Athletic transition: An investigation of elite track and field participation in the post-high school years

ANDREW BENNIE, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
DONNA O’CONNOR, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This study investigated the reasons why elite junior track and field athletes continue or discontinue with elite level athletic participation during the transition years (18-24 years). Data were collected from 20 semi-structured interviews with current and former elite track and field athletes, elite track and field coaches and Australian athletics administrators. Results indicated that a combination of psychological, social, economic, educational and political forces exert extraordinary pressure on the athlete during the transition years, while also contributing to the phenomenon of elite athlete withdrawal. However, the results highlight that there are increasing opportunities for elite athletes to continue participating at an elite level during the transition years if the athlete is determined and supported in an appropriate manner. The paper concludes with proposals regarding the ways in which elite athlete participation can be maximised in the years following high school along with recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

AUSTRALIA prides itself on its ability to develop athletes who can compete in the top echelon of
the international sporting community across a wide variety of sports. However, sport withdrawal is a widespread phenomenon that plagues many sports across the world. It occurs at all ages and in all levels of sport participation. In Australia, more than two-thirds of children aged over 15 do not take part in any form of sport (NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, 1994). Track and field is a popular sport among young people, but continued participation often decreases in the latter stages of life (Tarbotton, 2001b) particularly at the elite level.

Research on the reasons why athletes continue or discontinue with participation is not a new phenomenon (Gill, 2000; Gould, 1993; Orlick, 1974; Robinson & Carron, 1982). However, there is little evidence of research specifically concerning track and field participation at any level. Additionally, with the exception of a few recent studies (Hill, 1994; Hollings, Hume & Trewin, 1997; Ogles & Masters, 2000; Tarbotton, 2001b), research relating to sport adherence and withdrawal has been restricted to youth sport participants and the club/social level athlete (Barber, Sukhi & White, 1999; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983). Little of the existing research on sport participation, however, has examined elite athletes or athletes in their late teens and early adulthood. Thus, there is a need to assess athlete participation during the years following high school.

There has been useful research describing motives for continued participation in sport. On the whole, researchers have tended to agree that skill development, fun and enjoyment are the most important features concerning continued participation in sport programmes (Barber et al., 1999; Koivula, 1999; Weiss, 1993). If these and other needs such as socialisation and physical fitness are not met, withdrawal from participation often results (Hill, 1994; Ogles & Masters, 2000). Further, Frederick & Morrison (1999), Gill (2000) and Weigand & Broadhurst (1998) revealed that athletes who are intrinsically driven and maintain positive perceptions of their ability are more likely to make time for sport and are thus more likely to continue.

Positive relations among peers, parents and coaches have been noted to encourage continued participation, while pressure, lack of support and recognition often result in sport withdrawal (Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Coakley, 2001; Horton & Mack, 2000; Kenow & Williams, 1999; Stein, Raedeke & Glenn, 1999). Current evidence highlights the immense pressure to sustain financial security or gain further education on completion of high school as a result of the expectation that as adults, they now should be responsible for their own lives (Reimer, Beal and Schroeder, 2000). Although there have been increases in access to athletic scholarships and financial assistance (Tarbotton, 2001b), the distribution of funds has been inequitable and, not available to all elite athletes. This, unfortunately, often requires athletes to decide between a career in athletics and a career in the workforce (Hollings et al., 1997). Thus, it is important to establish how it may be possible to adequately balance athletic endeavours with work and or study commitments.

At an elite track and field level, Tarbotton (2001b) revealed that participation in the years following high school is astonishingly low, with claims that no more than 25 per cent of national junior track and field representatives progress through to the senior ranks. On a similar scale, only 47 per cent of all Australian world junior track and field representatives have continued on to represent Australia on the international stage (Tarbotton, 2001a). With a high dropout rate at the elite level in athletics, there is a substantial demise in the pool of athletic talent to choose from when considering future representation at international track and field meets.
These statistics and the pivotal period of the transition years, form the basis of concern for this research project. The transition years have been described as the years where athletes progress from junior (under-20s) to senior athletic (all ages) competition events (Tarbottton, 2001b). Upon completion of high school, life takes on various new directions and athletes are faced with many conflicting predicaments on social, economic and personal levels. This often results in the athlete withdrawing from participation in track and field. Despite the success of Australian athletes at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, elite and non-elite athletic participation rates during the transition years continue to decline. The ability to produce sustained success in athletics at an international level may be in danger if the current withdrawal rate of more than 50 per cent continues in the future. Potentially, it could lead to the future demise of athletics in Australia.

