INFLUENCES ON THE SOCIALISATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN ELITE ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

Within the different phases of being socialised into the formation of an athletic identity, socialisation agents (including the 'self') make significant contributions. A self-constructed questionnaire was completed by 123 South African elite athletes who competed in the 8th All Africa Games in Abuja (2003). They represented 17 different sports codes, the majority (n=74, 60%) of which competed in team sports and 49 (40%) competed in individual sports. The gender composition of the sample consists of 69 (56%) men and 54 (44%) women. The findings reflect the shifting nature and dominant role of significant others as socialising agents, the influence of environmental factors, and socio-cultural and economic aspects. The social worlds and career paths of elite athletes is further constructed through ideological and subjective schemes, which translate into needs and perceptions that should be understood and addressed in the development of elite athletes in the South African context.

Key words: Elite athlete; Socialisation; Sport; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Through identity formation as an integral part in the socialisation process, athletes consciously and unconsciously acquire a set of dispositions that orientate them towards a particular understanding and interpretation of the role that they are fulfilling in their social world (Vaugrand, 2001; Schinkel & Tacq, 2004). Career orientation and pathes of an elite athlete is constructed by the socialisation process in which socialisation agents (significant others), socio-cultural influences, the 'self' and the environment have significant roles to play (Stevenson, 1990; Phillips, 1993). On the one hand the athlete is acquiring the role and identity of being acknowledged as 'an athlete' and on the other hand he/she is actively involved through meaningful interaction in the socialisation process.

An individual is thus reciprocally involved in the socialisation process as Coakley (2003: 98) explains: "socialisation is an active process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become acquainted with the social world in which we live". The interaction between athlete and socialising agent changes over time as is evident in the different phases of becoming involved. First, individuals are introduced to sports participation. Then they experience a deepening involvement, and become entangled and committed until the athletic identity is internalised (Prus & Irini, 1980; Salema, 1994). Desocialisation entails the phase of becoming disengaged in the particular role and includes the formation of a new identity, namely that of ex-participant in terms of elite participation in athletics.

Bandura's social learning theory demonstrates the effect of identity formation and learning through the observation of models as represented by significant others (parents, family members, the coach, peers or team members) (Stroot, 2002). Within the cognitive development theory, Brustad (1992) discusses the influence of parental socialisation patterns on children's self-perception and orientation towards achievement. Identity formation and the creation and confirmation of the role identities of elite athletes are substantially 'sponsored' by significant others (parents, peers, siblings and coaches) (Stevenson, 1990; Kohl, 2000). Family members, especially the father or same-sex older siblings (Raudsepp & Viira, 2000), seem to exert the strongest influence on athletes under the age of 14, whereas the influences of peers seem to dominate during later adolescence (Nowacki, 2000).

Two major influences that contribute to athletes' pursuing an athletic career are, according to Stevenson (1990), success and positive support from significant others. Success in youth sport is rewarded and recognised, and thus impacts on the creation of a positive self-image – a condition that is internalised and reaffirmed through continued participation, positive experiences and recognition from others (parents, coaches, peers and external agents).

Parents' own involvement (Melnick *et al.*, 1981), socio-economic status and urban locality (Maksimenko & Baruschimana, 1978) as well as their educational level (especially the mother's) (Givi, 1984) are conducive to the successful introduction and sustained involvement of children in competitive sport. Other factors such as the birth order also impact on the social worlds of athletes in the sense that first borns are relatively more dependent on the parents as socialising agents, whereas later borns are relatively more dependent on older siblings for support in their sporting roles (Ebihara *et al.*, 1983). Reseach findings also indicate dependency on siblings for support and social influence in sports participation among ethnic minorities from relatively poor socio-economic backgrounds (Phillips, 1993).

Moderate pressure from significant others (parents and coaches) to compete successfully and pursue a sporting career is perceived relatively positively by athletes in early adolescence. Over-involvement and unrealistic expectations may result in a 'reversed-dependency trap', where the self-worth of the adult (parent and/or coach) depends on the sporting success of the child (Coakley, 1993; Wiersma, 2000). Managing the competitive career of athletes requires special guidance, encouragement and coaching. Coaches treasure the socialisation aspect of the athlete-coach relationship and are aware of its shaping the lives of young athletes (Goncalves, 1996). The competitive emphasis, lack of enjoyment and coaching style are main contributing factors to early retirement from competitive sports participation (Greendorfer, 1986). Parents mainly transmit the orientation and ideology of upward social mobility through successful sports participation to children. The strife for fame and social recognition is often over-emphasized by parents and not equally shared by the athlete (Oliver, 1980). Especially in the poorer sections of society, this is an important consideration for motivating children to follow a career in sport (Harris, 1994).

