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DUAL CAREER COMPETENCES AND THEIR PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE IN SLOVENIAN STUDENT-ATHLETES IN RELATION TO GENDER

KOMPETENCE ZA DVOJNO KARIERO IN NJIHOVA ZAZNANA POMEMBOST PRI SLOVENSКИH ŠPORTNIKIХ ŠTUDENTIХ (PRIMERJAVA MED SPOLOMA)

ABSTRACT

The study's purpose was to explore the importance, which the athletes attribute to different dual career competences, and to investigate for possible gender differences. GEES-S38 questionnaire presenting with a list of 38 dual career competences was administered to 198 Slovene student athletes (97 males and 101 female). The athletes indicated the importance of each competence. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. For determining the influence of gender, Mann-Whitney U test was used. The participants rated all 38 dual career competence items as important to very important for their success in both sport and studies. Several gender differences occurred in athletes' perceived importance of dual competences, where female athletes attributed a higher importance to majority of competences. The results of this study help to develop dual career programs for student athletes. Future dual career support programs should promote a development of a wide range of competences among student athletes in order to foster athletes' success in both sport and school/studies. In developing these programs, gender specifics of male and female athletes should be considered.

Keywords: athletes, dual career, competences, gender

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IZVLEČEK

Namen te raziskave je bil ugotoviti, kakšen pomen pripisujejo slovenski športniki različnim kompetencam, potrebnim za dvojno kariero, in raziskati morebitne razlike med spoloma. 198 slovenskih študentov športnikov (97 moških in 101 ženska) je izpolnilo vprašalnik GEES-S38, ki vsebuje 38 različnih kompetenc za dvojno kariero. Udeleženci so ocenili pomembnost vsake izmed kompetenc. Rezultate smo analizirali s pomočjo deskriptivnih analiz, za ugotavljanje morebitnega vpliva spola na ocenjeno pomembnost kompetenc pa je bil uporabljen Mann-Whitney U test. Udeleženci so vseh 38 kompetenc za dvojno kariero ocenili kot pomembne do zelo pomembne za njihov uspeh v športu in pri študiju. Rezultati so pokazali nekaj razlik med spoloma: v primerjavi z moškimi so ženske so večini kompetenc za dvojno kariero pripisale večji pomen. Rezultati te študije prispevajo k razvoju programov za spodbujanje dvojne kariere študentov športnikov. Ti naj bi pomagali razviti različne kompetence, potrebne za dvojno kariero, in s tem pripomogli k športnikovim uspehom pri študiju in v športu. V razvoju teh programov naj bi se upoštevale tudi razlike med spoloma.

Ključne besede: športniki, dvojna kariera, kompetence, spol

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the topic of pursuing an athletic career together with education has become more popular and different research on dual career athletes has been made (e.g., Aqulina, 2013; Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner, & Lindahl, 2015; Tekavc, Wylleman, & Cecić Erpič, 2015). This increase in interest is not surprising since the majority of talented and elite young athletes pursue a dual career, i.e., a career of a student and an athlete (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015).

Dual career brings several demands and challenges to athletes. As the athletes progress throughout their career, participation in both sport and education becomes more demanding making the integration of both domains very challenging (e.g., Brettschneider, 1999; Cosh & Tully, 2014; MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Research examining stressors on dual career athletes identifies several demands connected to sport and education, e.g., high expectations with regard to physical condition and competition results (Franck & Tuovila, 2008); lack of time and time-management (Cosh & Tully, 2014; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002) difficulties when incorporating study with the training schedules (Burden, Tremayne, & Marsh, 2004); attendance-monitoring; coping with unexpected situations, adapting to possible setbacks in performance, demands for increased practice, willingness to move out of the 'comfort zone' (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010a). Together with being student athletes, young athletes are faced with the same adolescent development tasks as their non-sporting peers, e.g. acceptance of one's own body, detachment from parental home, forming a supportive network of friends, development of positive self-concept, and successful construction of identity (Brettschneider, 1999). The amount of dual career challenges especially increases during the important transitions in athletic career development, such as transition to higher level of education (high school or university), or transition from junior to senior level of competition (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). These challenges are not only academic (e.g., less supervision, need for a higher personal involvement in career planning, having a more systematic planning of study) and sport-related (e.g., change of coach and regime, increase in training load, competition), but also psychological (e.g., lifestyle pressures, stress related to exams), psychosocial (e.g., moving away from parental house, integrating in a new social environment), and financial (e.g., tuition fees, accommodation expenses) (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; MacNamara et al., 2010; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Tekavc, Wylleman, & Cecić Erpič, 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Besides the anticipated transitions several stressful life events can occur in athletes' careers, which include e.g. major sporting successes and defeats, season-ending injuries, change of a personal coach or the breaking up of the training group (Brettschneider, 1999).

