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An investigation of the demands faced and support needed by elite dual career adolescent badminton players and their entourage

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Introduction

While the demands placed upon athletes to achieve success in their sport are ever present, few reach the professional/elite level, and fewer are sufficiently financially rewarded to derive a living from their sport (Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007). Consequently, responsibility lies with sport national governing bodies to promote the welfare of athletes by supporting them in their career development (European Union, 2012; Subijana, Barriopedro, & Conde, 2015). To aid the current and future welfare of athletes, it has been recommended that sports organizations increase the provision of support via a holistic perspective, taking into account the whole person (Stambulova, 2012; Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpic, 2015; Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013).

Current approaches to athletic career development (e.g., the holistic athlete career model of athlete development - Wylleman et al., 2013) highlight the need to understand the continual interaction between an athlete's sporting development and the transitions experienced throughout the stages of an individual's life. Specifically, athletes must successfully develop their athletic career in conjunction with other domains such as their education and employment career, which are of importance at different stages in life (Tekavc et al., 2015). Indeed, successful athletic talent development environments have been found to be highly supportive and facilitative of athletes' sport-education balance (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010).

To support athletes' development in non-athletic domains (i.e., education and training), scientific research has increasingly focused upon understanding athletes' dual career experiences (i.e., combining sporting and educational career development). Here, athletes can benefit from engaging in vocational training/schooling while competing on the international stage, with the adoption of a dual career pursuit positively influencing the transition out of sport (Aquilina, 2013; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015).

Specific to the psychological developmental stage of adolescence, the main challenge for individuals pursuing a career in sport is balancing a dual career (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015). Recent adolescent dual career research in sport has indicated that elite adolescent athletes require specific types of support within their home, school, and sport context to be able to manage their dual career effectively (Knight, Harwood, & Sellars, 2018). During adolescence, management of dual careers for athletes is seen as particularly salient due to the potential for high dropout rates at this stage of sporting development (Stambulova, 2012). Seeking to establish an optimal balance between sport and other areas of athletes' lives has been found to be an important factor in preventing athletic dropout and promoting sport retention (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Sellars, Mellalieu, & Knight, 2018).

Adolescent sport is a complex social environment influenced by athletes, peers, coaches, and parents (Knight & Holt, 2012). While research has emphasized the effects of a dual career upon adolescent athletes' physical and mental wellbeing, performance and sport continuation, the processes that contribute, positively or negatively, to dual career development in adolescence remains unclear (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015). The lack of clarity concerning adolescent athletes' dual careers can be attributed to different sporting contexts presenting different demands or challenging moments; and, the influence of an individual's entourage (i.e., parents, coaches, and teachers; Knight & Holt, 2012). Demands experienced by adolescent dual career athletes include: educational examinations (Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2017); transitions into higher level training environments (Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner, & Lindahl, 2015); and, high levels of time commitments from sport and educational environments (Ryba et al., 2015). In addition to the demands perceived by adolescent dual career athletes, members of their entourage have also experienced strain as a result of supporting a dual career athlete. For example, parents of elite adolescent athletes have identified strain from competitive (e.g., children's anxiety), organisational (e.g., personal sacrifices), and developmental sources

(children's potential to progress in sport; Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). As such, to enhance understanding and subsequently provide greater support to dual career athletes and their entourage, research is needed which incorporates views of all members of the entourage, and illustrates how support may need to change and adapt across challenging points in athletes' academic and sporting calendars (Knight et al., 2018). Additionally, further investigation is needed that: places greater emphasis upon understanding entourage perspectives of educational and academic staff (Brown et al., 2015); focuses upon a specific sporting context (Stambulova, et al., 2015); provides examples from different stages of sporting development; and, uses longitudinal approaches to highlight changes in the support needs over time (Knight et al., 2018). Therefore, in order to effectively support adolescent athletes throughout their dual career development, the sporting context, the athlete, the individuals within an athlete's entourage, as well as changes in this dynamic system must be considered.

