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### Structural Support of High-Performance Athletes' Education Supporting Dual Careers in Greece

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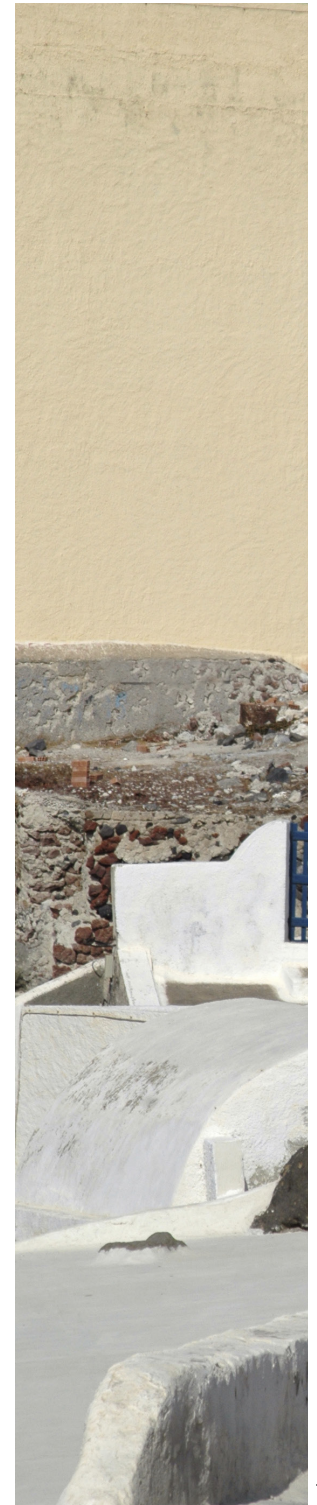
*Column Editor: Roger Jackson*

## STRUCTURAL SUPPORT OF High-Performance Athletes' Education *Supporting Dual Careers in Greece*

By George Pavlidis and Dimitris Gargalianos

The ancient Greeks' worldview advocated the development of both mind and body (Crowley, 2006). In modern times, this view has been adopted by many international organizations. The European Commission (EC) indicates that participating in sports promotes good physical and psychological health and personal growth and influences positive social values and economic growth. Acknowledging the importance of balancing education and sport commitments, the EC (2007) emphasizes the importance of the dual career for young high-performance athletes (HPA) “. . . in order to ensure the reintegration of professional sportspersons into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers.”

The U.S. educational system promotes the dual career through collegial sports, as many educational institutions offer athletic scholarships to talented athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2006). Dual-career support structures exist in sports organizations, such as the National Football League (NFL, 2011a, 2011b) and the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA, 2011). For this purpose, they have established departments and programs that assist players in exploring educational options or preparation programs for their transition to a postcompetition life (NBPA, 2011; NFL, 2011a). They also collaborate with several prominent educational institutions, such as Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Florida (Hadavi, 2011; NFL, 2011a).





The International Olympic Committee (IOC) runs a program that guides Olympic athletes into education with the goal of a better postretirement life. The IOC works in collaboration with Adecco, a global human resources company, in preparing athletes for their transition into the labor market (Olympic.org, 2009a, 2009b). The Fédération Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels (FIFPro), the worldwide collective representative organization of professional soccer players, in collaboration with Nordjylland University in Denmark, initiated the FIFPro Online Academy in September 2011 (Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland, 2011). The Institut National du Sport, de l'Expertise et de la Performance offers contracts to clubs/academies that employ young players who combine an intensive sport schedule with an academic program (Athletes to Business, 2011).

In Germany, the National Sport Federation, the University Sports Association, and several higher education institutions offer the services of 48 elite sport universities across the country for the purposes of a dual career for HPA (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). In this framework, elite athletes benefit from carefully established entry criteria, flexible study and examination timetables, alternative means of completing courses, tutoring, monitoring, and counseling. In the United Kingdom, an athlete has the opportunity to benefit from the services of the performance lifestyle advisor, who usually is eligible to negotiate directly with the teaching staff on behalf of the athlete (Aquilina & Henry, 2010).

Many stress that athletes need to be educated in certain sporting issues, such as betting, doping, finance, and dealing with the media (NFL, 2011a; Olympic.org, 2009b). To inform athletes in the United Kingdom about the aforementioned issues, the Performance Lifestyle Program was created (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). In Belgium, the Vrije University of Brussels developed the Study and Talent Education Program, which includes workshops and presentations on topics such as time management, communication skills, and financial management (Aquilina & Henry, 2010).

## The Case of Greece

The Greek secondary education system addresses the dual-career issue, allowing selected talented athletes to attend classes of sport facilitation (CSF) and special classes of sport facilitation (SCSF). These were located in designated upper secondary schools (PMP consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004). Additionally, providing sufficient justifications, all student-athletes in Greece were allowed to miss 20% to 50% of classes for important athletic commitments. In some cases, HPA students were entitled to special teaching support to compensate the missed classes (Greek Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religion [GME], Law 3169, FEK 141A, 10.06.2003, cited in PMP consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004). This scheme has not been as successful as intended. Therefore, GME started a public dialogue on the "structures for educational facilitation for high-performance student-athletes" after admitting that the CSFs and SCSFs failed to achieve their goals (GME, 2011a).