Successful athletes indentified the encouragement of peers as very important in motivating them to continue competitive participation in sport (Stevenson, 1990). Young athletes around the age of 15 who are increasingly 'entangled' in sport establish frienships with co-players and are thus influenced by other athletes (peers within the athletic fraternity) (MacPhail *et al.*, 2003). As young as age five, children seem to be ready to develop loyalties towards a team (James, 2001). Social identity formation, team cohesion and shared commitment are strong

motivators for social bonding in team sport during the phase of 'deepening commitment' (Prus & Irini, 1980).

Environmental factors that are of significance include favourable geographic conditions such as the availability of the sea for surfing. Access to expert coaching and economic factors impact on athletes' opportunities to excel in 'expensive' sports such as golf, rowing or equestrian sport. The availability of facilities, coaching and competition can be translated into opportunities that are perceived to be a 'cause' determining the level of participation and success in sport (Phillips, 1993). In addition to opportunity, Carlson (1993) identified the importance of a favourable sports culture, club environment (support and positive long-term athlete-coach relationship) and multi-sport involvement during childhood for the success of national athletes in Sweden. Lee *et al*. (1990) reported the influence of similar socio-environmental factors in their study of Korean medallists in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.

Broad cultural influences conductive to promoting sport and developing sporting talent are essential in the creation of a sporting culture and role models who provide norms, values and a frame of reference for developing athletes (Phillips, 1993). Awareness of a sports culture (Lankford *et al*., 2000) and the role of the school and community in facilitating such norms and values (Ikhioya, 1999) are directly linked to socialising athletes into the 'sport ethic' and the role of being an athlete (Figler & Whitaker, 1995).

Ideological and structural barriers inherent in different societies result in discriminatory practices. Sponsorship-driven or commercial sports and social stratification based on age, gender and/or race may negatively affect continued sports participation (Bruening, 2000). Part of broader socio-cultural influences is the role that role models and the media play in motivating athletes to follow an athletic pathway (Coakley, 2003). Research by Maccobny (1959) illustrates the fact that the impact of role models as an influence on children's choices to follow a sport career is directly related to the intensity of the relationship with the person (athlete) being socialised. More recent research by Phillips (1993) confirms this reality and illustrates the need for personal involvement and contact to utilize role models as potential socialising agents.

Probably the most significant influence on the identity formation of the athlete and central to the construction and understanding of his/her social world (life style and associated mindset) is the 'self', which includes the inherent interpretation of the atheletic identity, role, success and aspirations of the individual (Johansson, 1992; Coakley, 2003). It is the athlete's personal goals and perception of potential and success that inform the athletic identity, which impacts positively on the continuation of a sporting career (Balague, 1999; Stroot, 2002).

The following model has been developed by the author and is based on the changing nature of dominant influences of social agents and the integration of the ideology and experiences of athletes across the different socialisation phases – from the initial phase of being introduced to a sport until the 'self' features predominate in the athletic identity and sport has become an obligation.
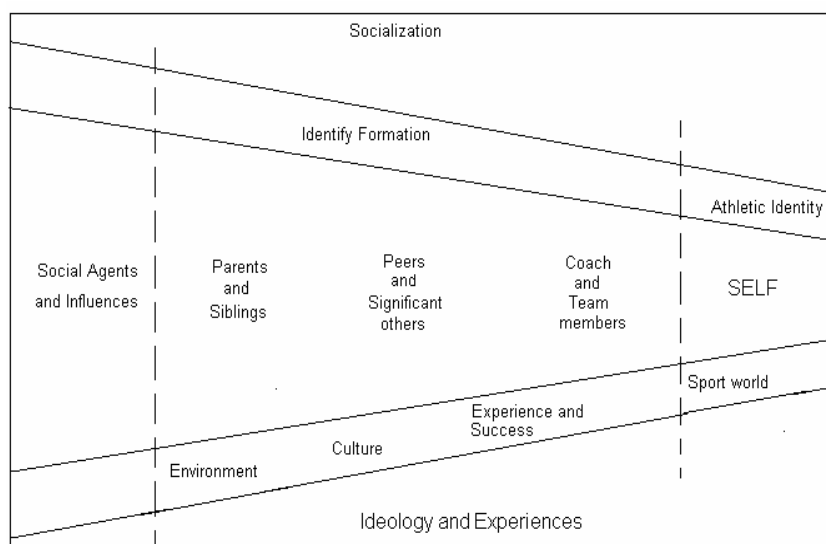
FIGURE 1. **ATHLETIC IDENTITY SOCIALISATION MODEL**

