imperative, especially considering the challenges faced by high-performance athletes (Stambulova 2012; Ryba et al. 2015).

The simultaneous pursuit of elite-level success in both sports and education or work poses challenges, leading to fatigue, loss of motivation, and limited time for activities outside of sport or work/education (McCormack and Walseth 2013; Miller and Kerr 2002; Pavlidis and Gargalianos 2014). This juggling act may result in student-athlete overload and an increased risk of injuries (Ryba et al. 2015). Aquilina (2013) noted that the commitment required to excel in sport may lead to athletes failing in either or both sporting and academic endeavors.

Despite potential negative consequences, engaging in dual careers has unequivocal positive results (Henry 2013). While some coaches express concerns about the impact on sporting performances, studies, such as Aquilina's (2013) life history methodology, reveal numerous benefits. Athletes from France, Finland, and the United Kingdom reported that their dual careers positively influenced their sporting involvement. These benefits included the transferability of skills between academia and sports, a balance of intellectual and physical stimulation, and a sense of security in sport, fostering better performance by providing a safety net outside of the sporting realm. Additionally, maintaining perspective on both sport and education contributed to a general sense of balance, emphasizing that life encompasses more than just athletic pursuits.

Combining Sport and Education: The Need for Balance

While the term "balance" may not have received extensive attention in the literature, it is a widely used concept recognized as a crucial element in the lives of elite athletes across various contexts and levels (Stambulova and Harwood 2022). The first level to be explored is the personal level, encompassing various components such as sport, education, and social relations that constitute an athlete's life. Researchers, including McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004) and Miller and Kerr (2002, 2003), have delved into the discussion of elite athletes balancing priorities to manage educational and sporting commitments. The focus has been on achieving equilibrium in various roles and

responsibilities, particularly in the dual roles of students and Olympic athletes. Miller and Kerr (2002) sought to explain negative academic experiences by proposing the influence of other factors, such as fatigue, lack of role experimentation, and delayed identity development, on the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. Emphasizing the potential to lose sight of the importance of balance in pursuing goals and objectives, the authors stated that there is always the potential to lose sight of the importance of balance in pursuing one's goals and objectives (Miller and Kerr 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This study employed the Model of Career Transition (Wylleman, Reints, and De Knop 2013) as the theoretical framework, as it portrays an athletic career as an ongoing sequence of events rather than a singular occurrence. This perspective aligns with the notion that athletes should be comprehensively treated and viewed, considering factors beyond just their athletic performance. While earlier research primarily concentrated on stages of talent development, crisis transitions, and sports career termination, recent studies have increasingly focused on within-career transitions using a holistic lifespan perspective (Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee 2004). The Model of Career Transition (Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee 2004) is a developmental model that elucidates the challenges athletes encounter when balancing dual careers, encompassing academic and athletic development. For the investigation, only the top and bottom layers of the model are illustrated in Figure 2.

The first or top layer of the Model of Career Transition consists of the stages in athletic development. On this level, the athlete goes through four transitions or stages: initiation, development, mastery, and discontinuation, as depicted in Figure 1. The mastery (higher education) stage is most prevalent in dual careers for Olympic athletes due to the demanding training schedule in combination with education. This stage occurs when athletes move from the development stage to the mastery stage.

