

THE PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT

A STUDY OF THE PERSONAL, LIFESTYLE AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS THAT AFFECT SPORTING PERFORMANCE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Introduction

There is a growing awareness that sports performance, particularly at the elite level, is affected by many personal, lifestyle, and environmental factors. To date, little research has been conducted to examine exactly how, and through what processes, lifestyle and environmental factors impact on athletes' performance. This research was carried out to explore the broad question: taking a holistic approach to performance, how do elite and professional athletes account for performance fluctuations?

Methodology

A total of 21 athletes took part in the research (11 female, 10 male). Participants were between 18 and 44 years of age at the time of the interviews and were drawn from the following sports: athletics, canoeing, cricket, hockey, judo, rugby union, swimming, netball and rowing. Participants first played the sport in which they excelled between four and 22 years of age and had been involved in senior competition from less than one year to 24 years. At the time of the interviews, eleven athletes were retired from competitive sport and ten were competing.

An interpretive, qualitative method was used to explore in depth the experiences of these athletes through five focus groups and five in-depth interviews. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed to identify and explore key issues and processes. By using an interpretive approach, the researchers focussed on understanding athletes' own experiences of how lifestyle and environment factors impact on performance. The findings include the research team's interpretations of the athletes' accounts alongside excerpts from the transcripts which illustrate and clarify specific events, experiences, or perspectives. Athletes' anonymity has been protected in all reporting.





Key findings

It is unusual for a lifestyle or environmental issue to *directly* affect sport performance. More often, a specific lifestyle or environmental issue affects performance via an intermediary variable. The intermediary variable might be a specific task, a personal value, or a motive. For example, removing athlete autonomy can reduce the personal relevance of training which subsequently inhibits performance.



INITIAL PARTICIPATION

Understanding the context of athletes' initial participation helps explain how these intermediary variables came to be important to athletes' performance.

Family relationships were important to participants' initial involvement in sport. Several factors were common to most participants: **(a)** parents and siblings were often involved in and positive about sport; **(b)** sport provided an avenue for youngsters to be with and to do things with their family; **(c)** parents supported but did not pressurise children in their sporting endeavours; **(d)** parental support was not contingent upon success, results or achievement.

Social affiliation was a key motive behind most athletes' initial sport participation. Being involved in sport allowed young people to **(a)** feel they were part of something; **(b)** meet and be with friends; **(c)** develop strong and enduring social networks.

Participants described a considerable degree of **enthusiasm** towards sport and physical activity in general from a young age. However, participants did not necessarily end up in the sport they were initially enthusiastic about. Likewise, some athletes were not initially enthusiastic about the sport in which they subsequently specialised.

Chance events were important in athletes' initial participation. Although school sport served as a broad introduction to sport for most participants, a series of unplanned and unpredictable events often influenced the development of athletes' careers.



CORE LIFESTYLE VALUES

Over the course of their careers most athletes have developed some core lifestyle values which help explain how various lifestyle and environment factors affect sport performance. Several themes were common among most participants and these provide an alternative template of desirable or necessary lifestyle values that might be used to guide and educate young athletes.

Athletes value **ownership and personal control** of their sport career, daily lives, and futures. As athletes age and gain experience, ownership and control becomes an increasingly important issue. More experienced athletes emphasise that when they feel ownership and control over their lives and their sport they perform better. For these athletes, the reverse is also true: when ownership and control is removed performance invariably suffers.

"The coach we deal with now, he started out two, three, four years ago hugely inclusive. 'Come on lads we're in this together! We want to help each other! I'm new at this...' And it worked perfectly. ... But then it slowly sort of reversed round. This guy got picked as assistant coach for England and ... next season ... all that inclusive style ... went the other way ... and all of a sudden we've got to do this, 'because this is what the England team do.' We had the best team on paper in the entire country and we got relegated. It had a massive, massive impact on the dynamics of the group and how it behaved and how we played."



While younger athletes speak of difficult conditions in their lives as standing in the way of them achieving peak performance, more experienced athletes often view hardships in a positive light. Among these individuals there is a belief that successfully **coping with and overcoming hardships** provides strength and resilience which improves their sport performance.

"I had to find a way of supporting myself before I could think of actually starting training and it was a really difficult year. I took out some loans, I worked in a few pubs, I worked for some landscape gardeners. It helped me perform – at that time it didn't stop me it actually helped me because, OK, it wasn't necessarily the best environment to get the absolutely the most out of me physiologically, but the hunger that it gave me just absolutely completely made up for all of that and made up some more besides."