As sport takes place within the context of society's significant symbols, it influences the athlete's self-perception, self-esteem and self-worth of being identified (social recognition) and self-identification (self-recognition) as an elite athlete (athletic identity) (Weiss, 2001). The athletic identity is an integral part of an athlete (in the 'obligation phase') in that the 'persona' is built around the athletic accomplishments of the individual. Major 'ego adjustments' of such athletes are required on retirement from active competition (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the socialisation process and career pathways of South African elite athletes who took part in the 8th All Africa Games in Abuja in 2003, which represents the core of the South African sporting talent. Understanding the sporting world and athletic identity (through the eyes of the athletes), stakeholders could be informed to optimize circumstances and influences for the humane and successful development of sporting careers – as athletes - or offer alternative career pathways.

METHOD

A total of 123 South African athletes who competed in the 2003 All Africa Games held in Abuja completed a questionnaire, which was initially developed in 1999 to determine the psycho-social profiles of elite athletes who competed in the 7th All Africa Games (Burnett, 2003). The latter research included extensive qualitative data which could be utilised for analysis. Interviews was however not possible in this research as the researcher was not allowed entry into the athletes' villiage in Abudja and as the questionnaires was anonymously completed, no follow-up interviews were possible. 'Open categories' in previous research were developed as 'closed' ones based on the responses provided by 343 African athletes who previously completed the questionnaire.

Researchers were restricted and only allowed to approach athletes at the competition venues. The cooperation of coaches and managers was elicited and the majority of athletes answered the questionnaire during more convenient times at the Athletes' Villiage or back in their countries, in which case the questionnaires were to be posted by the manager. This resulted in a relatively low return rate of return of 53.5% (123 out of 230).

The sample of the athletes represented athletes from 17 (74%) of the sports codes offered at the All Africa Games. A relatively higher representation was represented of athletes from team sports (n=74, 60%), compared to athletes who competed in individual sports (n=49, 40%). The gender composition was representative of the larger population as 69 (56%) were men and 54 (44%) were women. Participation in the research was voluntary and the researcher had no control on the selection of the sample and thus not on providing for representation in various aspects.

RESULTS

The majority of athletes were from an urban *environment* (n=97, 79%) where they had access to relatively superior resources such as expert coaching, better quality facilities, transport and training opportunities as compared to their rural counterparts who made up 21% (n=26) of the sample. This corresponds to the findings of Maksimenko and Baruschimana (1978), Lee *et al.* (1990) and Phillips (1993).

The athletes identified themselves as representing all four major racial and/or ethnic groups in South Africa. The majority (79, 64%) considered themselves to be from minority groups reasoning mainly from the persepective of number representation (n=84) and/or racial representation (n=49), having access to political power (n=23) or economic resources (n=9) or a dominant religious affiliation (n=10). A similar rationale was presented in Burnett's (2003) study.

An elite athletic career is often glorified and highlighted in terms of the lucrative contracts and/or earnings ('fortune') or relative stardom ('fame') and social status of the athletes, yet the downside and hardships seldom receive the same exposure. Inherent in the social worlds of athletes are the discrimination, degradation and abuse they suffer in their sporting careers. *Discriminatory experiences* link mainly to the relative 'low status' of their sport (compared to better resourced professional sports) (n=60); their amateur status (n=39); racial (n=23), gender (n=33) and 'majority group' (n=20); or 'political discrimiation' (n=11). Racial stacking patterns (Coackley, 2003) and gender discrimination (Bruening, 2000) are well documented in literature.

