THE RATIONALE FOR THE MULTIFACETED DEVELOPMENT OF THE ATHLETE-STUDENT IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In the high profile competitive world of global sport, the athlete is from a relatively young age under exorbitant pressure to excel, compete successfully in the international arena and develop as a person and professionally. The South African athlete faces unique challenges in this regard and requires special nurturing and development to achieve personal, professional and sports-related success. This paper explores the unique social and competitive world of the athlete by analyzing data obtained from a survey conducted among elite athletes who participated in the 7th All Africa Games in 1999. The data focuses on the social profile of the athletes and was obtained through 103 interviews (8 heads of missions, 11 managers, 17 coaches and 67 athletes) and questionnaires that were completed by 343 athletes (160 men and 113 women). They represented 20 different sporting codes, were from 97 different urban and/or rural communities and represented a wide socio-economic, ethnic, age and educational spectrum. The findings informed the proposed rationale for a multi-level and -faceted development programme for the athlete-students. Educational institutions, national sports agencies, companies and athletes may tap into these research findings and this rationale to address the development of South African athletes and sport meaningfully, ethically and responsibly.

Key words: Elite athlete; African athlete; Career phases; Retirement.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the major forces in the world of contemporary elite sport relate to the economic and political power structures and relationships. Celebrating the values of excellence and competition in elite sport, successful athletes and teams receive the adulation of being national heroes and superstars (Sanders, 2000). They often fulfil the aspirations of acclaimed nationhood, bringing the gold medals to their countries and instilling pride in people who, by association, experience a surge in their self-worth and national pride. International super stars such as Pele became the symbol of Brazil's sporting prowess and the long line of Kenian runners who have dominated world distance running are celebrated as capturing the spirit of the nation (Allison, 2001). When the "Amabokoboko" (Springboks) won the 1995 Rugby World Cup and the Bafana Bafana the 1996 African Cup of Nations, politicians used the forum to address nation-building and supporters experienced feelings of national pride and belonging of the majority of South Africans (Booth, 1996).

Another major force influencing the world of sport is commercialisation. Professional sport has at different levels of professionalism become a lucrative career for the fortunate few

whose upward social mobility is also evidenced in often exorbitant appearance fees, endorsement and player contracts (Lavoie, 2001). Professional athletes have become sports workers with a relatively short playing career. They have become commodities to be bought or sold in accordance with market forces and their own marketability (Coakley, 2001). Many top-level players who had obtained contracts to play overseas did so to maximise their earnings as 'migrant workers' and to extend their sporting careers. David Bechkham who earns about R109 million yearly at the age of 27, and South Africa's soccer star, Lucas Radebe as a contracted player of Leeds United (since 1994) has been earning about R187 million yearly through contracts, bonuses, sponsorships and endorsements, are but two of the 'success stories' of sport (Griffiths, 1999; Adamson, 2002).

Transnational companies and media networks have tapped into the highly visible and persuasive world of elite sport by successfully branding athletes with products to enhance their consumer profiles and maximise their profits (Giddens, 2000; Coakley, 2001). As Carl Lewis explained when he raced against Linford Christie in 1993 and their respective sponsors put up 100 000 pounds in prize money: "I'm a company, he's a company. The idea is for my company to outperform his company" (Lynam & Teasdale, 1994: 33).

Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies as well as governmental task teams have investigated the complex process of the athletic achievements of different nations and developed benchmarks from the most successful nations and teams (Gould *et al.*, 1999). The quality of scientific support and resources is perceived to be the basis of athletic success (Stamm & Lamprecht, 2001). It accentuates the economic inequalities as first-world countries have always won the overall medal counts.

With these major forces at play, individual athletes have to negotiate a career and find ways to invest in their personal future, which will enable them to have a career once their active playing days are over. Insight into the socialisation process may provide them and the academic fraternity involved in assisting them to meet this challenge, with some answers.

THE PREMISE AND PARADIGM

The Marxist paradigm provides a framework for analysing the exploitative and stratified structuring of elite sport and the power play within commercial sport with its roots in the media and corporate enterprise (Rigauer, 2001). Political power and the acclaim of sport in terms of nationhood can be conceptualised critically in terms of Gramsci's analysis of hegemonic power relations (Hargreaves & McDonald, 2001). The macro theoretical perspective may however, contribute to the understanding of the contextual factors influencing the lives of elite athletes.