It is evident that in order to ensure the continued success of Australian athletics, the reasoning behind elite athlete withdrawal needs to be further understood. In addition, high dropout rates suggest that fundamental elements of the sport, from the grassroots to the elite, are not sound and need to be improved. In setting out to inquire into this phenomenon, the research reported on in this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main issues that influence elite track and field participation during the transition years?
2. Which forces had the most significant bearing on athletes’ decisions to continue?
3. Which forces had the most significant bearing on athletes’ decisions to discontinue?
4. What needs to be done to minimise the attrition of elite athletes during the transition years?

METHODS

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with seven current athletes at the time of the study and six former elite track and field or cross-country athletes aged between 18 and 24, two elite NSW track and field coaches, and five Australian athletics administrators. Criteria for inclusion consisted of athletes who had competed at Telstra ‘A’ series meets, a national championship in a variety of track and field events, or were world schools Cross-country representatives; coaches who had trained athletes to a national or international standard; and athletics administrators from Athletics Australia or the Australian Olympic Committee.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subjected to content analysis that employed deductive procedures to classify information (Berg, 1998; Burns, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Raw data themes were compiled uniformly around seven a priori categories presented in the interview schedule (general, social, economic, political, psychological, environmental and educational forces). Rather than compile lists and carry out frequency analyses, concepts identified by the participants were integrated into sets of theories to provide an accurate and detailed interpretation of the research. Conclusions and recommendations were derived from data analysis with participant results indicating what can be done in order to reduce the significant attrition of participants from elite senior level track and field participation.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychological (e.g. motivation, goals), social (e.g. socialisation, support), economic (e.g. scholarships), educational (e.g. balancing study and training), and political (e.g. selection criteria) forces influenced elite athletes’ decisions to continue or discontinue with elite athletic endeavours during the transition years. While there are some minor differences between youths and adults and elite and non-elite sport participants, the results from this study indicate that there were not widespread discrepancies when disclosing the general issues regarding sport participation. The only notable difference was that during the transition years, elite track and field athletes claimed to have greater independence. Therefore, they had more commitments and individual responsibilities, which compellingly influenced their ability to continue competing at an elite level in the sport.

1. Adherence to participation

Athletes in this study indicated that they derived enjoyment from a variety of sources during the transition years including affiliation with other athletes and the physical nature of gradually seeing their performance improve:

    Having a good coach, good competition with people of similar standard and getting good results is always encouraging. If you win a few races and times are coming down then that is always good. Enjoyment... I played all other sports through school and to make the top teams were hard, so I thought I’ll try a different sport and athletics seems the one where I had the best chance. (Interview: 23-year-old male, current competitor)

The results of this study concur with previous research which suggested that athletes who enjoy training, competing and socialising within the sporting framework are prone to maintain positive perceptions of their ability and are thus more likely to continue (Barber et al., 1999; Frederick & Morrison, 1999; Gill, 2000; Weigand & Broadhurst, 1998). The satisfaction gained from elite track and field experiences was central to the current athletes’ decisions to continue participating in elite level track and field. Although the overwhelming task of qualifying for elite athletic competition initially served as a deterrent for some current athletes, the drive to achieve more in the sport and initial success in making representative teams and achieving established goals, were significant contributors as far as continued participation was concerned. In addition, those athletes who were able to achieve pre-determined goals in the early stages of the transition years were the ones that continued. These were some of the psychological forces that contributed to current elite athletes’ decisions to maintain their participation in the years following high school.

Social, financial and psychological support during the transition years was regarded as crucial to continued participation in elite track and field in the years following high school. Much like previous research into sport participation, positive contributions from parents and coaches were deemed as significant in relation to adherence, as was the ability to sufficiently balance the demands of sport, work and/or education (Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999; Robertson, 1988). Admittedly, all the current athletes specified that although it was difficult to manage education, work and training, an adequate balance ultimately was
achieved by making sacrifices in all areas of life and by organising events around their athletic timetables:

You can maintain a balance, but you have to make so many sacrifices and that is why I’m choosing to sacrifice the length of time it takes to finish my education. I guess you could do it if you have a lot of money, and you don’t have to work, then you could easily fit in full-time uni and train as hard as you want. (Interview: 20-year-old male, current competitor)

Other economic and political issues had little impact on athletes’ decisions to continue. For example, some athletes suggested that they received scholarships, yet this had little bearing on their overall interest in maintaining participation in the sport. In addition, none was subjected to any contentious selection issues for representative teams or further funding which negated any negative ‘politics’ that may have influenced their continued participation.

