

# The Dual Career of Student Athletes and the Quest for a Personalized Tutorship Model

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**Abstract:** The interest for the topics concerning the dual career of student athletes is growing in importance in Europe. In this study we will show, through theoretical reflections based on the review of the scientific literature and experiences, how tutorship is a key factor for the success of the university courses for dual career student athletes. This study will also demonstrate how good tutorship for student athletes is always the result of a systemic interaction among different agencies oriented towards a common and shared goal: that is to empower, through specific learning and education models, and transform the athlete as a resource for the community. In conclusion, the study will stress the importance of studying, in the future, tutorship for the dual career of student athletes in light of a more systemic approach, taking into account all the multidimensional aspects and pedagogical challenges it embodies (social, cognitive, political, organizational, etc.), and framing it within the concept of “sport guidance”.

**Keywords:** Dual Career, Student Athlete, Pedagogy, Tutorship.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the last three years, the importance of helping professional athletes during and after finishing their professional career has been highlighted by the European Union (EU) through specific initiatives and political strategies supported by its funds. The EU has taken aware of the importance of enhancing athletes learning and education giving them the opportunity to attend university courses. These courses aim at developing athletes' skills and competencies (European Commission, 2007; 2012). The ethical starting point of this recent interest of the EU for athletes education is that education is a human right and the athlete, as human being who has served the community through sport and has been useful to society, she/he deserves to be helped to enjoy this right in all stages of her/his life (Schweiger, 2014). The athlete has to be helped to develop as a professional and human being, and to join the life-long learning system which society provides for the formation of its members.

In contemporary European society, the issue of dual careers represents a very central topic. Nowadays, the main educational agencies and institutions of the Old Continent have recognized the importance of the formation of the athlete, and they are aware of the complex problems that all this implies. Actually, it carries complex demands for quality teaching activities, social and professional placement, and teaching program development (Bastianon, 2014).

The characteristics of the athlete, who is both a student and professional who wishes to earn a university degree, require a specific system capable of both teaching and assisting them in following these courses. For this reason, the universities which are interested in devoting part of their efforts as educational agencies to this kind of athletes know that they need to focus not only on the specific and particular contents of their teaching programs but also on the specific organizational and logistic aspects related to the teaching activities.

What we present here is a theoretical study aimed at sketching a pedagogical overview of the main issues concerning the tutorship of dual career student athletes. For this reason, to carrying out this research, a hermeneutical methodology was used. This methodology focused on the following main steps: a) description and interpretation of the existing situation related to tutorship and the dual career of student athletes; b) a penetration of the reasons that brought the existing situation to the current form (analysis of interests and ideologies this situation implies); c) a possible agenda for improving a more effective tutorship system; d) evaluation of how to put it into practice (Louis, Lawrence, & Keith, 2007: p. 28-29).

## II. THE STUDENT ATHLETE AND HER/HIS PROFILE

The concept of dual career refers to the combination and coupling of an athletic career with education and/or occupation (Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015). For an athlete, pursuing education while competing in high-performance sport can be a challenge. We know that nowadays there is an increasing demand on athletic performance in elite sports. This can determine a very high pressure on athletes, who are often forced to choose between maximizing their athletic potential or obtaining a satisfying education for their post-athletic career (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000).

As claimed by Geranosova and Ronkainen (2015), if this, on the one hand, can often lead to premature discontinuation of the athletic career due to prioritization of education (Amara, Aquilina & Henry, 2004), on the other hand, it can happen that the athlete tends to less invest in education due to her/his exclusively focusing on athletic success (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey & Banaji, 2004).

For all these reasons, the dual career represents a challenge for European universities that need to invent new ways of re-organizing their knowledge and the learning models they offer to their students. This has to be done so to help student athletes in their learning processes which, if one wants them to be effective, they have to be supervised and monitored by an appropriate supervision system capable to adapt themselves to the needs and requirements of the student athlete both as a person and professional. To be clear, one of the main question relating to the dual career of athletes and its issues concerns “what”, or better “who” the student athlete is. According to the main definitions, a student-athlete is a person who is a full-time university or high school student, and who participates in athletics or plays sport as an individual or member of a federation, a club, or of a sport association.

This definition is generic, and it takes into account the situation and characteristics of the student athlete as seen in the tradition of the European Universities, which have not a long tradition in this field, as it happens, instead, in the American ones. For the student athlete, it is not easy to find a balance between education and participation in athletics because this participation takes complete mentally and physically dedication. Nevertheless, many authors claim that participation in sport can foster, in all the people, the growth of her/his personality, of leadership skills, and it can bring, if adequately supported, to a global satisfaction with the University experience (Ryan, 1989).