In sum, the required support for dual career athletes is influenced by a multitude of factors including their sporting environment, sports developmental stage, educational environment, and surrounding entourage. Consequently, the specific demands and support needs of adolescent athletes warrant further investigation, with particular focus upon a specific sporting context. Dual career research including both the athlete and their entourage has the potential to support the development of adolescent athletic performance, welfare, and retention in sports. Using a badminton-specific context, the current research aimed to explore the demands and support needs of elite adolescent dual career badminton players and their entourage.

Method

To better understand the support needs of talented, dual career, adolescent badminton players and their entourage a longitudinal, qualitative design was adopted using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with players and their entourage. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Describe the demands and challenges dual career adolescent badminton players and their social entourage face throughout a badminton season;
2. Identify the most demanding periods for players throughout a badminton season;
3. Explore the support needs of dual career badminton players and their social network during these demanding periods.

Participants

Participants were purposefully identified from a regional national badminton academy, comprising female and male players aged 11-15 years. Participants included players ($n = 8$) and members from within their entourage (parents and/or guardians $n = 8$; badminton staff, including a National Academy Coach, CEO, Performance Manager, and Player Manager; and, a teacher).

Study design

Qualitative data was collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Specifically, players and parents were invited to take part in focus groups, while Badminton coaches, management and support staff, and teachers were asked to take part in individual semi-structured interviews. Focus groups provide the opportunity to illicit spontaneous, expressive, and emotional views; facilitate dynamic dialogues among participants; enable social interactions to be observed; and, allow different perspectives and ideas to be put forward (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interviews allow for the collection of in-depth information regarding experiences of dual careers in adolescent badminton and flexibility for participants to express their opinions, ideas, feelings, and attitudes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Focus group and interview guides were consistent with the recommendations of Rubin and Rubin (2012) and pilot studies conducted to assess the effectiveness of the guides.

Data collection

Following institutional ethical approval, players and their entourage were provided with an information pack informing potential participants about the project aims and data collection process. Individuals interested in taking part were asked to provide consent, and parental assent for players. Following provision of consent and assent, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were organised for players, parents, badminton coaches, management, support staff, and the teacher. Data collection was conducted at two points throughout the badminton season: Time-point 1 (December-January 2018/19) encompassed the first half of the badminton season and Time-point 2 (June-July 2019) encompassed the second half of the season. The data collection time-points were selected following consultation with the badminton staff.

Time-point 1: Using focus groups and interviews, data collection focused upon two areas. First, identification of the demands placed upon badminton players and their entourage during the first half of the badminton season (September 2018 to February 2019). Second, the support needs of badminton players and their entourage. To identify the demands, participants were asked to identify the most stressful demands (or challenging moments) encountered in their respective badminton and educational environments. For example:

- Players: “What have been the biggest challenges to successfully completing your schoolwork while playing badminton?”
- Entourage: “What are the biggest challenges to supporting your child/players/student in their dual badminton and education career?”

Following the identification of the demands experienced, participants were asked to discuss their support needs to be able to deal more effectively with the identified demands. For example:

- Players: “When experiencing [DEMAND] how could you be best supported by your parents/coaches/teachers?”
- Entourage: “When experiencing [DEMAND] what support do you require to best support your child/players/student in their dual badminton and education career?”

Time-point 2: Time-point 2 followed the same approach outlined in Time-point 1, however this data collection point focused upon the demands experienced and support requirements during the second half of the badminton season (February to July 2019). In addition to the demands and support requirements, the players and their entourage were asked about the changes in demands throughout the badminton season and the most demanding periods encountered throughout the badminton season.

Data analysis

Focus groups and interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes, resulting in 524 minutes of audio recorded data. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify the most demanding challenges (from a badminton player and entourage member perspective) and to the desired support needs. Thematic analysis followed a six-phase process (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) and enabled key features of the data to be summarised, similarities and differences of the data to be identified, and social and psychological interpretations of data to be made (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To ensure methodological rigour, authenticity, and trustworthiness, the approach was informed by previous literature and used a number of approaches particularly related to credibility, transparency, rich rigour, sincerity, and coherence (Tracey, 2010; Smith & Caddick 2012; Smith & McGannon, 2017). For example, the lead researcher was familiar with the research context as a result of being involved with the badminton academy for over 12 months prior to data collection (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). Such familiarisation enabled authentic and trusting relationships between the participants and the lead research to be forged. Additionally, frequent contact with participants allowed for sustained dialogue. This prolonged immersion produced rigorous qualitative research as it facilitated a robust and intellectually enriched understanding through the generation of additional insight (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Furthermore, the lead researcher worked with a number of ‘critical friends’,

affording him the opportunity to frequently and critically discuss and reflect upon the findings and research processes (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Results