Socio-political-based discrimination is further evident in perceived discriminatory practices being reported by athletes such as not being from the 'right' club (n=15), or being either too 'young' (n=15) or too 'old' (n=13). Athletes who are too outspoken also experience that they are discriminated against due to their 'personalities' (n=13). Several athletes (n=5) indicated that they had experienced 'sexual harassment' in their sporting careers, which also relates to the relative powerlessness and vulnerability of athletes and the possible control the perpetrators might have over the victim.

It is clear that *economic resources* are essential for facilitating participation in sport at elite level. Due to the relative small number of professional (10, 9%) and semi-professional (45, 40%) athletes, the family or household is mainly responsible for providing essential funding. This aspect is reflected in the fact that the majority of athletes indicated that they grew up in households, the socio-economic status of which is identified by them as either 'above average' (n=29, 24%) or 'average' (n=63, 53%). Only 12 (10%) indicated that they were from 'poor households'.

Access to special resources seems to be essential in the preparation and training for international and major sporting events where First World countries often afford athletes superior opportunities (Gould *et al*., 1999). This reality is evident in the fact that some athletes (n=35, 29%) had trained for more than three months in 'other countries', thus tapping into international resources and expertise from European countries (n=28). Two athletes from martial arts also trained in Japan prior to the 2003 All Africa Games.

The socio-economic status of the household is inevitably linked to the educational status of the prime care-givers (mother and/or father) of the athlete, and/or the athlete who is already economically productive or professional (Givi, 1984). The literacy level of the fathers and/or male guardians of athletes is relatively high with the majority (n=80, 71%) having a matric (Form 5 or Grade 12) or post-matric qualification. The same is true of the female guardians or mothers who (n=84, 71%) hold similar qualifications. Despite the fact that a relatively high percentage of athletes in the sample identified themselves as 'students' (n=58, 51%) and are thus still in the process of qualifying for a career, most (n=111, 92%) of the economically active athletes in the sample have already obtained a matric (Form 5 or Grade 12) or post-matric qualification.

The mean age of the *specialization* of athletes in the sport in which they competed at international level during the 8th All Africa Games, is 15.7 years. As the mean age of the athletes in the sample is 25.6, it represents an average of 10 years of participation, preparation and specialization to reach the present elite level of competition. Thus, it seems that the last four phases from 'deepening commitment' to 'obligation' (Prus & Irini, 1980) entail a process that stretches over approximately one decade.

Athletes indicated that they *initially became involved* in sport due to the fact that they enjoyed participation, and because they had the talent to achieve success during competitions (see Figure 2). Internal motivation and positive experiences linked to a sense of achievement are thus essential drawcards during the early stages of sports participation (Stevenson, 1990). The next set of attracting factors is relatively secondary and relates to the influence of parents and family members, coaches, role models, friends and teachers (Kohl, 2000; Stroot, 2002). Perceived spin-offs in terms of physical health, fitness and psychological well-being are also recognised. More peripheral influences relate to the status of the sport, external rewards, opportunities (availability and accessibility of resources), and the most distant factor seems to be the media, which were mentioned by only 25 respondents (see Figure 2). Similar results were reported by Phillips (1993) and disclaim the popular belief of the perceived persuasive value of the media.
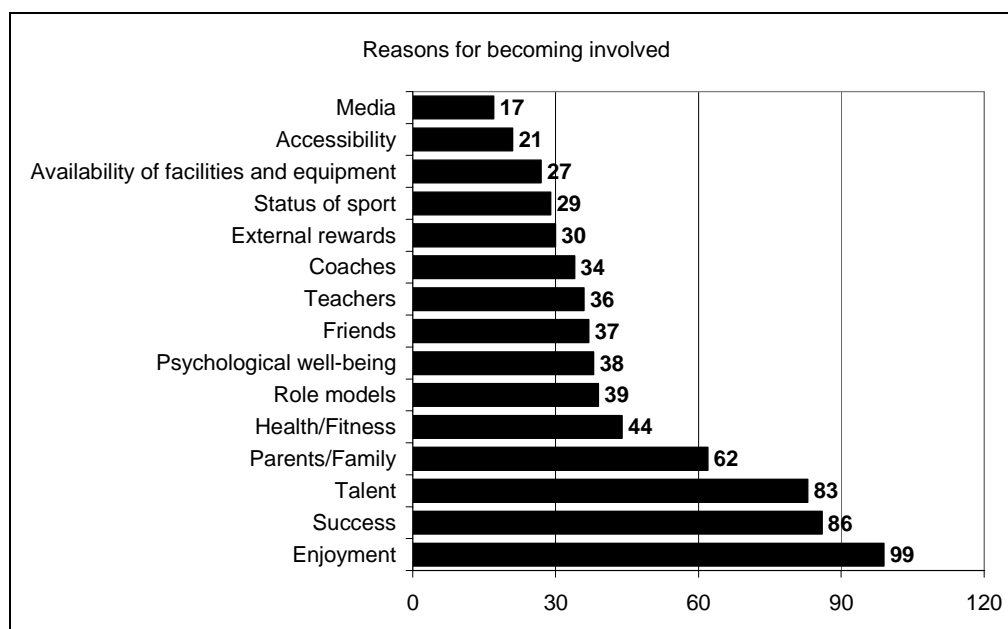
FIGURE 2. REASONS GIVEN BY ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE FOR BECOMING INVOLVED IN SPORT