This experience can serve as what we can call a “reservoir” for skills which can become qualities shown as behaviors by the athlete as person in her/his everyday life. To define who the student athlete is, it seems a very complex and elusive task due to many factors and variables such as: the vision of each university, college or high-school about the student athletes; social awareness that education is a right for the athlete throughout the overall course of her/his life; the policy and politics strategies, dependent on local or national institutions/governmental bodies, aimed to support the dual career of student athletes; and, above all, the prejudices and stereotypes towards the dual career of student athletes.

Actually, there are several prejudices and stereotypes towards the student athlete and her/his being as such. These prejudices and stereotypes «range from being classified as a “dumb jock” to majoring in “easier degrees” as opposed to their peers» (Diersen, 2005). This prejudice has been dismantled by many researches and studies which have shown how, in some countries such as the United States (where the “culture” of the dual career of student athletes has always been massively present), student athletes succeed in attaining higher grade point averages than other students (Soltz, 1986). The same studies have also shown how these students reveal educational aspirations, reveal that they are not superficial because they show self-concepts, philosophies of life, and other effective characteristics that can be enhanced by participation both in education and sport.

The student athlete shows a complex profile which can be considered very similar to that of a centaur (half man and half animal). We could say that, actually, the student athlete is neither an athlete nor a student, if we conceive of her/him as a person who uses to entirely devote herself/himself to the full activities that both sport and education imply. The student athlete really seems to be a centaur: half a student and half an athlete, whose success depends upon being entirely one of the two parts of the mythological creature. This centaur profile, being so complex, fragmented and unstable, of course makes it difficult to identify a stable pattern of overall training and education for students athletes in dual career.

In this regard, contemporary studies and researches have stressed the importance to offer student athletes the satisfactory experience of a “whole career”, focusing on an approach centered on the “whole person”, and highlighting that athletes are human beings who, in their professional development, go through several transitional and alternative phases. All these phases can develop simultaneously and range from sport performances, educational activities carried out both in presence and at distance, and psycho-social development (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004).

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The centaur profile of the student athlete calls for a specific holistic approach in terms of learning models, organization and structuring of experiences offered to these persons. The research on the dual career of athletes supported by the European Union testifies the importance of this holistic approach (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Platts & Smith, 2009). The documents of the European Union have also stressed the importance, despite the differences due to cultural and country-specific educational policies and traditions, of guidance and counseling as a key factors to promote the dual career of athletes, and to offer them the opportunity of a satisfactory “whole career” experience capable to couple sport and education, career and life (EOC, 2011; EC, 2012).

**III. THE QUEST FOR NEW LEARNING MODELS**

This means that when one teaches student athletes attending different university courses, the main starting point of that teaching should be the competences and skills acquired and developed by them in their sports career. To be clear, sport and its both intrinsic and extrinsic values should be always the starting point for designing contents, learning models and outcomes of university courses for student athletes. Sport always has to be seen as providing a resource and set of experiences that allow student athletes to enrich their knowledge by reconvertng the competencies and skills acquired during their previous professional career into competences and qualifications for their new professions, future jobs and employments. We could say that an athlete is an athlete forever. Therefore, in the context of the seeking new learning models for student athletes, sport has to be seen as a tool box for developing their new competencies and skills in order to grant them access not only to the University as a community of learning but also to other vocational courses or the lifelong learning system.

Key figures in the development of these new learning models are represented by mentors and tutors. These figures are responsible for activities which are fundamental to assist and support student athletes at University. As we have said about tutoring and counseling, there also exist specific differences between mentoring and tutoring. The main aim of both these two activities, which always imply a set of help and support actions, is to promote the attainment of results, encouraging and instilling positive attitudes in student athletes.

Tutor and tutoring are two academic terms which define the figure and action of people whose aim is to assist individuals who are behind in their studies or experience problems when they study within large groups of people. A tutor has to have proficiency in the main subject matters the student athletes are taught. Mentor and mentoring, on the contrary, are terms which refer to an older and mature person who acts as an example to emulate and offer students/trainees opportunities to improve their life skills (Danish, Petipas, & Hale, 1993). For student athletes, mentors, who can come from several and different backgrounds, serve as examples to emulate.

A mentor is more a guide than a teacher, and this figure can also play a remarkable role in assisting student athletes during their transition from their profession as sportswomen/sportsmen to University. Both mentor and tutor are key figures in the process of assisting student athletes in their transition from profession to inclusion in the formal system of learning (Stankovich, Meeker & Henderson, 2001). Both the two figures represent and form the pillars of the tutorship/mentorship system in the context of the dual career of athletes.