Focus group and interview data highlighted the demands faced and support desired by elite adolescent dual career badminton players and their entourage. The results are presented under four categories, namely badminton player demands, badminton player support desired, demands faced by entourage, and entourage support desired, and accompanied by example quotes from the focus groups and interviews.

Badminton player demands

The four most frequently cited demands by badminton players in relation to being a dual career badminton player were:

1. *Educational requirements* (e.g., studying for exams, doing coursework or homework)

“... we had coursework to do, so I definitely think that impacted [my badminton]... It [coursework] just takes a lot of time. So you don't have as much time to do badminton and that may impact how much badminton you do do.” - Player

2. *Injury management*

“[I felt] not depressed, but sort of more down, because you feel that you don't really have something to aim for if you're not playing tournaments or anything.” - Player

3. *Expectations to perform (from internal/external sources)*

“I know my mum and dad put a lot of money into it [badminton], and sometimes it makes me feel a bit like I'm letting them down because I'm not getting where I should be. I've been playing for so long, putting lots of money into it and I feel like I should be better than what I am and I should be performing and getting results.” - Player

“[Teachers get] frustrated with the amount of time that they see I'm putting into badminton and not the amount of time I'm putting into school. It's frustrating because when it comes to mocks and exams and stuff, it's rarely a B [grade] and usually above that so they're getting mad for stuff like not being in lessons or falling asleep in lessons when, in reality, the outcome of grades isn't bad and they just don't like the amount of time I'm putting into my sport.” - Player

4. *Time management*

“Now, it's more training and I don't go out weekdays anymore. I can't. I don't have the time. I revise and I do training. I have set days for revising and training. I can't go out. I'd be lucky if I go out on the weekend if I'm not revising again.” - Player

The strain that resulted from these demands was reported to intensify during exam or assessment periods.

“I've had mock exams recently. I had them on the week of Nationals as well. So that was a lot of pressure because I had four in one week so being able to write and also think about what I was going to do at the weekend was quite hard for me... it was my first major tournament as well for a year. So I thought definitely there's high pressure on a grade and also the stress of

what I'd got as well. [Exams] Definitely impacted [badminton]. I felt disappointed with myself, the way I played, because I knew I wasn't playing to my best." - Player

The members of the players' entourage highlighted that they had observed similar demands faced by the dual career badminton players, and also reinforced that these demands intensified during examination periods, and were further heightened once players reached years in which school or education became increasingly exam focused.

"The biggest demand on players, it's generally just balancing everything at their age, like I see players that are up at 6:30 in the morning to get a little session in before they go to school, then they're in school all day, then they get the bus home, they do their homework on the bus and then they're straight out, sometimes they've got like an hour's plus travel to training and then they train from like 7 til 9 and then they do their homework in the car on the way home and they haven't even had dinner yet and they're home at like ten, gone ten." – Badminton staff

Badminton player support desired

Players suggested that the strain arising from the demands they faced as a dual career badminton player could be relieved through five approaches:

- ***Increase in individualised support provided by coaches*** (e.g., one on one mentoring)

"I think we should also sit down with our coaches, because we don't tend to have one on one time with them by saying maybe if you film the match, going through it and saying, 'You did this well', 'You could have done this'." - Player

- ***Enhanced communication between badminton and school/education environments***

"I think it [having an understanding of schoolwork] would take a little bit of the pressure off because coaches don't know what you're doing outside of school at all. They just focus on badminton, but I think they should take a bit more interest in schoolwork just because they're like Monday, Tuesday training, training, I think they should be supportive to us doing some homework and stuff." – Player