Moving to postmodernism and interpretative sociology, Prus's model of 'career contingencies', which is grounded in the interactionist view of social behaviour, offers explanations of the identity formation (social and personal), and the processes of socialisation and desocialisation of the elite athlete within his/her social position (Prus & Irini, 1980; Stevenson, 1999). Descriptions and analyses of sports subcultures and the process of socialisation that provide insights into the themes of sporting careers, subcultures and cultural production will be utilised in the micro-analysis of data (Donnely, 2001).

SOCIALISATION OF THE ELITE ATHLETE

Prus and Irini (1980) identify various phases in being socialised into and through sport that entails introduction, recruitment, deepening involvement, entanglement, commitment and obligation. This analysis corresponds with the career phases identified by Bloom and adapted by Salema (1994) who conceptualised and integrated the behaviour of performers and significant others (performer and mentors) in their typologies.   The significance of socialisation as a reciprocal process between the athlete and the significant other is widely recognised (Coakley, 2001). Insofar as human agency demonstrates the social construction of reality, it sheds light on the fact that humans interact to accept or reject certain norms and behaviours and are thus actively making choices that are influenced by culture (including subcultures), their environment and significant others as major 'socialisers'.

During the formative years and initiation phase of becoming an athlete, parents are mainly sought mentors who share the positive excitement of their children being actively involved in sport and often make significant sacrifices in providing resources and support in order to 'launch their children's sporting careers'. During the mastery phase, parents tend to play a lesser role although emotional and practical support remain to a large extent the prerogative of the family and friends (Johnston & Carroll, 1998). The influence of coaches has proved to become more important as athletes progress in their athletic careers. Insofar as these factors can contribute to sporting success, they can also contribute to withdrawal and burnout. The over-involvement and unrealistic expectations of parents and coaches identified as the 'reversed-dependency trap', where an adult identifies with a child to the extent that his or her self-worth depends upon the success of the child, often contribute to competitive anxiety, decreased enjoyment and guilt that may lead to dropping out of sport (Coakley, 1993; Wiersma, 2000).

Whereas the family or household provides experiences and values for learned interpersonal relationships and normative behaviour, the peer group is an equally powerful source of ideas and experiences during the teen years (Hardman, 1997). Team members, in particular, are important influences in the lives of athletes who are subjected to long hours of training, travelling and competing. Social identity formation, team cohesion, inter-group harmony, co-operation and a shared commitment are strong motivators for group success, team-building and social bonding during the phase of 'deepening commitment' (Prus & Irini, 1980; Widmeyer *et al.,* 1993).

Environmental factors that are of relevance at his stage relate to the compatibility of dominant value systems of competitive sport with personal and social lifestyles, a favourable sports culture, club environment (support and long term- positive athlete-coach relationships), athletic success during adolescence, multi-sport involvement during childhood, early maturation, being born early in the year and hereditary factors ('the right genes') (Carlson, 1993).

Lee *et al.* (1990) report the influence of similar socio-environmental factors in their study of the 'social role-social system' of Korean medallists in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. As a dialectical process, socialisation is problematic - despite the fact that people demonstrate agency (i.e. abilities, power to act), the conditions for the agency are rarely ones of the agent's own choosing (Lawson & Stroot, 1993). Political ends are often served by coercing athletes

to take part in national competitions, using them as 'political ambassadors' for propaganda purposes. Economic exploitation is also evident in the buying and selling of athletes or teams, controlling endorsement, biased contracting, unethical labour practices and the spread of consumerism through media profiling and sponsorship (Coakley, 2001). If athletes have outlived their usefulness or are no longer 'marketable' they are often left alone to cope with the downward spiral retirement.

Research on the retirement experience of Olympic athletes suggests that the majority (up to 80%) report difficulty in making the transition out of active sports competition (Petitpas *et al.,* 1992). Research findings and analytical models reflect on the trauma, loss of status, financial difficulties, drug abuse, identity crisis, isolation and sometimes grieving process of transition (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). Training and sport performance are central in the lives of athletes and have strong ties to their self-identity, self-worth and value system of being an elite athlete (Balague, 1999).

The experience of 'social death' upon retirement is closely linked to factors such as a narrow focus of self-identity (as athlete), loss of control over the decision to retire, loss of status and social identity, the lack of a social support system and inadequate pre-retirement planning (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Elite athletes who are professionally qualified have some form of sheltered employment, or are in the position to acquire a high profile career outside that of a professional player, may experience a 'relief rather than a crisis' (Sinclair & Orlick, 1994). Still, the majority of elite athletes are still exposed to 'social death' rather than 'social rebirth'.