In Slovenia, several system solutions and programs aim to help young athletes to coordinate their sport and studies, such as legally defined modifications of academic obligations from primary education onwards, organization of sport classes in secondary schools, sport boarding schools of national importance for individual disciplines (Cecić Erpič, 2013). These programs, however, mainly focus on young athletes at secondary education level, while at higher education level, there exists the so-called *laissez-faire* style of implementing dual career policies into practice, where universities and even faculties individually decide whether they will make any special arrangements for student athletes (e.g., greater flexibility concerning exams, tutors).

So far research identifies different personal resources or competences which facilitate the transitions and help dealing with dual career challenges throughout athletes' career, i.e. life skills (e.g.,

Baron-Thiene, & Alfermann, 2015; Hardcastle, Tye, Glassey, & Hagger, 2015), coping strategies (Franck, & Tuovila, 2008; Giurgiu, & Damian, 2015), self-regulation (Mouratidis & Michou, 2011), mental toughness, and resilience (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Student athletes seem to use different life skills to face challenges of their dual career, i.e. self-organization skills, discipline, goal-setting, motivation, commitment, goal setting, time management skills, quality practice, planning, dealing with increased pressure, stress management skills, decision making skills, imagery, realistic performance evaluations, social skills, communication skills, team work, leadership skills, family interaction skills (Baron-Thiene, & Alfermann, 2015; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Hardcastle et al., 2015).

While the existing research has already identified differences in coping with athletic career demands between different groups of athletes (e.g. individual and team athletes, athletes of different age groups) (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; Giurgiu & Damian, 2015), some dissimilarities were also found between male and female athletes in the way they perceive dual career challenges as well as how they cope with them. Tekavc et al. (2015) explored the perceptions of dual career development among Slovene athletes. They found that while the majority of athletes in their study pursued their athletic career together with academic/occupational endeavors, female athletes seemed to be more under pressure to perform well in their academic career. In comparison to male athletes in this study, females planned their career earlier and more thoroughly, more often reported using planning and time management as coping skills, made less sacrifices in their academic endeavours for the sake of their athletic career, but more often than males sacrificed their social life because of their dual career obligations (Tekavc et al., 2015). Similar to that, in Heller's study (2008) female student athletes reported higher grades and higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms than males. Mouratidis & Michou (2011) compared coping skills among male and female adolescent athletes and found that female athletes use less problem-focused coping than males, and respond less effectively in terms of concentration, peaking under pressure, coping with adversity, or goal setting and mental preparation.

Although some research has been done on skills required by athletes, there is still a lack of knowledge on the competences (i.e. knowledge, skills, experience and attitude) dual career athletes need to possess in order to successfully negotiate career transition demands and challenges. Together with some evidence about gender differences in perceiving dual career challenges and coping with those challenges (e.g., Tekavc et al., 2015), the purpose of this study was twofold: first, to identify which dual career competences Slovene talented and elite athletes find important; second, to explore whether any gender differences exist in athletes' perceived importance of those competences.

METHODS

Participants

The study sampled Slovene athletes who met the following criteria: (1) being recognized as elite by their respective elite sport governing body, the sport administration of the government, or their education institution, (2) competing at minimum at national level, and (3) being enrolled as a pupil or student in a secondary or higher education institution. In total, 198 Slovene athletes (97 males and 101 female) aged between 15 and 25 (mean = 18.92 years, SD = 3.7) participated in the study. Among the participants, 160 were involved in secondary education, and 38 were involved

in higher education. Participants were active in a wide range of individual (141 athletes) and team sports (57 athletes) in Olympic summer (N = 149), Olympic winter (N = 16), non-Olympic (N = 32), and Paralympic (N = 1) disciplines. With regards to their place of living, 165 participants (80 males and 85 females) still lived at home with their parents; 14 participants (eight males, six females) stayed in students' home, and 13 participants lived independently from their parents in their own apartment (three males and ten females).