Mentoring and tutoring within the system of dual career, although these two actions want to achieve the same goal and are part of the same system, they are different. As we have said above, mentoring focuses on life skills and provides help and assistance to athletes encouraging them to live the experience of studying and learning at university as something positive. Mentoring helps students cope the stress this experience might imply. Tutoring helps athletes acquire information and develop problem solving skills relate to the specific courses they follow.

Both mentoring and tutoring show the importance of developing new learning models for helping athletes successfully attend university/education courses (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 2000; Tuijnman, & Boström, 2002; Jackson, 2012). Assuming that there does not exist any formula to successfully mentor, tutor or counsel student athletes, a successful tutorship system for these specific students has to include both mentoring and counseling actions. The student athlete is a “person”, that is a human being who acts as a “whole”, and as such she/he has to be helped to develop. As a person, the student athlete has to be encouraged to critically reflect on her/his motivation to study, and to be helped to reflect on her/his own limits, on how to overcome difficulties taking aware of the results attainable through commitment and dedication to the task (Zagelbaum, 2014).

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An effective tutorship system for dual career student athletes has to intellectually and emotionally motivate them to find solutions to solve problems and to put forth the necessary effort to complete the tasks they are required to carry out. In the context of this tutorship system, mentors have to positively influence the athletes to personal motivation and self-encouragement. Mentor is a person who provides advice, shares knowledge and experiences with student athletes, and motivates them to study using an approach based on low pressure and self-discovery.

We could say that the person who can make the tutorship more effective has to be half a tutor and half a mentor, focusing on strategies aimed at enhancing self-discovery and problem-solving in student athletes. To be clear, being this person also a tutor, on the one hand, she/he has to be well versed in the subject matters the students are taught. In addition, using problem solving or critical thinking methodology, tutor has to be capable to listen and determine the concepts student athletes don't understand or are not able to grasp when they study, helping them to autonomously solve the problems they face.

**IV. TOWARDS A PERSONALIZED TUTORSHIP MODEL**

In a nutshell, motivation, knowledge and comprehension of the subject matters as well as of the process of acquiring them, have to be the pillars of a system to tutor and mentor student athletes. This system has to help them develop problem solving skills, and to discover how to better understand things. This system has to inspire confidence in the student athletes and motivate them to learn autonomously and in a critical way. The system has to focus on the way individual students acquire information, i.e. on their learning styles, not being afraid to use innovative communication approaches to tutor and foster effective study habits in them. At this point, we can try to sketch the principles of a methodology to design a tutorship system for the dual career of student athletes who follow university or, generally speaking, education courses. Taking into account that the scope of an effective tutorship system is always to help the student athlete to develop as an autonomous and independent person, these principles can be summed up as follows.

- 1) To teach student athletes how to assess a problem they face;
- 2) To help them analyze the problem and propose individual solutions;
- 3) To encourage them to individually acquire the research tools and skills to solve the problem;
- 4) To help the student athletes to autonomously acquire all the information needed for solving the problem;
- 5) To help them put into action the solution they are testing working both individually and in team;
- 6) To continuously provide student with examples of problem solving, and gradually increase the difficulty and complexity of it.

Tutorship is, after all, a communication system aimed at developing both educational and communication skills in student athletes. It is a tool that educational organizations can use to help and grow their student athletes and it can be an informal practice or part of a formal program. There are many causes which can determine the success or failure of an education program for student athletes. One of these is not to give athletes the opportunity to continue their sport participation at an elite level during and after their university studies. Upon the end of participation in sport at an elite level, for example, former athletes can often experience negative emotions and behaviours. In a program aimed to tutor and to mentor student athletes, these latter ones have to be helped ease the transition from sport activities to university also continuing to combine both. In some cases, student athletes have to be prepared for the end of their sport careers by assessing their identity (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998) and developing a tutorship system to support and encourage them to develop strategies to use within the situation of sport retirement, in order to make easier their transition out of sport and into a new role in life and society. In this regards, the design and implementation of a tutorship system for student athletes should focus on and take into account how to carry out four crucial actions. These actions can become guidelines to sketch a successful tutorship program and are as follows.