Three interlinked aspects of **attitude** are common to these elite athletes: **(a)** they adopt an effort rather than an ability/talent focus; **(b)** they are extremely determined and committed to improve their own sport performance despite setbacks; **(c)** they are confident that, by virtue of their effort, they will eventually be successful.

"Attitude is massive. Attitude, regardless of talent sometimes, can often go a lot further."

Relationships are closely linked to sport performance in three ways: **(a)** family and personal relationships provide the first line of support when things go wrong – athletes often believe that this support is critical to their success; **(b)** positive relationships with team mates and squad members improve performance and are characterised by "pulling together", "doing for each other" and "mutual support"; **(c)** a trusting, communicative, supportive coach-athlete relationship is important for some athletes' performance but takes time to develop.

"I moved around the country trying to find the right coach once I'd finished my education. ... I just kept moving around trying to find someone who could communicate with me – that's what I felt was missing. It's alright having technical knowledge but not knowing how to communicate it to you or not knowing how to give relevant feedback or the right feedback at the right time. So it took me a long while to find somebody like that and once I found him I stayed with him and moved houses when he moved jobs because that was important to me."

Athletes' views and experiences of **balance in life** differ in relation to age and experience. Some younger athletes take the perspective that other aspects of life must be and were being sacrificed in the interest of their sport career. More experienced athletes take the perspective that balance is essential in regard to both performance and life as a whole. Commonly, athletes told how eliminating or sidelining other areas of their life adversely affects their performance and well-being. While athletes tend to believe that at times it is necessary to compromise balance in the pursuit of excellence, most believe that other areas of life had to be maintained and valued alongside their sport careers in order to perform optimally.

"I remember being back at training and deciding that really I'd given everything to my sport in the most single minded way I could do. ... It was all based around training – completely. And I just felt that's crazy. What happens when I'm not an athlete? I feel like I've really gone back to basics, I've got back to me, spending more time with my girlfriend, spend a lot more time in church, and training to be a PE teacher. So I'm working toward a future outside of sport. I don't train maybe as much as I did there but I'm running just as well, I'm fitter, I have around me people that care for me, people that want to help me in sport and so I think that was just something that I just needed to get other parts sorted."





LIFESTYLE AND PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT CONTEXTS

Several specific lifestyle and performance environment contexts have the potential to impact sport performance. The effects of each context are generally mediated by each athlete's own values, motives and experiences.

Athletes find that **education** provides two key benefits: **(a)** greater personal control and options in their career and future life; **(b)** balance in their life by providing a worthwhile pursuit outside sport. University education fits better with the demands of elite sport by virtue of increased flexibility in terms of timetabling when compared to school education. When clashes occur between the demands of education and sport, athletes usually compromise education before sport.

“Education was very important to me... One of the things that has been great when I’ve been on the team is I’ve just thought if I want to I can just quit this now and I can go out and I can get a job earning the same amount of money and my life, where I live, isn’t in danger. There are a lot of people on the sports teams now where they haven’t got a further or higher education and you do kind of look at them and think what are you going to do if you don’t do sport? Literally what are you going to do?”

Although **employment** is an important way of retaining balance in life and providing financial autonomy for non-professional athletes, most struggle to fulfil the demands of full-time employment alongside elite sport. Those who successfully combine work and elite sport require flexible working conditions and good employer relationships.

“My employers were so supportive. I couldn’t have asked for anything better. ‘Cause they knew my background. So it carried a lot of weight with them when I came in and said ‘I’ve got a physio appointment.’ They’d say ‘OK. Get in when you can.’ When I was going away to Belgium: ‘OK. That’s fine. See you in a week.’ I found all the time along the way that as long as I communicated with people that they’d happily sort it out for me.”

Among non-professional athletes **funding** is often considered something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, funding frees time and provides access to resources or expertise which is often essential for optimum performance. On the other hand, funding removes autonomy and certain hardships which act as an unspoken “training ground” for elite sport. The way funding is awarded and administered is likely to have a critical influence on the degree to which funding brings positive or negative consequences.

“The journey to the edge of the team, that journey needs to have ownership but it needs to be hard. That guy living out of the bag – that actually might be one of the best things for him. It means more to him than the guy whose been put up been put up in the fancy hotel. If you give up everything in your life to get to the edge of the team, I hate to say it, but you’re probably only ever going to get to the edge of the team. But if you can get to the edge of the team and hold down a part-time job, when you go full-time you’ll probably move into the medal zone.”