The GME also set out legislation to facilitate the enrollment of athletes with certain sport accomplishments in higher education institutions. These are realized by awarding additional points on top of the overall points athletes get in the university entrance exams taken by all high school students. The awarding points depend on the classification of each HPA in athletic events (GME, 2011b, FEK 125/50210/B6/28.04.2011).

For the student-athletes in Greece who succeed in gaining entry to a higher education institution, no framework provides further support. More precisely, there are no academic institutions or university programs that are tailored to the atypical lifestyle of an HPA. Any flexibility in academic programs tends to depend on informal contacts between HPA and their professors. It is stated that although many professors in Greece are willing to help well-known athletes, not all are sympathetic to the dual-career concept (PMP consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004).



Sport clubs in Greece are private entities with a limited liability status and are under no obligation to safeguard athletes' education (PMP consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004). At a state level, there is legislation aimed at safeguarding professional soccer players' educational rights (Greek General Secretariat of Sport [GGSS], Law 3479, article 4, par. i, FEK 152, 19.07.2006), yet it has never been implemented.

The GGSS assumes that the following choices are available for athletes who have completed upper secondary education but have not yet been enrolled in a university: (a) enroll in a vocational training program at a postsecondary education institution, or (b) apply to the Hellenic Open University, which uses a distance-learning method to deliver six courses at the bachelor's degree level (PMP consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004). However, the number of applicants in the Hellenic Open University is quite high. For selection, each year, the university carries out a draw (Greek Open University, 2011). In 2009, 31,559 students applied for the 4,200 spots available (NEA, 2011).

The current Greek sport education context seems to offer a relatively poor dual-career support when compared with other available structures in the world. More precisely, the secondary educational system supports only those who exhibit distinguished athletic accomplishments (i.e., top three places in the Olympic Games [OG]; GME, 2011b, FEK 125/50210/B6/28.04.2011). This system excludes many who, although they are equally engaged in the demanding lifestyle of being an HPA, do not become elite. Hence, many young people who invest an immense proportion of their time in sports end up outside the elite sport world, with no athletic legacy and a restricted education (PMP

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consultants & The Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy Loughborough University, 2004; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

The consequences of that context may be threefold: (1) Young HPA may have a hard time educating themselves (compared with non-HPA), because practicing intensely in combination with school is overwhelming and time-consuming (EC, 2007) and (2) parents of HPAs may realize that the aforementioned disadvantages may set aside their child's talent in sport and drive him/her to study more in order to get better grades in school. This is echoed in statements by Pyros Dimas (three-time gold medal winner in the OG and president of the Hellenic Weightlifting Federation): "... parents often tell me that their kids are studying hard to achieve their entrance in a higher education institution



of their choice" (Tzouostas, 2011). Finally, (3) the "win a medal to earn your entrance in higher education" legislative might develop a mentality among youths that justifies the use of illegal and immoral tactics (such as doping) to boost performance and raise the chances for achieving a distinguished accomplishment. The last is a phenomenon in Greece that raises serious concerns about the health of youths and doubts the spirit that the current Greek sport-education context transcends (ESOS, 2011). In response, the GME organized a public dialogue for reforming the sport-education framework in schools (GME, 2011a).

There are no tailored programs available for HPA in higher education or in other vocational education institutions. Distance learning (often coined as suitable for HPA) is feasible only on a few occasions such as the Greek Open University (GOU) of Patra, which selects its students by draw. As only 1 out of 7.5 applications is accepted in GOU programs, entrance depends purely on luck. In all institutions any regulation attempts for support to current studies are narrowed down in the context of informal bargaining between HPA and professors (with a questionable outcome; Aquilina & Henry, 2010). The absence of government initiatives to assist student-athletes in a dual career from entry into university raises serious doubts as to whether a career in professional sport and pursuing an education are compatible in Greece.

The GGSS assumes athletes' lifestyle education is their own responsibility and provides no support or guidance in that direction. Yet, it may be that seminars and workshops in Greece could inform athletes on subjects such as the value of a dual career and dual-career options, business planning, doping, betting, and many more. Such programs could be a part of an "athlete's lifestyle support program" to avert Greek athletes from hazardous and immoral actions, indirectly safeguarding national pride and simultaneously contributing to their personal growth, maturity, and preparation for their postcompetition life (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; EC, 2007; NFL, 2011a, 2011b).

The present study highlights the fact that the current education-sport framework in Greece deviates significantly in structural plurality compared with other frameworks that are implemented



## The current Greek sport education context seems to offer a relatively poor dual-career support when compared with other available structures in the world.

from various stakeholders. This results in additional obstacles in Greek athletes' efforts to educate themselves and an ambiguous prospect for their future. Consequently, the Greek sport-educational context raises serious doubts as to whether high-performance sports and education are compatible.

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