Positive experience and success in competing are carried over into the second phase of *specialization* in a sport (Prus & Irine, 1980). Athletes rank achievement, the recognition of their talent, and the desire to win and thus compete successfully as major components in the formation of their athletic identity and indicators of possible future success as an elite athlete (see Figure 3). Perceived external rewards such as travelling and gaining experience as well as internal rewards in terms of personal development, self-actualisation and self-belief are recognised as main reasons for continued specialisation in sport – findings that correspond to those of Johannson (1992) and Weiss (2001). Upward social mobility in terms of recognition, status and prestige are recognised as factors that contribute to sustainable involvement.

The fact that elite athletes acquire an athletic identity and spend a substantial amount of time practising, training and competing results in the fact that they would choose to remain involved in elite sport in the 'desocialisation process' (Balague, 1999). The majority (n=86) indicated that they viewed sports coaching as the number one option for a possible future career (see Figure 4). Only a relatively small number of athletes (n=36) viewed a 'career outside sport' as a future option when their active competitive days are over. Continued active participation in competitive sport (n=40) or in recreative sport (n=55) seems to be an inevitable choice for athletes who have internalised the role of being an athlete with an active and/or competitive life style over many years. The attitude of wanting "to give back to the sport what it has given to me" (as expressed by a South African track and field athlete) is evident in the desire to transfer from an active participant to a coaching role or a role in sports development. A sports-related career is thus a favourable choice for athletes who also indicated the fields of sports management (n=46), sports medicine (n=16) and sports journalism (n=16) as additional future options (see Figure 4).
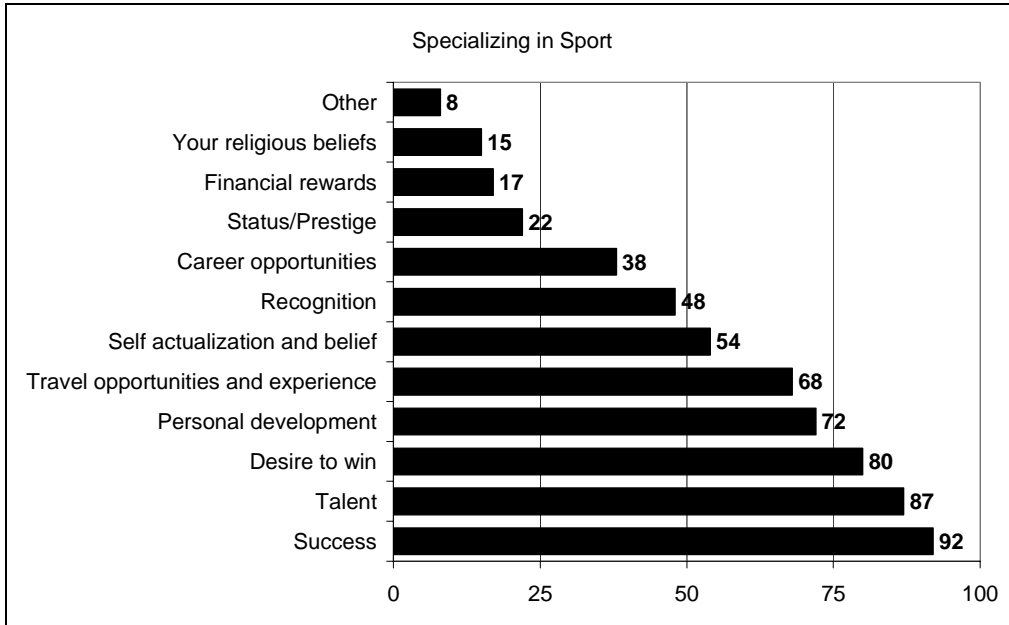
Specializing in Sport

