

The dual career of student athletes: a pedagogical challenge

The European Union has recently stressed the importance of helping professional athletes during and after finishing their professional career in order to enhance their learning through attendance of university courses or through participation in educational activities aimed at developing their competencies and skills (European Commission, 2007; 2012). Education is a human right and the athlete as human being has to be helped to enjoy this right in all stages of her/his life.

Nowadays, the issue of dual careers represents a very central topic for European Universities, educational agencies and institutions, because it carries complex demands for quality teaching activities, social and professional placement, and teaching program development (Bastianon, 2014).

The characteristics of athletes, both students and professionals who wish to earn a university degree, require a specific system capable of both teaching and assisting them in following these courses. For this reason, all universities interested in devoting part of their efforts as educational agencies to athletes who want to attend university courses must focus on both the particular contents of their teaching programs and the specific organizational and logistic aspects of the corresponding teaching activities.

This represents a challenge for universities that are required to invent new ways of re-organizing themselves, new ways of producing knowledge and learning models and processes, as well as to adopt a tutoring system for their student athletes.

Among the problems dealing with the dual career of athletes, that one concerning how to tutor is crucial. Tutorship is the main challenge that the dual career of student athletes has to face up to and win. This challenge requires flexibility and creativity to succeed in dealing with the problems and possible difficulties encountered by student athletes in attending courses and taking their exams. In Europe, these difficulties are often increased and amplified by legal constraints and university administrative rules which tend not to favor the process of insertion of the student athlete in the system of traditional university courses. With regard to the attendance of these courses, professional athletes face many problems: they are forced to combine sports activities and competitions with their duties as university students.

Fortunately, the new communication and virtual social interaction e-tools provided by the Web 2.0 can help dual career student athletes study and attend university courses via an online tutorship system focused on their needs. In this frame, a new challenge consists of identifying effective learning and tutorship models based on virtual communication. However, this system needs not only a revolution in thinking of new models of teaching-learning but also in rethinking role of the professor/instructor who teaches student athletes as a facilitator in the context of an effective lifelong learning system. These new learning models should be rethought in light of an experiential conception of education aimed at developing so-called "life-wide learning". This learning should focus on the person and her/his life experience as a whole.

This means that when one teaches student athletes attending different university courses, the main starting point of that teaching should be the competences and skills acquired and developed by them in their sports career. To be clear, sport and its both intrinsic and extrinsic values should be always the starting point for designing contents, learning models and outcomes of university courses for student athletes. Sport always has to be seen as providing a resource and set of experiences that allow student athletes to enrich their knowledge by reconverting the competencies and skills acquired during their previous professional career into competences and qualifications for their new professions, future jobs and employments. We could say that an athlete is an athlete forever. Therefore, in the context of the seeking new learning models for student athletes, sport has to be seen as a tool box for developing their new competencies and skills in order to grant them access not only to the University as a community of learning but also to other vocational courses or the lifelong learning system.

In so doing, these learning models and tools have to help athletes to achieve a full personal growth as human beings capable of conscious participation in the cultural development of the society in which they live. Tools and activities should be aimed at helping dual career student athletes in reflecting on their experiences. This reflection has to be developed in a double direction, that is: on action (about what they did, and after their learning activities, when they are alone at home, for example) and in action (in the classroom, when carrying out activities).

Learning community, agile, experiential and life-wide learning, and Donald Schön's reflective practitioner model (Mezirow, 2000; Tuijnman, & Boström, 2002; Jackson 2012; Schön, 1983) are possible models that can be used for teaching dual career student athletes at university. The pedagogical challenge of all these models consists in how to put them into practice. We are convinced that a fundamental role in putting the above-mentioned models into practice can be played by specialized tutors, and by a system specifically designed for tutoring student athletes. Tutorship is a key factor for the success of the university courses for dual career student athletes. In a nutshell, tutorship can act as an effective support and assist system only if it will be used in the framework of the university conceived of as a community of people, open and flexible, and not as an ivory tower isolated from the social context that very often tends to be prejudiced towards both sport and the student athlete who attends its courses.