Instrument

For the purposes of this study, GEES-S38 questionnaire¹ (De Brandt, Wylleman, Torregrossa, Defruyt, S. & Van Rossem, 2017) was implemented. The questionnaire assesses athletes' dual career competences presented in a list of 38 competences (e.g., dedication to put hard work into sport and study, ability to put sport and study performances in perspective). Initial validation of the questionnaire revealed four factors of the GEES-S38 which reflect distinct but related components of athletes' dual career competences: (1) Dual Career Management, (2) Mental Toughness, (3) Social Intelligence & Adaptability, and (4) Career Planning.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of some general questions (i.e., age, gender, type of sport, level of sport, education variables, and athletes' identity). In the second part, participants were presented with the list of 38 dual career competences and needed to indicate the importance of these competences on a 5-point scale by answering the following main question: How important are each of these competences for you in order to successfully combine sport and study? ("1 – unimportant" to "5 – very important").

Procedure

Before starting data gathering, national ethical committee gave its approval for the study. The informed consent was integrated into the questionnaire after the information was given to the participants about the aim of the project, confidentiality of treating information, voluntariness of participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. For the participant under 18 of age their parents signed the informed consent.

The questionnaire was constructed and executed online using Limesurvey software. Participants who met the inclusion criteria, were identified by the sporting institution and contacted via their sport organization or school. Two emails were sent to them: first one was an invitation to participate in the study; the second email contained a link to the online questionnaire. The participants, who agreed to participate in the study, completed the questionnaire via their personal computer.

Data analysis

To test internal consistency of the four scales measuring four factors of dual career competences, Cronbach's alpha test was used. Internal reliability scores were considered acceptable ($\alpha = .70 - .85$). Data was summarized and average scores (M, Me, SD) of athletes' perceived importance of the 38 items of the GEES-S38 (De Brandt et al., 2017) were calculated using descriptive statistics. In order to test the normality of the data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the Shapiro-Wilk test were used. Results of both tests revealed, that the data significantly deviated from a normal distribution. Because of that, Mann-Whitney U test was used in order to examine the influence

¹Assessment instrument used in this study is available upon request from the authors.

of gender on the importance of the competences. All four assumptions to run this non-parametric test were met, i.e. dependent variable being measured at the ordinal level, independent variable consisting of two categorical, independent groups (male and female), independence of observations (different participants in each group with no participant being in more than one group), and not normally distributed variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 represents the list of dual career competences, organized in four factors (i.e., Dual Career Management, Mental Toughness, Social Intelligence & Adaptability, and Career Planning), and shows the importance which participants attributed to each item in terms of their success in combination of studies and elite sport. Higher mean value means that the participants perceived that competence as more important in their combination of studies and athletic career. When the data does not distribute normally (as in our study), the mean loses its ability to provide the best central location for the data (Aron & Aron, 1994). In such case, the median is better suited.

Looking at the median of the items, we can see that participants rated all 38 dual career competence items as important to very important for their success in both sport and studies. An inspection of means for each competence reveals that the most important competences for the athletes in this study were: the ability to persist during challenging times and in the face of setback; believing in athlete's personal abilities to overcome challenges in dual career; ability to cope with stress and study assertiveness; dedication to succeed in both sport and studies; understanding the importance of rest and recuperation; self-discipline to manage the demands of one's study and sport combination, clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in sport and studies, and being able to collaborate with dual career support stuff (e.g., coach, teacher, dual career support provider).

Table 1. Perceived importance of dual career competences.

Factor	Competence	Together		Females		Males			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>
Dual Career Management	Self-discipline to manage the demands of one's study and sport combination	4,60	,580	4,74*	,443	5	4,46	,665	5
	Ability to use time efficiently	4,61	,608	4,71*	,588	5	4,50	,611	5
	Dedication to succeed in both sport and study	4,64	,609	4,76*	,448	5	4,51	,716	5
	Ability to plan conscientiously in advance	4,28	,704	4,32	,690	4	4,24	,718	4
	Ability to prioritize what needs to be done	4,39	,730	4,46	,714	5	4,33	,743	4
	Willingness to make sacrifices and choices to succeed in sport and study	4,40	,841	4,51*	,750	5	4,29	,914	5
	Ability to make one's own responsible choices with regard to study and sport career	4,36	,700	4,44	,648	5	4,28	,744	4
	Clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in sport and study	4,54	,565	4,62*	,539	5	4,46	,581	4,5