Other	8
Your religious beliefs	15
Financial rewards	17
Status/Prestige	22
Career opportunities	38
Recognition	48
Self actualization and belief	54
Travel opportunities and experience	68
Personal development	72
Desire to win	80
Talent	87
Success	92

FIGURE 3. **REASONS GIVEN BY ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE FOR SPECIALISING IN SPORT**

Future Plans

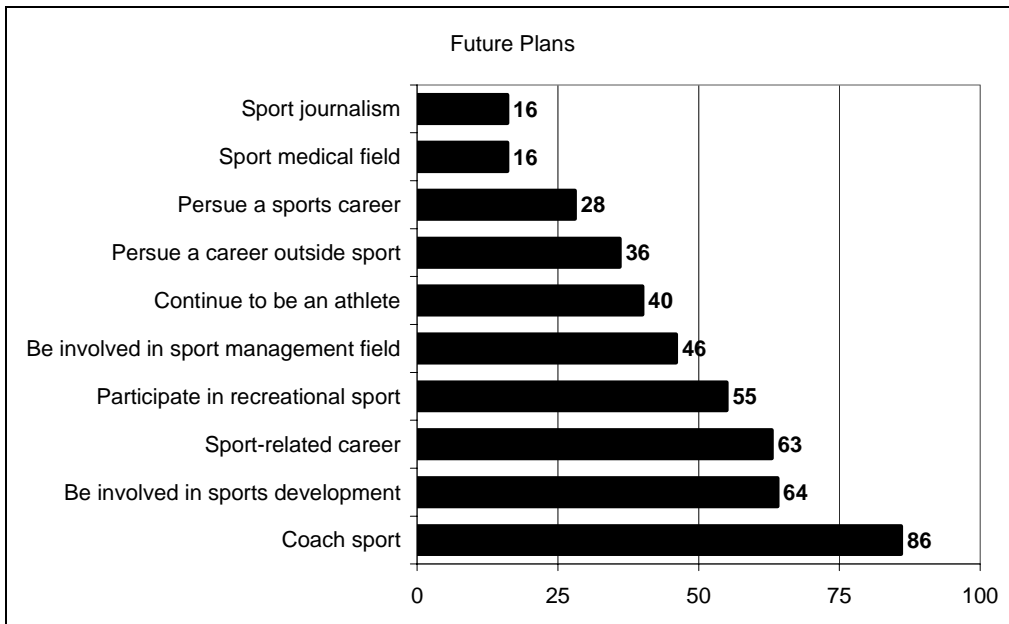|	
Sport journalism	16
Sport medical field	16
Persue a sports career	28
Persue a career outside sport	36
Continue to be an athlete	40
Be involved in sport management field	46
Participate in recreational sport	55
Sport-related career	63
Be involved in sports development	64
Coach sport	86

FIGURE 4. **FUTURE PLANS OF ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE**

From a very young age, athletes are provided opportunities to participate and compete at local clubs and/or schools in which different stakeholders and agents have an influential role to play. The fact that only 46% (n=56) indicated that they had specifically been recruited as an athlete indicates service delivery by various agents of sports development. The local sports club (n=26) and coach (local/n=22, regional and/or national, n=19) have been identified as main recruiters by the athletes, followed by tertiary institutions (n=15) and schools (n=10). This demonstrates the significant role of these agencies and agents as well as the expertise and resources needed to play such a vital role in screening and developing elite athletes (Carlson, 1993). This scenario reflects negatively on various structures and agencies that claim to be funding and optimally facilitating sports development, as the evidence points in the direction of traditional structures and the coach as the main socialisation agents in this regard. However, governmental initiatives are recognised by 40% (n=48) of the athletes who perceive themselves as 'products of government programmes'.