2. Withdrawal from participation

Many studies over the years have generated similar results in relation to this phenomenon of sport withdrawal, with psychological issues believed to have the most significant bearing on sport participation or withdrawal (Australian Sports Commission, 1991; Bussman, 1999; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Schmidt and Stein, 1991; Semple, 2000). The results of this study indicated that most of the former athletes possessed little or no self-belief in their ability to progress to the next elite level of track and field participation (opens). This was partially attributed to a lack of success early on in the transition phase due to the huge gap in performance standards between junior and senior competitions. For example, one former athlete suggested that the major gaps in performance standards lead to a significant reduction in confidence and interest in the sport:

... athletics in Australia, well it just seems like the support is just not there and it just doesn’t seem like you’ve got a chance. You really have to be up in the top one or two people to have any chance of even making the Olympics because the standards are so high. When you leave high school you’re forced out into Opens and it’s really hard to know where to start. You know you were doing well and then suddenly you’re against all these older guys who are much better than you and that can be a bit of an ego blow. (Interview: 22-year-old male, former competitor)

Of particular importance was the deterrent of insurmountable selection criteria for entry into elite athletic scholarship programmes and competition events. However, the incredulous task of qualifying for national senior competition proved too difficult.

All the qualifying standards are a bit of a joke, they’re pretty hard. Open standards are too hard and they’re not retaining athletes as a result, so the standards have to be brought back. (Interview: elite coach)

Although intrinsic (e.g. enjoyment, satisfaction) and extrinsic (e.g. trophies, records) motivations were deemed to have a significant bearing on athlete participation in previous research (Frederick & Morrison, 1999; Gill, 2000; Weigand and Broadhurst, 1998), the
findings from this project suggested that what motivated an athlete was not essentially as important as the ability to achieve the intrinsic and extrinsic goals established by the athletes. As in previous research, the elite athletes in this study claimed that injury and lack of support from coaching staff served as additional forces that influenced their decision to discontinue with participation (Bianco, Malo, & Orlick, 1999; Kenow & Williams, 1999 Stein et al., 1999). Similarly, the motivation of athletes to continue training and competing at an elite level during the transition years was diminished as a result of being physically and/or mentally burnt out:

There was so much pain and I just seemed to be getting injured and I wasn’t able to enjoy other activities. Eventually I wasn’t able to put in the full effort that I thought that I could to both uni and athletics and I sort of blamed athletics. It made me tired and it took up too much of my time, so I got fed up with that. As a result, my commitment to athletics was reduced because I became physically and mentally burnt out. (Interview: 22-year-old male, former competitor)

Similar to previous research (Horton & Mack, 2000; Gould, 1993; Reimer et al., 2000; Tarbotton, 2001b), the pressures associated with work and/or study and the culmination of a variety of new social experiences that surfaced once high school concluded were further issues that the athletes confronted as they progressed from junior to senior athletic competitions. These social, economic and academic forces undoubtedly influenced several athletes’ decisions to withdraw from elite athletic participation:

I did realise that yes I do need a good education and deep down that was the reason that I did stop running. I could go to football training twice a week, play in a game and go out with the boys, but that was still nowhere near the commitment needed to be a high-class runner.

(Interview: 23-year-old male, former competitor)

As far as parental pressure is concerned, there was no evidence of parental pressure having any influence on participant withdrawal in this study. This is in contrast to the results of previous research which indicated that this phenomenon significantly contributes to athlete withdrawal (Sprecher, 1982 cited Carpenter & Coleman, 1998). The results of this study confirm the pressures suggested by Reimer et al. (2000) associated with the burden of sustaining financial security or gaining an education. Athletes suggested that being incapable of balancing training, university and a job meant that certain aspects of their life were compromised in order to cater for what they deemed most essential for their future. In most instances, the former athletes’ interest in academic and economic security began to outweigh the importance of continuing with elite athletic participation.

Although research has indicated that there is increasing access to athletic scholarships and financial assistance (Tarbotton, 2001b), several former athletes claimed that not receiving scholarships had no effect on their decision to discontinue. Rather, the inequitable distribution of funds meant that many of the former athletes could not justify sacrificing academic and vocational interests in order to continue the pursuit of elite athleticism during the transition years. For example, one former athlete suggested that:

There were increasing monetary costs associated with coaching and
that was a big influence on me not competing at all. I mean... being a student I can’t afford much. I didn’t have much money and I felt I couldn’t sponge off my parents any longer. (Interview: 22-year-old male, former competitor)

These forces initiated a lack of commitment from the athletes and ultimately led to complete withdrawal from elite participation.