- a) To take care of the "self" of the student athlete. By the time they enter university, the student athlete has been engaged and participated in sport for many years. She/he have achieved success in her/his sport and have developed an identity as an athlete. This identity has to be preserved and at the same time developed so that the athlete can be motivated to study, taking aware of the importance of studying as an opportunity for a new job. We know that there exists, mainly among professional athletes, a sports culture that emphasizes athletics over academics (Adler & Adler, 1985; Benson 2000), causing them to be at risk for lack of engagement in academic pursuits and delayed career development (Menke, 2013). In

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this regard, it is important not only to encourage the student athlete to engage in academic activities such as knowing other students, but also talking with teachers and instructors, understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, and establishing their values which are at the core of their athletic and student identity.

b) To take care of the support of student athletes. Coaches, trainers, teammates, as well as athletic counselors are important and key figures who are pillars for the support and tutorship system of student athletes (Wisker, Exley, Antoniou, & Ridley, 2013). This means to encourage student athletes to establish and enter in a support team that includes significant others inside and outside of athletics. This team has also to be capable to create a link between the university and athletics (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

c) To encourage student athlete's participation in academic activities. This achievement has to be attained non only through pointing out the benefits of studying at university, but also showing the athletes how the university can help them develop role models for a future non-athletic identity. The university has to be a "resource for supporting resources", encouraging student athletes to maintain a support web that includes family, friends, and others.

d) To think of and to be aware of the strategies to support the student athlete. In this regards, it is important, for the success of a tutorship system for the dual career of sportswomen and sportsmen, to use specific strategies to encourage them. These strategies can be based on dialogue and discussion (so that to create an environment where student athletes feel comfortable and free to express their opinions about class attendance and how they feel about university). The strategies can also consist of intentional actions aimed at developing in the athletes exploration of personal identity, and at understanding how that of student differs from the athlete's one. This exploration favour a easier transition and a more effective participation in academic activities at university by the student athlete. There are authors who have stressed the importance of helping student athletes develop a student identity in addition to their athletic one, aiding and nurturing this development in order to promote more positive outcomes for them (Lally & Kerr, 2005).

To sum up, what is of fundamental importance for creating an effective tutorship system for student athletes in dual career is networking to their careers. This networking has to be developed while they are at university. These athletes have to be encouraged to treasure the high-profile experiences they received in sport to help themselves when they are at university. Sport represents a focus and a positive model for student athletes who can use it as a drive to put forth their best effort at every task. We know that sport develops a specific set of abilities and skills useful to effectively work in a team environment. For this reason, both tutors and mentors (just in case these two figures are not coupled within a tutorship program for student athletes) should encourage student athletes to adopt similar behaviours, and to use the positive aspects of sport as a human practice to transition into other new life and social roles.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the future, it will be necessary to study tutorship for the dual career of athletes in light of a more systemic approach, taking into account all the multidimensional aspects and pedagogical challenges it embodies (social, cognitive, political, organizational, etc.), and framing it within the concept of sport guidance. To study this tutorship in terms of a systemic approach can help us to better understand the importance of the involvement and coordination of different educational and social agencies, seen as a key institutions to sport policies. These policies will have always to be conceived of as educational policies in the future (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Education is a human right, and the participation in education and learning activities by athletes has to be increased and seen as a part of a permanent and complex social process that fulfils and completes sport as a human practice. Within this process of guidance and orientation for athletes, communities and families – rather than the university – play a fundamental and key role. A real tutorship system for the athlete in a dual career can achieve its main goal only through an effective cooperation between the main agencies and organizations that promote sport in our society (schools, federations, sport associations and clubs, etc.). The concept of dual career needs a rethinking of sport as an educational practice and form of human capital capable of empowering athletes and helping them to enhance their skills as a persons in the frame of lifelong learning and a continuous educational system (Zagelbaum, 2014).

The university alone cannot take care of the athlete as a student and enhance her/his skills through education. Students athletes have to be seen as members of an educational system that involves the whole community as a set of educational agencies that support them in all the stages of professional and personal life. Therefore, tutorship, flexibility and the need for a systemic approach represent the main pedagogical challenges for the dual career of athletes. These three challenges

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are all summed up in another big challenge that consists of finding a methodology that can help athletes to reconcile, as well as possible and according to their needs, education and professional career (Casucci, 2002). For the athlete, sport should represent an opportunity for fulfilling her/his life as a professional and human being who needs to learn for being a better citizen, woman or man.

To conclude, we are convinced that it is necessary to rethink the dual career of athletes in terms of a specific pedagogy of sport guidance (Isidori, 2015) looking at the athlete as a person who has different types of intelligences that, in accordance with Howards Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011), have to be oriented and guided in the framework of a human *paideia* of values and virtues (Reid, 2002).

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