Good tutorship for the dual career of student athletes is always the result of a systemic interaction among different agencies oriented towards a common and shared goal: that is to empower, through education and learning, and transform the athlete as a resource for the community. Therefore, we cannot think of the university as the only educational agency responsible for making this transformation possible by its internal tutorship system. There are many other educational and social agencies that should take care of the athlete and of her/his right to education.

We are also convinced that, although the configurations of national sport systems in European countries and the challenges faced by sport organizations are different, the state still plays an important role in this system. Therefore public institutions, families, sport associations and private organizations should work together more closely in the future in order to ensure athletes' educational guidance since the early years of their career, providing them with an effective tutorship system.

In the future, it will be necessary to study tutorship for the dual career of athletes in light of a more systemic approach, taking into account all the multidimensional aspects and pedagogical challenges it embodies (social, cognitive, political, organizational, etc.), and framing it within the concept of sport guidance. To study this tutorship in terms of a systemic approach can help us to better understand the importance of the involvement and coordination of different educational and social agencies, seen as a key institutions to sport policies. These policies will have always to be conceived of as educational policies in the future.

To be clear, nowadays the challenge of tutorship for the student athlete is to recognize, adapt and introduce the above-mentioned organizations to the tutorship conceived of as a complex interaction system of subjects, organizations, practices and policies, as well as of an interactive alliance among the above-mentioned components of the system.

We know that education is a human right, and the participation in education and learning activities by athletes has to be increased and seen as a part of a permanent and complex social process that fulfils and completes sport as a human practice. Within this process of guidance and orientation for athletes, communities and families – rather than the university – play a fundamental and key role. A real tutorship system for the athlete in a dual career can achieve its main goal only through an effective cooperation between the main agencies and organizations that promote sport in our society (schools, federations, sport associations and clubs, etc.). The concept of dual career needs a rethinking of sport as an educational practice and form of human capital capable of empowering athletes and helping them to enhance their skills as a persons in the frame of lifelong learning and a continuous educational system.

The university alone cannot take care of the athlete as a student and enhance her/his skills through education. Students athletes have to be seen as members of an educational system that involves the

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whole community as a set of educational agencies that support them in all the stages of professional and personal life. Therefore, tutorship, flexibility and the need for a systemic approach represent the main pedagogical challenges for the dual career of athletes. These three challenges are all summed up in another big challenge that consists of finding a methodology that can help athletes to reconcile, as well as possible and according to their needs, education and professional career (Casucci, 2002). For the athlete, sport should represent an opportunity for fulfilling her/his life as a professional and human being who needs to learn for being a better citizen, woman or man.

In this context it is necessary to rethink the dual career of athletes in terms of a specific *pedagogy of sport guidance* (Isidori, 2015) looking at the athlete as a person who has different types of intelligences that, in accordance with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence (Gardner, 2011), have to be oriented and guided. Sport is not a mere training and simple acquisition of technical skills. The pedagogical point of view from which we must begin to look at the dual career is that it always consists of a set of issues and problems that deal with the integral formation of the athlete as person.

This new pedagogy can help universities and sport organizations which are committed to devote its efforts as educational agencies to athletes, to understand that "integral formation" means that the athlete always needs a *paideia*, that is a "multidimensional" and "holistic education" shown through its different but unified intelligences – this education is called Bildung in German – in which both the humanities and the sciences are perfectly integrated.

A successful example of an effective tutorship in the dual career of an athlete, it is shown by Plato's biography. Plato (circa 429-347 B.C.), whose real name was Aristocles – Plato was his nickname as an athlete who had broad shoulders and a robust figure –, was a wrestler and became, thanks to the teaching and tutorship of his schoolmaster Socrates, one of the greatest philosophers of the world and one of the wisest men of all time. In the III century A.C., Philostratus the Athenian (circa 170/172-247/250) stressed in his treatise entitled *Gymnasticus* the importance of an integral paideia and good education both for trainers and athletes, showing how sport is always an intellectual and not a mere technical practice which requires well educated people to be taught and practiced. We should be inspired by Plato's biography and seriously take into account the suggestions from Philostratus, and educate and form students athletes for becoming new Platos and philosophical athletes (Reid, 2002) well versed in both the humanities and the sciences.

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