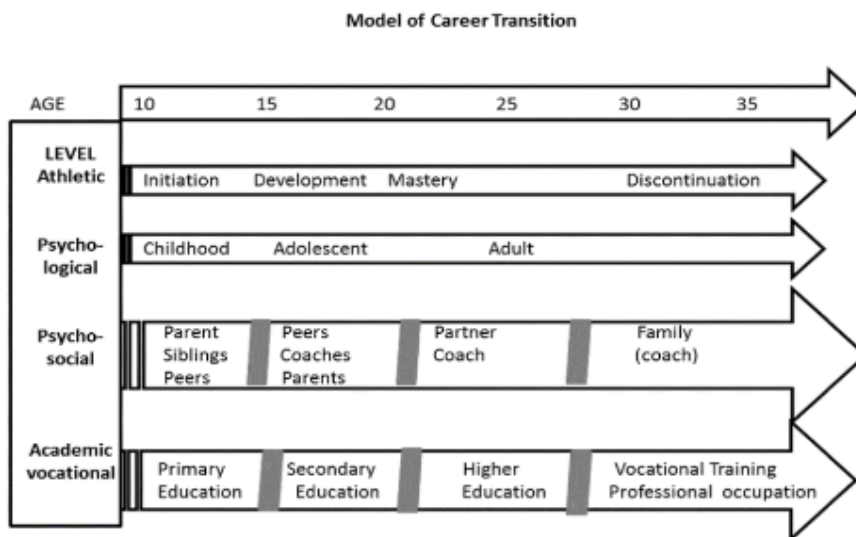


Figure 1: Adapted Version of the Holistic Athletic Career Model

Source: Wylleman Reints and De Knop 2013

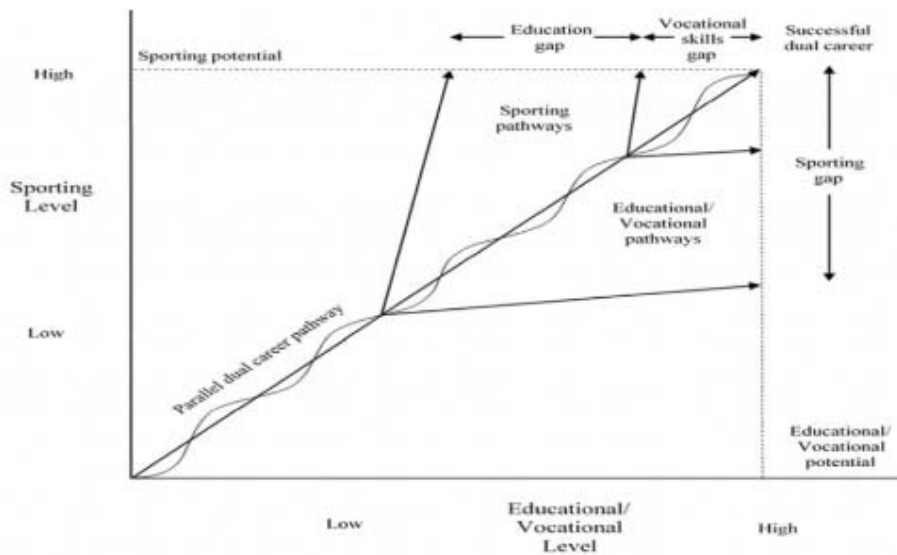


Figure 2: Visual Representation of a Grounded Theory of Dual Career Pathways in Sport

Source: Deason 2019

Participation in the Olympic Games is a turning point in athletes' athletic and life careers (Samuel, Tenenbaum, and Bar-Mecher 2016). Career researchers, however, have recently begun considering the Olympic Games from a holistic developmental perspective as a transition with several phases (Schinke et al. 2015; Stambulova, Stambulov, and Johnson 2012; Wylleman, Reints, and Van Aken 2012). Wylleman and colleagues used interviews and athletes' self-reports to describe changes in athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational development experienced by four Belgian Olympians. This analysis covered the periods leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games, the duration of the Games, and the subsequent phases thereafter. Relative to each phase, participants' changes covered all four developmental layers to allow the holistic developmental perspective to be critical in studying Olympic athletes.

The fourth layer pertains to the development and transitions at academic levels in higher education.

The commencement of Olympic athletes' dual careers coincides with their obligatory education. This transitional phase involves progressing from the initial stages of athletic pursuits to the developmental stages, where individuals formulate aspirations of attaining elite athlete status (Wylleman, Reints, and De Knop 2013). Negotiating the confluence of sports and mandatory education poses a considerable challenge for most athletes. Nevertheless, their ability to navigate this dual commitment is facilitated by a supportive network of individuals who largely accommodate both pursuits. However, the complexity of maintaining a dual career intensifies during higher education and employment, often resulting in participants scaling back their dedication to at least one of their career ambitions (Deason 2019).