To address this dilemma and exploitative sporting practices, anecdotal evidence should be replaced with cross-cultural in-depth research that will optimally drive the holistic life span development and nurturing of elite athletes as athletes and valuable human resources. Sports agencies (such as the National Olympic Committees) and educational institutions have responded to this dilemma by developing career assistance or institutionalized programmes and/or scholarships (Riffee & Alexander, 1991; Petitpas *et al*., 1992; Brown & Bohac, 1997). By tapping into these frameworks and conducting cross-cultural research into the sociological profiles and identity formation of African athletes, much needed insights are generated to inform a pragmatic developmental perspective.

The aim of this research focused on identifying the socio-psychological profiles of elite athletes and collect data on the processes of socialisation, identity formation and supportive systems that offer insight into lived experiences and the needs of these athletes. In part, this paper draws on the backgrounds, perceptions and experiences of national and/or international African athletes. It is thus structured firstly to explore the political and economic forces within elite sport, followed by the viewing of the process of socialisation, identity formation and the lived realities of African athletes to substantiate the need and rationale for multifaceted nurturing as part of a holistic identity formation as well as life- and career-oriented development.

THE METHOD

By reporting and interpreting data collected from 410 athletes from 22 African countries, 343 of whom completed questionnaires and 67 of whom were interviewed, insight is created into the lived realities of these athletes from developing countries. The sample of the athletes

included men (63%) and women (37%), representing all 20 sports of the 7th All Africa Games. Selecting a randomised and fully representative sample was problematic due to the limited availability of athletes during the Games and the limited research funding that did not allow for extensive travelling, post-Games follow-ups and translation services.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, collective comprehensive data was prioritised and a judgement sample was selected. Triangulation of data was the result of multiple researchers and methods (questionnaire and interviews). The interviews lasted from 40 to about 90 minutes and were taped and transcribed. The narratives were coded for analysis.

THE AFRICAN ATHLETE: RESULTS

Socio-economic profile

The data obtained from African athletes who participated in the 7th All Africa Games demonstrates clearly that the lack of resources and economic profile impact negatively on athletic careers. The majority of the athletes (84%) were from urban areas in their countries where there are facilities or where the training centres are relatively better equipped and coaches are more readily available than in the relatively rural areas. A coach and athletes explain their situations in this regard:

> "Unfortunately we do not have much in terms of financial backing. Whenever we play whether it be in the local league or the provincial tournaments or national tournaments, we always have to hand money out of our own pockets. This year, where I've been playing for many years, it is the first year ever that we've actually had a training camp for more than a couple of days' duration prior to a major competition."
> (A volleyball player from South Africa)

> "I am worried to run as I don't have shoes. I will have to borrow from the other athletes. There is no sponsorship for this."
> (An athlete from Nigeria)

> "We do not always have equipment, especially gloves. The boxers punch with motor car tyres and fasten papers like gloves."
> (A coach from Tanzania)

Competing in sport requires financial means and resources for which families and/or households have to bear the largest portion. It is tough for a poor household to support an athlete, a scenario that is reflected by the socio-economic status of the majority of African athletes being from a high- (7%) and middle-income bracket (60%) compared to 21% indicating that they fall into a low-income bracket or are poor (10%). This class distinction is even more prevalent in the educational status of the athletes and/or their parents have a small percentage of the athletes and both of their parents or guardians having secondary (15%) or tertiary education (13%).

Socio-economic groups also seem to differ as far as the type of sport in which they participate. Unfortunately, the chi-square approximation may not hold, due to small frequencies, but it

seems that athletes from the lower socio-economic strata represent sports such as handball (64%), soccer (56%), athletics (48%), weightlifting (39%) and volleyball (38%). The access to practice time was also influenced by the socio-economic status of the athletes.

A cross-tabulation of off-season and competitive season practice times shows that there is a significant difference between off and competitive season training times (Chi-square value=99.789; p-value=0.000 <0.01). As training peaks during the competitive season, athletes from poor socio-economic households tend to practise only 5-10 hours per week (40%) in comparison with athletes of a middle (33%) and higher economic status (40%) who train for more than 21 hours per week during the competitive season.

Unequal access to resources is even more evident among athletes from developing countries and first-world countries. Athletes from African countries perceive themselves as being relatively disadvantaged and lagging behind their European and/or American counterparts, particularly in terms of scientific support, preparation and support for international competitions. The majority of African athletes perceive the lack of financial support (91%), scientific assistance (82%), training and competitive opportunities (80%), expert coaching (63%) and social support (56%) as stumbling blocks in their athletic careers.