Communication styles between the performance team and individual athletes can be either a source of problems or a solution to problems. A critical factor in the effectiveness of communication styles is the extent of athletes' inclusion in the communication process. When athletes are solely or primarily on the receiving end of information, negative effects to performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being are common. When athletes are involved in the communication process performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being all tend to improve.

“If you split it into two sides, which is the athlete and their management, communication flow tends to only go one way. I mean we get told what to do, we have to know how to receive feedback, we’ve got to take it, swallow it, and get on with what you’re doing. But it doesn’t go the other direction. It’s very difficult for an athlete to say to their team manager ‘If you want some feedback, actually we didn’t handle this very well and maybe it should be structured differently’.”

Two further lifestyle and performance environment concerns were raised by athletes in this research: **(a)** Although athletes value the contribution scientific knowledge and technological innovation to sport performance, some question whether our reliance on science and technology has gone too far. These athletes are concerned that the elimination of flair, creativity, and individuality from elite sport will adversely affect performance in the long-term; **(b)** There is concern that talent identification schemes and our tendency to encourage athletes to specialise and commit at a young age do not have positive effects in terms of long-term performance and well-being. Several athletes felt that they would not have remained in their sport long enough to be successful had they specialised at a young age.

“(The current coach) has got very good strengths, very technical, he’s got everything on his laptop. But then that overtakes sport which is not science. You tend to get the impression that (if) there’s a certain problem, well, the solutions on page 63. That’s how you get the impression with a technology influence within sport – which is fantastic, I’m not poo-pooing it – but ticking boxes doesn’t solve all the problems.”



Conclusions

Some final conclusions arising from the study are set out below. The research team also proposed a number of associated measures which they believe should be taken to improve practice. These proposals will be taken into consideration by UK Sport when it is working with governing bodies on the development of their athlete support programmes.

CONCLUSIONS	IMPROVING PRACTICE
<p>1. Exposing young athletes to an over-systematised regime too soon can be counter-productive as it risks denying the autonomy and personal control which experienced athletes believe is crucial to their performance.</p>	<p>In order to nurture autonomy and the ability to take personal control, young athletes should be encouraged to engage in (and provided with opportunities for) education. Critically, education should focus not only on training for employment but also on personal growth and development. Governing bodies and coaches have responsibilities in this regard.</p>
<p>2. Personal and family relationships are rooted in athletes' early sporting experiences and play an important role in helping athletes cope with the demands of elite sport throughout their careers. Practices which prevent or limit family and personal relationships threaten not only athlete performance but also long term well-being.</p>	<p>Athletes should be actively encouraged and allowed to make time and space for personal and family relationships alongside their sports careers.</p>
<p>3. Experienced athletes typically value effort above or alongside ability and talent.</p>	<p>Young athletes need to be helped to understand and evaluate the benefits of effort as those who can see the relationship between effort and performance are more likely than those who don't to have confidence in their ability to progress.</p>
<p>4. Athletes considered that good communication prevents or minimises certain problems and difficulties. Provision of information and inclusion in the decision making process are hallmarks of effective communication practice. Effective communication can improve perceptions of ownership and control as athletes are less likely to feel that control of their lives and careers is being taken away.</p>	<p>Initiatives to promote effective communication such as workshops, seminars, facilitated discussions, and interviews should be made available to coaches, athletes, parents, and other officials who work with athletes.</p>
<p>5. Experienced athletes in this research valued the opportunity to "give back" to sport by discussing their experiences for the benefit of others. Their perspectives and stories challenge the stereotypical conception of elite athletes as macho, obsessive, one-dimensional, or uncultured.</p>	<p>"Story-telling" of this sort may be profitably incorporated into athlete development programmes. This is likely to provide two benefits: (a) it provides younger athletes with an opportunity to consider and discuss their lives and careers in the light of the perspectives and stories of older athletes; and (b) it allows experienced athletes to feel they are valued and have a continuing role to play within sport.</p>
<p>6. Maintaining a balanced life alongside involvement in elite sport is something that was possible for some athletes but not for others. Some athletes described phases of their career where balance was present and other times when it was not.</p>	<p>Further research is needed to explore in greater depth the circumstances through which balance might be sacrificed and the effects of this in terms of performance and athlete well-being in different sports.</p>
<p>7. The perspectives of Paralympic athletes enriched the findings of this research and raised several issues which are worthy of further exploration. In particular a more complete understanding is needed of: (a) The unique difficulties disabled athletes face in accessing sport opportunities at all levels; (b) The ways in which career progression and performance are affected by existing sport provision for disabled athletes and social attitudes towards disability; (c) The potential mutual benefits of greater integration of Paralympic and able-bodied athletes in training and preparation.</p>	<p>Further research is urgently needed which focuses specifically on the experiences of Paralympic athletes in order to tease out and develop these issues. This understanding will both contribute to the development of disability sport in general and encourage the wider sporting community to value and integrate athletes with disabilities.</p>