Research Methodology

For this investigation, a qualitative research approach was employed. The underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm were used to explore the dual career experiences of Olympians in South Africa due to the qualitative nature of this study. As part of a qualitative study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. This qualitative study explored and found an understanding of the dual career experiences of Olympic athletes in South Africa. Therefore, the construction of the athletes' reality was explored as subjective. A qualitative approach was also

suitable for use in this study because of the alignment that the approach has with interpretive and constructivist paradigms (Sefotho 2018).

Research Sample

Fifteen semi-structured individual interviews were used from four sporting codes and seven universities. The age of the participants varied from 19 to 37 years. The criteria and protocol used to select participants were self-designed to conduct the interviews. Purposive sampling, as well as snowball sampling, were used as data collection methods. The inclusion criteria included male and female athletes from multiple racial-ethnic groups and Olympic and Paralympic athletes enrolled at a higher education institution. A snowball sampling method was used to contact paralympic athletes. This sampling method is used when participants are difficult to find and, once found, information is requested from them about others (Maree 2019). The sample consisted of three cohorts: (1) athletes who did not complete their studies; (2) athletes who were currently enrolled in studies; and (3) athletes who had completed studies while simultaneously preparing for the Olympic Games that were postponed from 2020 to 2021 because of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection Protocol: Narrative Interviews

The study employed a narrative research approach, wherein athletes shared narratives recounting their life experiences. These personal accounts were systematically integrated into a narrative chronology, weaving together the perspectives derived from the athletes' lives with those of the researcher. This collaborative narrative approach aligns with the principles outlined by Clandinin (2006), fostering a comprehensive understanding by incorporating the athletes' perspectives and the researcher's life experiences.

Data Analysis

This investigation aimed to explore the dual career experiences of Olympic athletes in South Africa. The research topic was investigated through the underlying principles of an interpretive paradigm, specifically the social constructivist paradigm. The focus of the research was an understanding of the subjective experiences and meanings made by athletes in their social realities. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), the interpretive paradigm aims to

understand subjective experience. Interpretivism may also be associated with the idea that multiple realities exist and each reality has its subjective interpretation and perception (Maree 2019). The interpretive paradigm was used to understand the dual careers that Olympic athletes experience at a higher education institution. The narrated narratives were recorded with a video recording device and transcribed afterward. The transcriptions of the fifteen Olympic athletes were categorized into variables organized according to key themes.

Participants' Narratives

Financial Challenges

Although most of the participants had sports bursaries from their respective universities to cover expenses such as coaching, partial study fees, accommodation, and club fees, more than the bursaries were needed. The bursaries did not provide them with a sustainable living as Olympic athletes, and those considered student-athletes had to follow the third stream to fund their sporting careers at the elite level. SASCOC (2020), the National Olympic Committee for South Africa, has a support scheme, but this is only available for Olympic athletes who are ranked in the top twelve in the world or are medal contenders.

Participant G felt disadvantaged because he had to focus on more than a dual career to support himself financially. He explained that he earned additional funds by making knives and selling cutting boards.

I compete with professionals, but we are trained amateurs and want to compete like professionals. I come from a very poor socio-economic level. My parents couldn't afford high school or university. I sacrifice some of my practice time to study for an actual proper degree. I started making money from my hobby, which is making wooden cutting boards and knifemaking.

Participants B and E experienced similar financial burdens with their sports participation. Training equipment and the cost of prosthetics are almost prohibitive and, therefore, a big financial burden for a disabled athlete in South Africa. Sponsorships are not easily obtained. To overcome this burden, Participant B had to find a career to establish a dual career. He explained that he had paid for most of his travels, even to the Doha 2019 World Championships himself, while at the same time working full-time to support himself. Participant J had funding from the Olympic Solidarity Fund, but, in his view, it was not enough.

I had a scholarship from Olympic Solidarity and with those funds, I must manage to do sport and balance my studies. The funds were not enough, so I am still busy with my studies because like you say, I need more than paying for accommodation and the status to live the Olympic dream or be a professional athlete. In this case, the studies take a little bit of a back seat due to insufficient funds.