Factor	Competence	Together		Females		Males			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>
Mental Toughness	Ability to create individualized routines (for sport and study)	4,14	,842	4,23	,814	4	4,05	,863	4
	Belief that study and sport can positively complement each other	4,19	,937	4,37*	,837	5	4,01	1,000	4
	Belief in your own ability to overcome the challenges in sport and study	4,71	,601	4,86*	,392	5	4,56	,726	5
	Assertiveness (being self-assured and acting with confidence)	4,69	,608	4,79*	,506	5	4,59	,685	5
	Ability to cope with stress in sport and study	4,70	,576	4,83*	,421	5	4,57	,675	5
	Ability to regulate emotions in different situations	4,45	,747	4,51	,677	5	4,38	,809	5
	Ability to use setbacks in sport and/or study as a positive stimulus	4,02	,900	4,06	,884	4	3,97	,918	4
	Ability to focus on here and now, without being distracted	4,36	,737	4,46*	,701	5	4,27	,762	4
	Being patient about the progression of one's sport and study career	4,50	,732	4,68*	,567	5	4,31	,828	4
	Perseverance during challenging times and in the face of setbacks	4,78	,535	4,89*	,316	5	4,66	,672	5
Social Intelligence & Adaptability	Awareness of your strengths, weaknesses and capabilities	4,39	,699	4,50*	,611	5	4,28	,764	4
	Ability to negotiate and stand up for one's own interests	4,31	,737	4,34	,767	4	4,28	,708	4
	Ability to set realistic goals in sport and study	4,48	,726	4,54	,689	5	4,41	,758	5
	Ability to critically evaluate and modify one's goals when needed	4,16	,748	4,21	,701	4	4,12	,793	4
	Asking advice to the right people at the right time	4,31	,737	4,40	,657	4	4,22	,803	4
	Eagerness to listen and learn from others and past experiences	4,36	,766	4,48*	,651	5	4,25	,853	4
	Ability to maintain relations with important others	4,09	1,017	4,68*	,567	5	4,58	,661	5
	Ability to make social contacts with peers in study and sport	4,18	,837	4,24	,773	4	4,12	,896	4
	Ability to collaborate with support staff in study and sport	4,53	,754	4,68*	,613	5	4,39	,852	5
	Ability to resolve conflicts	4,29	,765	4,39*	,707	5	4,18	,809	4
	Understanding the importance of rest and recuperation	4,63	,689	4,79*	,522	5	4,47	,796	5
	Ability to adapt well to new situations	4,36	,650	4,44	,635	5	4,29	,660	4
	Ability to put sport and study performances in perspective	4,22	,778	4,29	,708	4	4,16	,840	4

Factor	Competence	Together		Females		Males			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>
Career Planning	Being prepared for the unexpected and having back up plans	4,29	,841	4,43*	,746	5	4,16	,910	4
	Ability to be flexible and change plans if necessary	4,37	,761	4,42	,685	5	4,32	,830	5
	Being curious to explore career plans outside elite sport	4,03	,921	4,09	,861	4	3,97	,977	4
	Vision of where one wants to go in life after your dual career	4,39	,748	4,43	,674	5	4,36	,817	5
	Having knowledge about one's career options in study and sport	4,29	,749	4,39*	,694	5	4,19	,790	4
Other	Ability to live independently with competent life skills	3,79	,959	3,73	,906	4	3,84	1,010	4
	Ability to spend and manage your own money	4,30	,811	4,32	,786	5	4,27	,838	4

Note: * $p < 0.05$

To compare differences between male and female athletes in this study, Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. In general, female athletes perceived all dual career competences as more important for their dual career in comparison with male athletes.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

For athletes who pursue a dual career (i.e., athletic career and education), the main challenge is to combine their trainings and competition with school or another form of academic education (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015). The purpose of this study was to identify which competences talented and elite athletes find important in order to successfully deal with dual career challenges. Moreover, our goal was to seek whether male and female athletes differ in perceived importance of these competences.