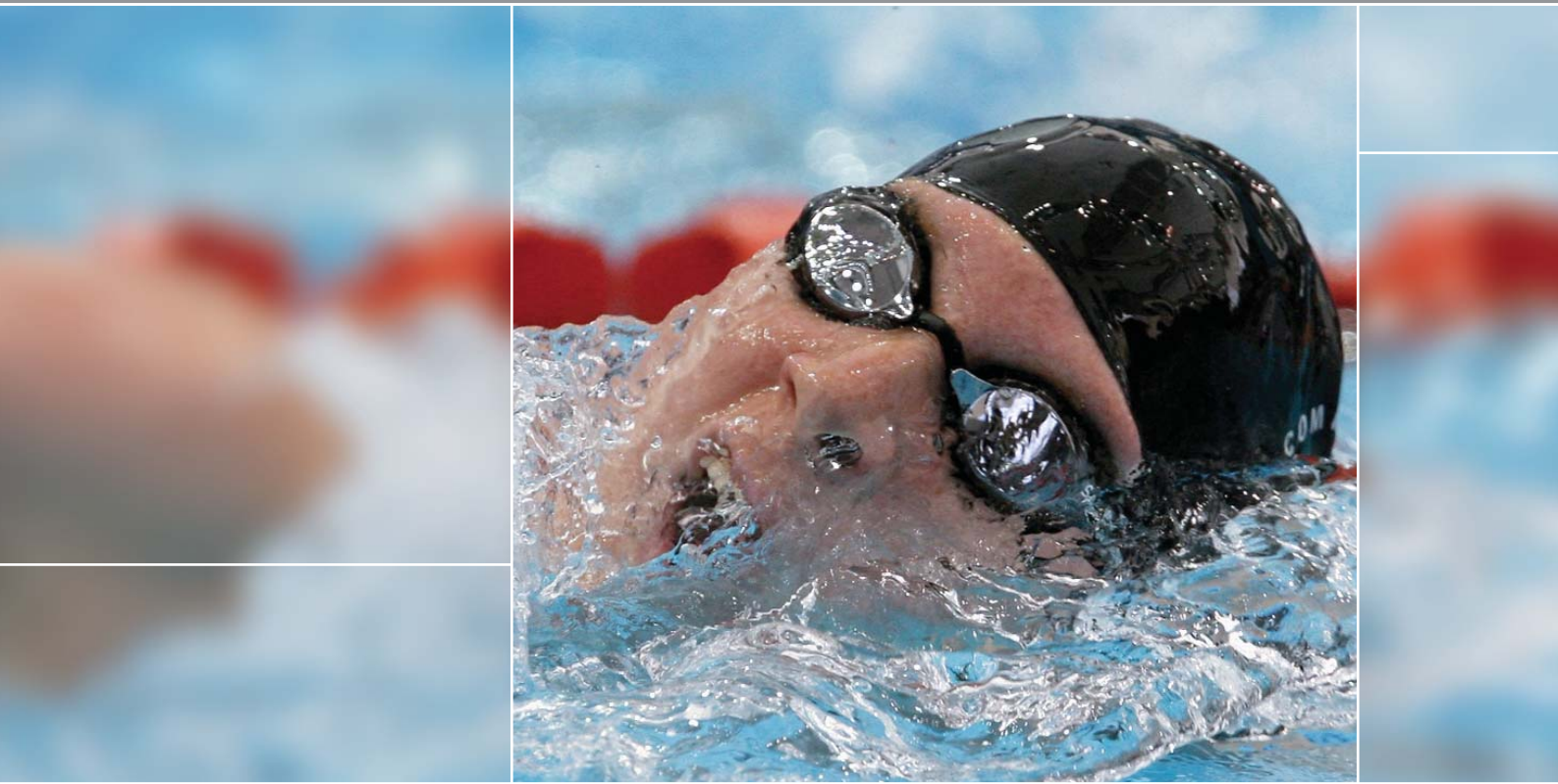
The full version of this report and a related study, Women Professional Tournament Golfers, also carried out for UK Sport by Dr. Douglas, can be obtained from

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