Participant D summarized what some of the other participants mentioned about their dual careers, saying, "[Field] hockey is a sport that struggles with basic funding, and so our athletes are forced to work full-time jobs, study full-time, and still make time for training."

In contrast to the other participants, Participant L, who lives in the USA, did not have financial challenges because of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules involving dual career collegiate support as a student-athlete as well as having a personal professional shoe contract. Presently, the NCAA permits collegiate student-athletes to secure contracts for additional money based on sports performance. It is referred to as a Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) contract for student-athletes.

Adidas is paying me enough money that I don't need to have a job outside of athletics, and for all my Olympian friends that's the same way any of my friends who are not paid through a shoe brand do have other jobs and seem to manage it just fine.

Student Support System

The need for an improved student support system tailored specifically for Olympic student-athletes was clear during the interviews. University departmental student-athlete advisors need to be more involved in dual careers by managing academic timetables and training schedules. Assistance with time management by tutors and student advisors would also be beneficial. Participant B thought there was life after sport, stating:

So, it would be important to know when you have reached your peak in elite sports, so you have something to fall back on. If you have a degree or some certificate where you can have a job after sport, that is very important. I am almost reaching that point in my career where I must start thinking of retiring from sports and then focus more on a professional career, which will be education.

Participant C had more than dual career challenges to overcome—he also had health burdens.

Knowing I had cancer changed my whole perspective. For the first time in my life, rowing was not the most important thing for me. Getting better was. I only started thinking about rowing and returning when my body began to react positively to the treatment.

It's a huge challenge for Olympic athletes trying to balance and keep up with all the information they know if you have six different subjects. You're trying to balance when the tests or when we're trying to move them with your training and with your competition. It's tough.

Participant D said that in the USA, they had sports advisors who planned timetables for the student-athletes and coordinated with the athletics head coach so that athletes could benefit in the classroom.

A sports tutor to help athletes, not only from the academic side but from, the sports club side, or, as somebody who can cater for students like you lead the Olympian, to help with number one stay up to date, too, to manage with academics to states, let's call it special tests or sick tests, early on, later, and keep you up to date.

Participant E spoke about his night training schedule and how this impacted his studies.

The time that we train is at night, around six to eight o'clock or so. And that's usually when I'm not sitting down and finishing up my work, starting something, or studying. So, it's quite hard, especially if you have a test the next day—you must study.

Participant E also thought time management was very important.

Tutors would help because, for example, let's say they've gone through a sporting career themselves. They'd like to understand the difference between the roles they must play, especially since they played sports and studied simultaneously. So, a sports tutor would benefit us as athletes.

Participant F stated:

We [in the USA] have an academic advisor to whom I can always send a message to pop in and tell. Okay, no. In this class, I'm alone; I'm struggling with it. Can I do anything? And he put me in contact with either a tutor or something because there are tutors whom we can reach out to throughout the university, especially as student-athletes, and then they are academic advisors who will also like him to help us with whatever we are struggling academically.

Participant H's dual career perception is a need for more support from his university regarding class attendance and assessment.

There should be more tutors helping because sometimes we can't attend every single class of the year. So, it would be nice to have someone who could help us throughout the year with specific assignments that we weren't there for in class or couldn't do the test somehow.

Participant H said having a successful dual career could be challenging and felt it was harder to have a dual career as an Olympian.

Being an Olympian is one of the highest track and field honors to have and focus on. It is hard for someone trying to achieve a goal in athletics when Olympic athletes must consistently attend classes, complete tests, and train for the sport. There is simply a great deal to attend to, much more than just being a student or an athlete.

Participant I also thought his university's structure was one of the greatest motivators to study and participate in athletics. In terms of sport and the community, it gave him an exit strategy after his athletic career was necessary and being able to study at a tertiary institution was the best way for him. He further suggested that the attitudes of Olympic athletes must include valuing the experience. The inclusion of a mentor could assist in finding a balance between studies and athletics.

Participant K said that the most challenging part of participating in a dual career program was traveling for track meets and missing classes. Still, in the USA, lecturers understand the commitment to track, and they help student-athletes as much as possible, including moving test dates to accommodate student-athletes.