These perceptions are substantiated by the fact that only a small percentage (13%) indicated that they were professional athletes or partially (21%) earned a living through sport. The majority (59%) who are neither students nor at school (13%) are otherwise employed in the formal or informal sector. Not being able to sustain a professional career in sport, elite athletes are carrying a double burden of supporting themselves and their athletic careers through other part- or full-time occupations and having little time for anything beside competing and training. This taxing lifestyle takes its toll on relationships as well as the physical and psychological health of athletes whose sports participation has in some cases taken over their entire existence. An athlete from Mauritius explains:

> "My biggest frustration as an athlete is the long working hours. I work as a lab assistant for ten hours per day. During the off-season I can train for two hours per evening. During the competition season I train more and only take the weekends off."

Sports-related injuries contribute to the financial, psychological and physical stress of athletes because injuries may end their sporting careers. Not being in a peak physical condition may cause them to lose a championship or sponsorship, or be dropped from a team. Some athletes explain their anxiety and consequences of being injured.

> "I had an injury to my hamstrings and was eliminated in the semi's because of the injury. An injury makes you nervous and demoralises you."
> (An athlete from Kenia)

Socio-political aspects

Against the background of relative deprivation, governmental institutions and sports bodies have a vital role to play in providing much needed support and resources as secured employment in the civil service is diminishing. Political agencies require athletes to be

ambassadors and role models conveying messages of nation-building and ideological superiority, and evoking national sentiments and pride through association. The perceived unique identity of African athletes embraces such national sentiments, which is expressed by several national athletes as follows:

> "Being an elite (sportsman) is very important because you are recognised and people give (you) respect. You are competing for your country and your people."
> (A volleyball player from Zambia)

In spite of the emphasis on talent identification and sports development in African countries, only 48% of the athletes indicated that coaches and/or institutions such as the school, local or regional sports club or tertiary institution had recruited them. An even smaller percentage (33%) viewed themselves as products of governmentally sponsored development programmes. This reflects on the absence or inadequate functioning of such programmes on the one hand, and the comprehensive support structures and support needed for sustaining elite sports participation.

The implementation of policy and other political power imbalances are manifested in diverse discriminatory practices such as controlling funding and/or access to election and/or favouritism based on majority status, ethnicity, gender, the status of a sport, and the age and locality of athletes. Several white South African athletes felt themselves relatively powerless as racial quotas have at some stages excluded them from participation, whereas athletes of colour perceived themselves as being economically disadvantaged. Patterns of social stratification were most evident among women athletes, and athletes from an ethnic minority, from certain nationalities or from the lower socio-economic strata in a society. Some athletes competing in karate, boxing and Taekwondo cited incidents in which they felt cheated by judges who favoured 'bigger names' or athletes from their own countries. Kenyan athletes experienced some animosity if they won races in the Grand Prix Series in European countries where sponsors and supporters would prefer one of their own to have won.

Socialisation

The life cycle of the athlete in most of the sporting codes is relatively short. The fact that it takes about 10 years of competitive participation to reach an elite level and given the mean age of 25.7 years of the sample illustrate the intensive engagement and influence on the identity formation of athletes from a relatively young age.

The social structure and presence of other siblings are more important, for only 14 athletes (4%) who completed questionnaires indicated that they were the only children. The largest number of athletes appears to be the youngest sibling (43%), followed by a middle child (35%) or eldest (22%). This picture changes when considering the gender of the athlete and the position within the family. It is clear that the majority of women athletes are the youngest of the siblings whereas the majority of male athletes are middle children (see Figure 1).

The importance of family members, parents, coaches (significant others) and friends (peer group) as 'socialisers' is evident in the athletes who indicate them as being the main providers of psychological support and influential people in their sports careers. Family members are