"Coach X has asked me a couple of times before because last year my behaviour was terrible in school. Coach X was asking me, every Wednesday he was asking me, 'How's school?' I think that was something that helped me to get back on track again because I didn't want to let Coach X down by showing that going to badminton's a bad thing and has a bad effect on me in school so I wanted... that made me behave, eventually." - Player

- ***Greater understanding from the educational environment regarding the challenges of being a dual career badminton player***

"They [teachers] don't understand the amount of training that it is and the amount of time. A lot of them recently have said that I'm lazy, and if they could see what I do on a court, they wouldn't be thinking that. Yes, the more you train so hard, you're more fatigued and tired in class. Like, today, I was knackered and I couldn't keep my eyes open. I was tired. It was just from training. - Player

"Teachers are a bit more understanding in my school. The PE teachers and form tutors, they will ask you what you do, and some of them, maybe the older teachers, well, they don't care. They expect everything to be done on time and to the best of your ability." - Player

“Our school thinks... because our school’s quite good at sport, across the board, we’ve got someone good at everything and the academic level is really high as well so they expect you to be able to do it and some people, maybe like me in some things, can’t sometimes and they don’t understand that; that I can’t do it straightaway like other people can.” - Player

“It’s nice to know that someone is willing to do that [support badminton], especially the PE teachers and form tutors, they’re really helpful. Sometimes they will just send out emails and say, ‘He’s had a tournament’ or, ‘He’s trained late tonight,’ or if I have an injury or trouble getting to lessons, they will let the teachers know.” - Player

- **Increased access to/provision of psychological support**

“There’s not as much advice on mental stuff, especially for tournaments and any matches. We don’t really go into mentality. Coach X has said stuff to me [at a tournament], but when we’re training down here, I suppose obviously they would if we went to tournaments and he’s with us but when it’s just in training, we don’t really, because we don’t get sent to many tournaments with coaches. We don’t really talk about the mentality of games and stuff. We have, but not in any detail.” - Player

“I think more support from people, like psychologists almost, so having more support with them, they can sort you out so you’re mentally ready... Sitting down just having a talk.” - Player

- **Adaptable and flexible badminton training during exam or assessment periods**

“If you have got an exam leave [training] early or finish late” - Player

“Reducing the toughness of training whilst exams are on” - Player

Demands faced by players’ entourage

Entourage members (parents, badminton staff, and PE teacher) indicated two main demands faced in relation to supporting a dual career badminton player:

1. Communication between entourage members

“I always feel I’ve got to push to get an answer I’ve got, and then I’ve normally got to contact two or three people until I get the right answer or to get an answer that someone wants to give me, so communication is very poor in my opinion.” - Parent

“... a load of the issues that parents and players have with coaches just comes from lack of communication, just lack of awareness as to what that player wants to achieve or what their other issues are, like how long their day is and what other things they have on during that day...” – Badminton Staff

2. Time and resource constraints

“I leave work at 5 o’clock [in the evening] to get down here [badminton court] for 6, either she [my wife] stays and then we go home or she drops off and I come down and spend the evening here, so on Tuesday and Wednesday one of us spends our whole evening here and my wife might spend 2 hours travelling, and then Thursday my son goes for another session... Broadly, so Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday’s we really don’t have a home life at home, so only one of us will be at home at any one time. On the weekends it’s similar, last Saturday was 6 o’clock

[in the morning] start, back at 6 [in the evening]. But if it's [a location of further distance], then in reality you have to spend a night" - Parent

"Probably all comes back down to funding and budget to be honest because I think if there was more, if there was more funding available, they would all have more time on court, they might have travel expenses, so then actually all of that travel isn't such a big issue for the parents, they might be able to have courts closer to home, it, I think it all comes down to funding..." – Badminton Staff Member

Entourage support desired

Entourage members suggested that the strain experienced as a result of supporting a dual career adolescent badminton player could be relieved through two areas:

- ***Improved communication between entourage members***

"I suppose ideally, we'd meet in the first week of September or something like that, the beginning of what would be the school academic year and we could then try and see where the hot spots are going to be for our badminton player as far as the school calendar was concerned, to say the right, when his year eleven locks off, for example, are here in January, the 2nd week of January. So if you've got any big championships there, that could be a problem. Or likewise the other way round, if he's got some championships there, we might need to try and move his exams around those times, so that we could plan." - Teacher