You're on your own to make sure that you didn't fall behind [in South Africa], but the University Athletic Department offered tutors that we could sign up for to help in all our different classes. There was never a class that I was struggling with. I would sign up for a tutor if I was free. But in terms of catching up on work, it was like leaving it up to the student-athlete to make sure they stayed on top of everything they were missing.

Participant L felt that it was important to have a backup plan and stated that student-athletes could not participate in elite sports for the rest of their lives. Participant M said that rowing does not give athletes a prolonged activity window, especially at the elite level. Rowers are generally at their peak by the age of 30. To have something to fall back on after an elite competition is good planning.

The hardest part for Participant M was communicating with his lecturers. Student advisors and tutors can assist athletes when they are absent from class. He also said student-athletes could be "left behind in a heartbeat."

Online Class Attendance and Assessment

Olympic student-athletes found class attendance and assessments difficult, especially when on sporting tours abroad or traveling to different geographical locations. Participants suggested that online assessments and audio recordings should be available after contact sessions to stay up to date with their academic responsibilities while participating in sports. The student advisor could facilitate such arrangements.

Participant A said that online class attendance and assessment could have helped his dual career when he had to travel to other countries for long periods of time. Most of the dual career balance was crammed in. Participant B agreed with Participant A and said that being in Europe for three months made it challenging to cope with academics while not on campus in South Africa.

It's tough; we always have clauses, and specifically, the postgraduate was very difficult. I had to obtain clauses and work from the internet that emails, hand in assignments, obviously work, which negatively affected my studies.

Participant C summarized what Participants A and B stated: "Each time rowing did well, the studies would take a backseat, and it was never really a focus. Eventually, I also tried to switch to majoring in marketing online." Figure 2 visually explains the sporting- and educational-pathway balance difficulties.

Extended Academic Programs

During the interviews, it was evident that student-athletes perceived extended academic programs as a way to contribute to a successful dual career. A higher education institution and a sports club can only arrange an extension to assist Olympic student-athletes in pursuing extended academic programs

associated with dual career assistance. The narratives verified this possibility when a balance in a dual career is sought.

Participant N suggested that qualifications need extended options to accommodate student-athletes' complex schedules: "Many of us [student-athletes] run an extended program anyway, but it's not official. A lot of us push modules into the following years. My degree is a four-year degree. I'm looking at doing it in six years."

Participant E also confirmed that extended academic programs should be implemented for those who seek them:

To have extended programs, for example, education is usually a four-year degree; doing it in five years is a perfect answer for most athletes. I know that I did break it up into six years as it's a three-year degree but broke it up into six.

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: financial challenges, student support systems, extended academic programs, and online class attendance and assessments. These themes encapsulate some of the challenges elite athletes experience on their paths to success. To minimize these challenges and foster future talent, changes are needed at an organizational level, specifically concerning adequate financial support.

Discussion

In literature studies on the dual careers of athletes, researchers have extensively explored the experiences of individuals across various stages of their careers and development (Wylleman, Reints, and De Knop 2013; Deason 2019). While a significant portion of this literature has concentrated on individuals in tertiary or higher education, there is a growing emphasis on the unique challenges faced by student-athletes, particularly at the university level. These individuals confront escalating pressures to effectively balance academic pursuits with sports participation (Aquilina 2009). Integrating academic and sport-specific training at this level introduces complexities, given the many transitions that student-athletes often undergo within a relatively short timeframe. Such transitions encompass moving away from home, separating from family, changing teams and coaches, and simultaneously engaging in advanced study and training. Recognizing the magnitude of these transitions, scholars have increasingly directed their dual career research toward university student-athletes. These studies consistently underscore the inherent tension experienced by student-athletes as they strive for excellence in their academic and sporting endeavors. The subsequent section will provide an overview of research findings and address two key questions in this context.