The most profound impact on socialising athletes in aquiring an athletic identity by introducing and supporting their sustained involvement and development seems to be significant others with whom athletes form intimate, interactive and supporting relationships (Ebihara *et al*., 1983; Wiersma, 2000). Elite athletic participation requires athletes to trust and believe in themself, which contributes to a postive, well-established self-concept (Stroot, 2002). Self-trust and confidence are mentioned by 115 elite athletes in the sample as ensuring the most influential 'relationship' in pursuing a sporting career (see Figure 5). An elite athletic career requires substantial support from the prime care givers (parents and family members) who often make sacrifices in order to facilitate their child and/or family member optimally to pursue a sporting career. They often make substantial financial and emotional contributions to offer continued support and resources for elite participation. This is recognised by the majority of athletes (n=116) who identified the positive influence of family members in their sporting lives. Other influential people in order of rank are the coach (n=112) and other team members (n=106) who are mostly instrumental in the athlete's performance and status within the team and/or sport. Friends (n=91) and spouses or partners (n=83) also fulfil supportive roles, whereas representatives of sporting bodies (n=76) and teachers (n=65) are also recognised as positive influences (see Figure 5).

It seems that older and/or same-sex siblings do not play a dominant role in socialising younger siblings into sporting roles, as the majority of the elite athletes are eldest children (see Figure 6). The fact that the second highest representation of athletes are middle children indicates that older siblings do have a role to play in socialising younger family members into sports participation, regardless of the sex of the athletes (see Figures 6 and 7). Similar findings are reported by Raudsepp and Viira (2000).
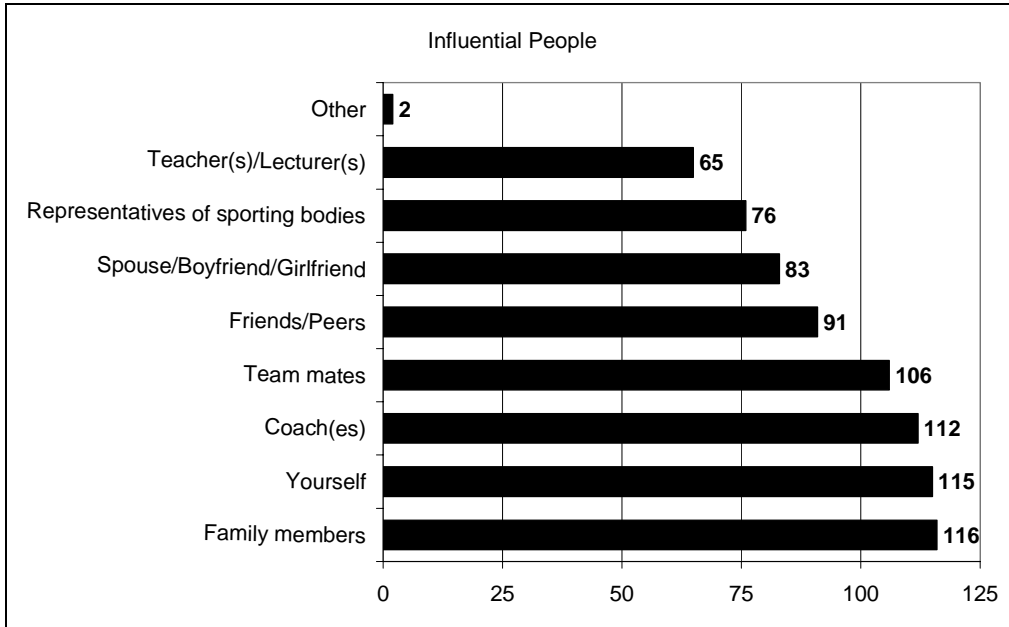
FIGURE 5. **INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE IN THE SOCIALISATION OF ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE**