In general, all factors of dual career competences presented in the GEES-S38 questionnaire (De Brandt et al., 2017) as well as all specific competences appeared as important to participants in our study. This represents the fact that a dual career requires a broad range of skills and capacities, what the athletes in our study clearly recognized. Competences, which appeared as being the most important for dual career athletes in our study, confirm some previous findings. Namely, as in the study of Mouratidis & Michou (2011), who found that athletes, who are inclined to set high personal standards for their own performance, are more likely to cope effectively in stressful situations; the participants in the current study believed that being dedicated to succeed in sport and studies is one of the most important competences for pursuing their dual career. Then, the participants identified persistence as one of the most important dual career competences; supporting Amiot, Blanchard, and Gaudreau (2008), who found that being able to persist under pressure and cope with adversity is an important adaptive coping strategy both in educational as well as sport context. Many of the competences which the athletes in this study perceived as being the most important for their dual career are similar to psychological characteristics for success in sport (Psychological Characteristics of developing Excellence) found by MacNamara et al. (2010), e.g. perseverance during hard times, self-belief, and awareness of what is required to

excel. As in the study of Mouratidis & Michou (2011), who found that athletes who are inclined to set high personal standards for their own performance, are more likely to cope effectively in stressful situations; the participants in the current study believed that being dedicated to succeed in sport and studies is one of the most important competences for pursuing their dual career. They also perceived that being assertive as well as being able to collaborate with dual career support staff (e.g., their coach, teachers, and dual career support providers) was one of the most important competences for their dual career success. It seems therefore that being able to effectively communicate with other people, especially those who are directly connected with their dual career, in athletes' perceptions increases their chances for dual career success. We can conclude that Slovene student athletes in this study believed that a successful dual career athlete is the one who is decided to succeed in both careers, is persistent in challenging times, believes in his/her own personal abilities, and clearly knows what it takes to succeed in sport and studies. Also, a successful dual career athlete knows how to communicate with dual career support staff, and acts with confidence in relationships with these people.

When comparing male and female athletes, several gender differences appeared in athletes' perceived importance of dual career competences. Female participants attributed a greater level of importance to all competences except the abilities for independent living, where male participants rated this competence as more important. This is in line with findings of De Brandt et al. (2017) on a sample of Flemish dual career athletes, where female student athletes rated the importance of three of four dual career competences (i.e., dual career management, career planning, and social intelligence & adaptability) higher than their male counterparts are. It also raises an interesting question why female athletes seem to attribute a greater level of importance to practically all dual career competences than male athletes do. A possible explanation could be that female athletes find their dual career as somewhat more difficult in comparison with males and therefore perceive that for an athlete's ongoing pursuits in both careers many competences are required. Research findings (e.g., Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015) which show that female student athletes are much more likely to drop out of sport than males, might support this hypothesis that male and female see their dual career differently in terms of difficulty and therefore possess different appraisal of required dual career competences. Another possible explanation derives from the study of Tekavc et al. (2015) who found that female student athletes put strong efforts into their dual career, especially into academics, and possess somewhat perfectionist tendencies for their success in both careers. We could therefore suspect that this same determination to put high investments in both careers together with serious approach at work explain why female athletes perceive the great majority of dual career competences as more important for their dual career success than male athletes.

In comparison with female athletes, male athletes expressed higher levels especially at competences connected to mental toughness (i.e., assertiveness, coping with stress, emotion regulation). Again, similar was found in the study of de Brandt et al. (2017), where Flemish female student athletes evaluated a stronger need to develop mental toughness in comparison with their male counterparts. This is in line with review findings of Holt, Hoar, and Fraser (2005), who found that female athletes tend to respond less effectively in stressful situations, because they are more emotion-focused and prefer directing their coping efforts towards regulating their inner affective state. Male athletes on the other hand are less affected by their emotions and therefore use more problem-focused coping.

There are some limitations in the study, connected predominantly with the selection of quantitative measurement (questionnaires). While using a questionnaire was effective because it enabled to include a large sample of participants and allowed a structured comparison between groups, some disadvantages need to be considered too. Unlike in an interview setting where additional questions can be given to the respondent if he/she is not clear about the question, a questionnaire does not allow for this. Therefore we are not sure whether all participants understood the items of the questionnaire the same way. Also, since there was no personal face-to-face contact with the respondents, we don't know how many thinking efforts they put into completing the questionnaire.

To conclude, it appears that athletes perceive a broad variety of competences as being important for their dual career success. Several gender differences seem to exist in the importance which the athletes attribute to specific competences. In the future, sport practitioners and dual career support providers should put their efforts into strengthening athletes' dual career competences to stimulate a successful development of athletes in all domains. Since gender seems to impact the importance of these competences, gender specific interventions when teaching the athletes dual career skills might be beneficial.

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