The dual career experiences of Olympic athletes are a complex phenomenon. Balancing academics and competition in sports at an elite level is challenging. Some student-athletes have discontinued their studies to devote more time and energy to sporting demands. The realization that dual careers were unmanageable for some was shocking. The higher education institutions in this study had support systems (for example, tutors and financial support in the form of sports bursaries). Factors that can smooth the balance involve additional financial support for student-athletes in the form of larger bursaries so that they do not have to secure jobs to earn additional funds. An improved higher education tutoring system tailored to student-athlete needs can contribute to dual career success. Based on the results of this investigation, it appears that leaders in higher education institutions would be prudent to implement stronger student-athlete "eligibility to play" policies governed by USSA to structure dual career options for student-athletes. The only policy statement to protect student-athletes' academic careers in the USSA Constitution is the classification of a bona fide student. Students actively pursuing their academic careers (i.e., assignments, writing tests, and examinations

to be promoted to the next level of study) are classified as bona fide students (University Sport South Africa 2020). As member organizations of the USSA, universities must follow USSA policy to ensure that students remain in good standing with dual career approaches. In the USA, the NCAA's "eligibility to play" policy is enforced regularly by student-athlete advisors who monitor the academic progress of student-athletes throughout their dual careers. If a student-athlete encounters difficulty academically, tutoring is automatically provided by academic tutors designated by the athletic departments. If student-athletes fall below academic standards by semesters, their scholarships or playing/practice time can be limited or eliminated (NCAA 2021). The visual presentation in Figure 2 by Deason summarizes the dual career pathway of an Olympic athlete's experience. The important part of the figure is the final career path, where an Olympic athlete can choose to follow a sporting, educational, or dual career until retirement. The ideal situation is when an Olympic athlete chooses to turn (semi) professional in their sporting career after graduation.

Conclusion

This investigation answered questions regarding the dual career experiences of South African Olympic athletes at higher education institutions in South Africa and the USA. Experiences with support systems for dual career student-athletes at higher education institutions were also recorded.

The results revealed the apparent need for immense improvements in support structures, like the universities in the USA, to assist Olympians in completing student-athlete dual careers. Furthermore, there seems to be a disconnect between the challenges that structures support and what athletes face. This study lays the groundwork for improved policies and practices for student-athletes once their participation in elite sports has been completed, as Deason (2019) suggested. Figure 2 is a visual representation of dual career pathways in sports. Successful student-athlete dual career completion can provide smoother transitions into the "real world" after participation in sports at an elite level.

The scope of this study was limited to the narratives of participants who qualified for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo and to the South African case study in which the participants were placed. Other role players, such as student advisors, coaches, and academic managers, provided different perspectives on the dual careers of Olympic athletes. The sample size was also limited in this investigation. A small sample of fifteen athletes from four of the twenty-three South African higher education institutions accounted for only 17 percent of the higher education institutions. A more accurate perspective could have been obtained if the sample had been larger and included a broader sample of Olympic athletes. Finally, the study focused on athletes at the elite level who had already performed internationally and did not include provincial and national dual career-level athletes.

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Informed Consent

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Participants' Profiles

Profiles of participants in the order of the interviews are presented in Table 1. As noted previously, the participants have been referred to with alphabetical designations (A, B, C, etc.) to protect their identities.

Table 1: Profiles of Interviewed Olympic Athletes

<i>Olympic Athlete</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Sport</i>	<i>Studies</i>
Participant A	F	Swimming Breaststroke	Higher Certificate in Sport Sciences
Participant B	M	Racewalking 20 km	Master of Education
Participant C	M	Rowing Men's four	BSc Sport Science
Participant D	F	Hockey	Education
Participant E	M	Athletics 400 m Class T37	Master's Sport Science
Participant F	M	Athletics long jump	Supply Management
Participant G	M	Athletics Shotput	Industrial Engineering
Participant H	M	Athletics 100/200 m	Business marketing
Participant I	F	Athletics 400 m ClassT47	Education
Participant J	M	Athletics 400 mh	Marketing
Participant K	F	Athletics 5000 m	Business Marketing
Participant L	M	Athletics Shotput	Higher Certificate in Sport Sciences
Participant M	M	Rowing doubles	Education
Participant N	F	Hockey	Sport Science
Participant O	M	Athletics 4 × 400 m relay	Agricultural Science