viewed as the most influential socialisation agents (n=210), followed by a coach or mentor (n=111) and friends or peers (n=99). The relationship with friends seems to be more vulnerable and most affected by the athletes' competitive participation. Eighty-four athletes indicate that their relationship with friends and/or love affairs had deteriorated due to the demands (time and emotional) of travelling, training and competitions.
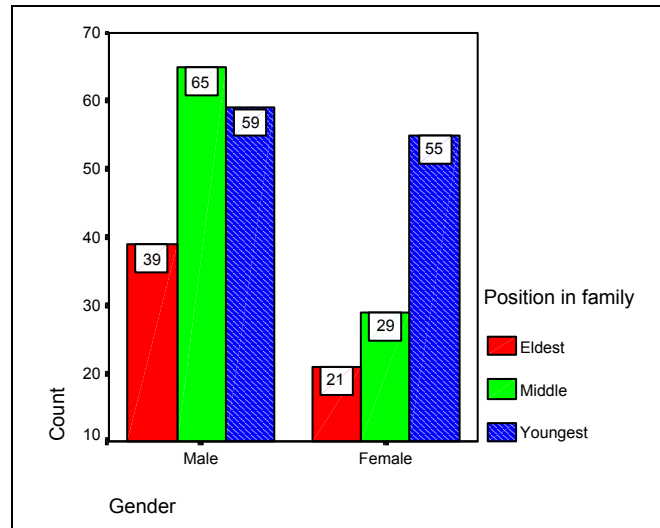

FIGURE 1. **GENDER AND POSITION OF ATHLETE IN THE FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Bonding with significant others seems to be strengthened during what Prus and Irini (1980) refer to as the introductory and deepening involvement phase of becoming an athlete. As a process of enculturation takes place and the athlete finds an appropriate place and status within the hierarchy of sport, new friendships are formed with team members and fellow athletes. Athletes develop a deep-seated desire to succeed and conform to the norms and behaviour conducive to their strife for distinction. This often becomes the overall purpose in their lives as they are recognised as being one of 'them' (elite athlete fraternity).

Between the initial and 'conversion' phase of becoming an elite athlete, a shift in motivation and behaviour takes place. Where intrinsic enjoyment, success, talent, the attractiveness of the sport and significant others were identified as prime introductory motivators, intrinsic and personal rewards, success, status and external rewards were identified as prime motivators for wanting to be an elite athlete (see Figure 2).

There seems to be a shift in focus as the sportsperson becomes more entangled in his/her role as an elite athlete. The personal growth, values, sacrifices and identity of being a committed athlete, hard work, sacrifice and sporting success are embraced and valued as meaningful and directive in pursuing a career in sport (see Figure 3).

In becoming an established part of the group of insiders (other elite athletes or a team), the individual's involvement deepens and he/she achieves some form of valued social identity in the sporting contexts with stronger commitments and self-identification of being an elite athlete – a reputation attributed by others as well.
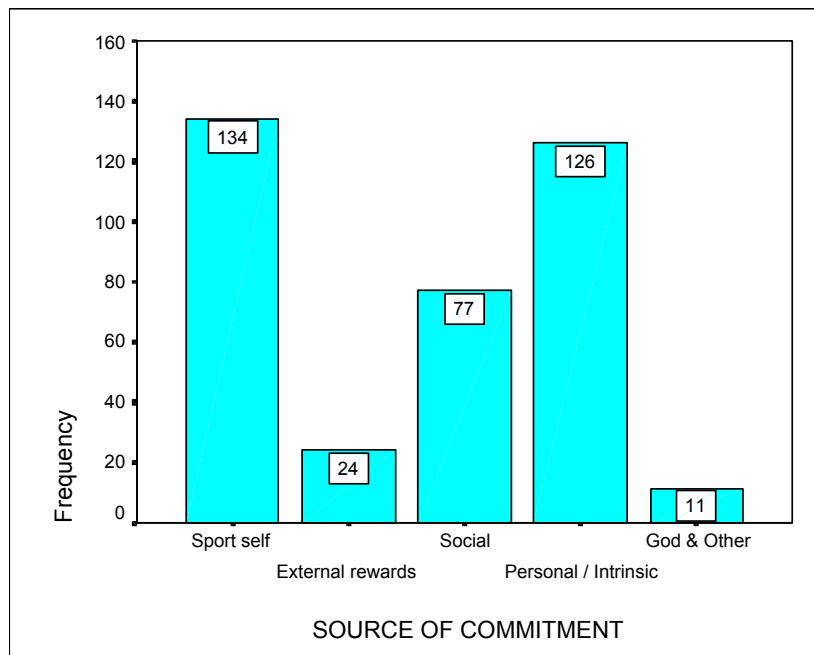