3. Recommendations for future policy and practice

Recommendations from the participants were collated in order to discuss their perceptions about what needs to be done now and in the future, and to minimise sport withdrawal by studying elite track and field participation in the years following high school. As in past research (Douge, 1987; Ghita, 1994; Hill, 1994; Kenow & Williams, 1999; Robertson, 1988; Semple, 2000; Sherman, Fuller, & Speed, 2000; Van Niekerk, 2002), this project demonstrated that before the start of the transition years, athletes, coaches and parents must be informed of the economic, competitive and social opportunities available in elite level track and field participation. Participants also recommended that the profile of track and field must be raised in order to boost participation and interest in the sport:

I think without a doubt that clubs have to approach kids at their schools before they leave school and make them feel welcome and get them into the system (Interview: 23-year-old male, former competitor)

In addition, establishing a support network where rapport between athletes, coaching staff and parents exists would be central to providing constant support and encouragement for the developing athlete:

Athletes must understand that you progress quickly as a junior. In a lot of sports that transfers on very quickly into the senior ranks. In athletics, typically it doesn’t. Most junior athletes who do well might not progress with a PB for four or five years before they start to become competitive at a senior level. And I think the gap between juniors and your next step into a senior elite team is a lot bigger than what people tend to give credit to. We have got to start to put things into place where athletes start to understand that, coaches understand that, and most importantly, their families and support networks understand it. We have to evolve... (Interview: elite coach).

Going beyond the extent of previous research, this project highlighted the need for changes to be made to competition standards in order to bridge the performance gap between junior and senior athletic competitions. Opportunities for athletes to represent their state and country at national or international events should be encouraged during the transition years and alteration should be made to the current club formats, including the introduction of an intermediate or under-23 competition standards. Finally, more funding needs to be channelled to the ‘fringe’ athletes rather than those who have established themselves in the senior ranks. These implications were seen as imperative to increasing athlete interest and participation during the transition years.

Understanding the issues that arise during the transition years along with reasons why
people choose to continue or discontinue with elite track and field participation will be beneficial for all those involved in the sport. Further, these recommendations may provide future elite athletes with information regarding 'what it takes' to participate at an elite level during the transition years. Ultimately, this could also assist in retaining more elite track and field athletes in the future.

4. Educational implications
Overall, it is most important that athletic administrators, teachers, coaches, parents and athletes are aware of the attributes that underlie continued athletic participation as well as understanding the issues that contribute to sport withdrawal. This will assist in perpetuating elite athletic careers beyond high school and the transition years. Elite athletes encounter challenging times during the transition years. During this period, those who have little time and do not receive ongoing physical, psychological, social and fiscal support tend to enjoy athletic participation less and typically drop out. If adequately prepared and supported, many more elite athletes should continue to prosper in the post-high school years.

Athletics administrators need to focus on creating environments in which elite athletes can enjoy themselves. This may be achieved by minimising the events that trigger sport withdrawal while maximising opportunities for athletes to boost self-esteem and confidence in their ability to continue during the demanding transition years. Ultimately, it is the athletes who physically and psychologically drive themselves to reach the pinnacle of their sporting abilities. Therefore, their interests and needs must be considered carefully and adequately catered for if Australia is to continue its tradition of international success in track and field competitions.

CONCLUSION
This research project has outlined psychological, social, economic and political forces that contribute to continuation with, or withdrawal from, elite track and field competition in the years following high school. Although the sample population may be considered relatively small, the findings indicate that there are many issues that need to be addressed in order to maximise the future success of athletics in Australia. In addition, the results have contributed to pre-existing knowledge in the area of sport participation and provide recommendations as to what can be done to maintain athlete interest and minimise athlete withdrawal.

As athletes progress through the transition years, they are faced with many personal, social, economic and educational hurdles that influence their decision to continue with or withdraw from sport participation. Understanding the dilemmas that surface throughout the transition years along with reasons why people choose to continue or discontinue with elite track and field participation will be advantageous for all those involved in the sport. Future research should consider examining athletes at a younger age (e.g. aged 14-17) in order to provide supplementary information to the findings from this study and boost overall knowledge of the dropout phenomenon across a vast sample within the sport.

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