- ***Education for entourage members regarding badminton performance progression***

"One thing has come up is that parents need extra support with the actual tournaments they [players] play in, because if you are not from an actual badminton background then they need extra support from the coaches to understand what the players need to do and where they need to be in order to progress." – Badminton Staff Member

Discussion

The results highlight that the demands faced by elite adolescent dual career badminton players relate to educational requirements (e.g., studying for exams, coursework, and homework); injury management; expectations to perform (from internal/external sources); and, time management. These demands were reported to be at their greatest across the season during exam or assessment periods and ameliorated further once players reached an age during which education environments became increasingly exam focused. Players suggested that the demands faced as a dual career badminton player could be supported through: an increase in individualised support provided by coaches (e.g., one on one mentoring); enhanced communication between badminton and school/education environments; greater understanding from education environment regarding the challenges of being a dual career badminton player; increased access to/provision of psychological support; and, adaptable and flexible training during exam and assessment periods.

Entourage members (parents, badminton staff members, and PE teacher) reported two main demands faced in attempting to support dual career badminton players. First, the level of communication between network members; and second, badminton staff and parents highlighted time and resources constraints, both of which negatively impacted upon entourage members' ability to optimally support dual career badminton players. Specifically, badminton staff stated that a lack of time and resources led to challenges in providing badminton-specific support to all players within the national academy (e.g., one-to-one mentoring). Parents reported difficulties in effectively supporting their children's athletic and academic aspirations through the provision of time and travel due to work and family commitments. Entourage members suggested that the demands faced

while supporting a dual career badminton player could be relieved through improved clarity and frequency of communication between different members of a player's entourage; and, a greater frequency of opportunities for increased education for entourage members regarding their child's performance pathway progression in the sport.

In line with existing athletic dual career research (e.g., Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; European Union, 2012), the current findings emphasise the influence that an athlete's entourage have upon dual career development (sport and education), and the demands athletes face when trying to achieve simultaneously in both domains. In addition, the current research advances the understanding of athletic dual careers by focusing upon a specific dual career context (i.e., adolescent badminton players); and using a longitudinal approach (i.e., across an entire competitive badminton season). As a result, the demands faced, support needs required, and demanding periods can be planned for, and players and their entourage supported accordingly to effectively prepare for these challenging times.

Practical implications

Informed by these findings, five recommendations are offered to enhance adolescent dual career badminton players' dual career development:

1. Badminton players' entourage should seek to assist players in their intentional preparation for coping with the demanding times that occur throughout the season (e.g., exam and tournament periods). This can be achieved through the provision of time management and goal-setting education workshops.
2. Third party support, such as access to a sport psychologist, can enhance players' ability to manage their own and others' performance expectations more effectively.
3. Greater communication between an athlete's entourage is needed to share information about key dates, demands, and responsibilities across a competitive season. Badminton staff should be the agents to drive these entourage communication channels.
4. In order to allow badminton players to manage dual career demands, badminton coaches should consider adopting greater flexibility in their training regimes, particularly during highly demanding educational periods.
5. Badminton academies can enhance parental knowledge and understanding of player progression by clearly communicating badminton player performance pathways. Strategies may include one to one meetings; provision of online resources (such as infographics); and facilitating parental forums.

Conclusion

Elite dual career adolescent badminton players face a number of demands throughout a season which challenge their athletic and vocational development including: managing educational requirements, injuries, expectations, and time. The intensity of these demands increases during education examination/assessment periods. As these periods can be predicted and prepared for, the frequency and clarity of communication between all members of the players' entourage should be managed to increase transparency to allow players and their entourage to effectively prepare for these challenging times. Players may also benefit from greater flexibility in training regimes during demanding educational examination/assessment periods, combined with educational workshops to facilitate management of personal and others' performance expectations, as well as time. Finally, entourage members highlighted the importance of communication in order for all members to best prepare and manage the time and resource challenges of supporting a dual career badminton player.

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