FIGURE 2.   **FREQUENCIES OF SOURCE OF COMMITMENT OF ATHLETES**

Personal and intrinsic meanings are viewed as important gains, as well as external rewards, social status and recognition despite the perceived lack of being successful at international level. It is however the love of, and commitment to, the sport, the intrinsic rewards and social status that primarily motivate athletes to remain involved and committed to train and compete at an elite level. In the end however, the main ambition is the quest for sporting success that is perceived to be the main source of the athlete's motivation. Several athletes commended on, and explained their dedication and often extreme commitment to their sports and their strife for excellence, success and recognition as follows:

> "The most rewarding experience for me as an athlete is really winning. I was so happy to have won the World Junior title last year. In fact, I felt like crying when the national anthem was played. Everywhere you go around in Nigeria you're known. This motivates you to stay there."
> (An athlete from Nigeria)

> "What keeps me going is the quest for personal growth and development. I also would like to better myself (in sport) all the time."
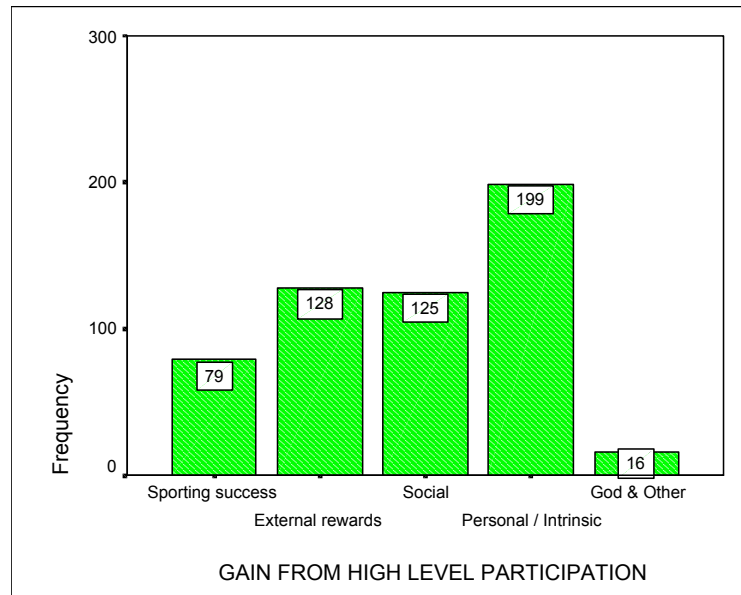> (An athlete from Cape Verde Islands)

FIGURE 3.   **GAINS OF ATHLETES FROM HIGH LEVEL PARTICIPATION**

This complete commitment and engulfment of a sporting career have in theory and practice overshadowed the inevitable reality of retirement from sport. When the athletes were asked to reflect on their possible retirement, the majority (46%) indicated that they wanted to become a coach or follow a sports-related career (14%). Twenty-five athletes were uncertain as they had not given retirement from high performance sport much thought and 44 (12%) only indicated that they would continue their sports participation at recreational and social levels. Only 45 (12%) indicated that they had career plans other than being directly involved in sport. It is clear that career development has taken the back seat in the development and nurturing of elite athletes. This is most evident in the athletes' admittance that, above all, they had sacrificed their education and preparation for a career in becoming and being an elite athlete.

> "I don't have a personal life. It is only training and competing. I have to sacrifice everything … Even my friends do not understand. We (athletes) are quite isolated."
> (An athlete from Namibia)

> "I never had a normal childhood because of football. I always had to train to become the best player. I do sport all the time. This is my life."
> (An athlete from South Africa)

We do not always realise how fragile and demanding a sporting career is. A national athlete who participated at the 7th All Africa Games captured the intense and fleeting existence thereof by saying: "Sport takes a lot of sacrificing. You have to cope with injury, jealousy, failure, politics, relationships and being away from home. It's tough out there, and then it is over before you are ready for it to end."

Educators and academics need to contribute meaningfully to the nurturing of athlete students and provide the essential resources firstly to equip them to meet the competitive demands of high performance sport, and secondly to develop life and career-related skills. The aspect of social care and assistance with the professional integration during and after the athlete's career need to form part of a comprehensive development strategy. Educational institutions, private enterprises and political stakeholders should be informed to come on board to facilitate sports development optimally and the multifaceted development of elite athletes.

CONCLUSION

The sports fraternity needs a rude awakening of what it takes to be an athlete. How much is an athlete's life worth? All role players are ethically bound and responsible to assist in the development of athletes as competitors, students and citizens who often light the flame of hope and glory in which everybody so readily shares. The quest for the athletes and all stakeholders is to team up and face the responsibility together.

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