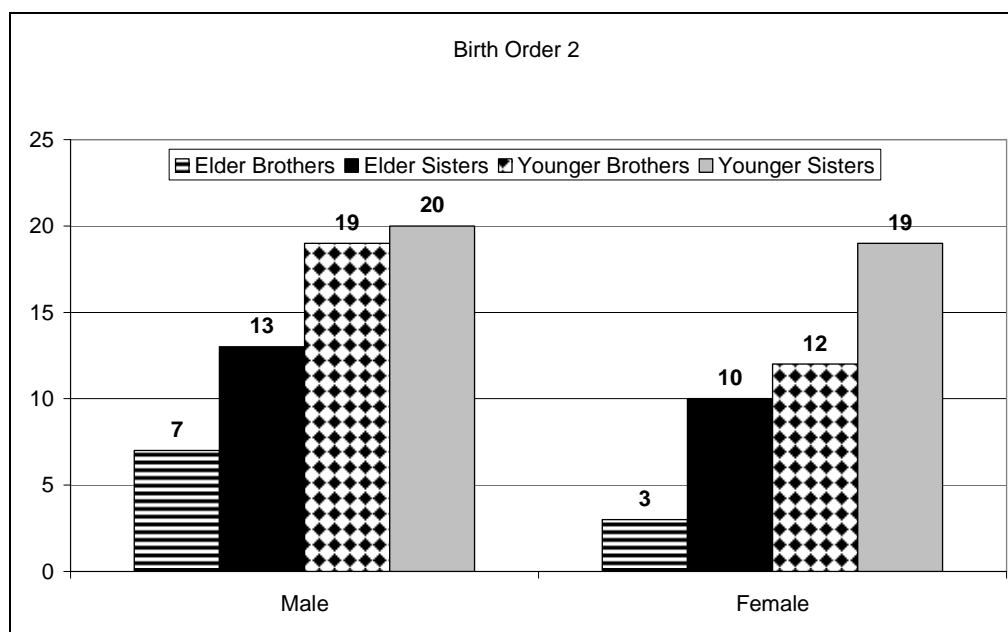*FIGURE 6.* **BIRTH ORDER AND GENDER OF ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE**

FIGURE 7. **BIRTH ORDER AND GENDER OF SIBLINGS AND ELITE ATHLETES IN THE SAMPLE**

Elite level sports participation affects *social relationships* between the athletes and their prime caregivers. The majority of athletes (n=86, 74%) indicated that their sports participation had resulted in creating closer family ties. Due to the relatively long hours of training, competing and being away from home for international competitions, some athletes were of the opinion that their sports participation tended to place some strain on social relationships (n=44, 38%).

Positive spin-offs from being recognised as an elite athlete lie in the perceived increase in the respect and admiration they receive (n=103, 87%), and the popularity they enjoy (n=62, 52%). A slight majority observed that people behave differently towards them due to their athletic status (n=61, 51%). Belonging to a close-knit sports fraternity means that they form special bonds with other team members (n=103, 87%) and that they are fortunate to meet 'famous' people such as other athletes and role players (n=103, 85%). The main obstacle they experience relates to the financial burden of affording essential resources (n=71, 64%). Most significant in the life cycle of becoming economically independent and professional preparation are the sacrifices elite athletes make in terms of pursuing 'sure' or 'other' careers (n=82, 75%), educational progress (n=65, 60%) and/or business opportunities (n=64, 62%). The majority of athletes indicated that they had made major personal (n=102, 92%) and financial sacrifices (n=92, 85%).

On a psycho-social level, the elite athletes indicated a need for mentorship, supportive social relations and assitance by indicating specific needs for emotional (n=120, 69%) and social support (n=128, 73%) as a prerequisite ('to a very large extent') for greater success in their sport. Prominent areas in which support and resources are required relate to opportunities for

training (n=190, 99%), financial support (n=180, 89%), competitive opportunities (n=150, 75%), scientific assitance (n=118, 72%) and expert coaching (n=130, 66%).

CONCLUSION

Central to the socialisation and career development of South African elite athletes is their changing reliance on the support of, and interaction with, significant others in accordance with the phases of socialisation into the role of an elite athlete. The change relates to human developmental phases and athletic role attainment where athletes demonstrate dependency first on parents and family members, and then on the coach, peers, and they ultimately become relatively independent by 'depending' mainly on the 'self'. This self-reliance represents a gradual process of emancipation through which athletes have internalised the work ethic of high level sports competition that entails hard work, sacrifice, a continued strife for excellence and success. The formation of an athletic identity is often indistinguisable from the perception of self-worth in that elite athletes seek to perpetuate their athletic status by pursuing a sports-related career after retirement from high level competition. Stakeholders should take cognisance of the dynamics and the socialisation of elite athletes in order to provide meaningful assistance and create an optimal nurturing climate and resources for the multi-faceted development of athletes in the South African context.

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(Subject editor: Prof. F.J.G. van der Merwe)