PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH

Commissioned by UK Sport

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February 2006

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without participants, there is no research and unless top performers are prepared to reflect on their sport careers with clarity improved strategies to support world class performers cannot be implemented. We are therefore indebted to the women and men who described, in detail, their careers in sport and who reflected on issues we asked them to expand upon. Time after time we were amazed at the candid and open descriptions that participants provided. We would like to thank all the participants and hope we have done justice to the trust they have put in us by portraying them in a dignified and articulate manner.

As a former professional in sport my allegiance to “performers” is paramount, however, we also acknowledge that the research project was commissioned and funded by UK Sport. Throughout the project we have felt we have been made to feel part of a dedicated team intent on supporting world class athletes. Cain Berry was given the difficult task of contacting athletes and trying to arrange the focus groups – not an easy task. This report is evidence of his success, thank you Cain!

At all stages of the project Jerry Bingham has provided us with sound counsel, enthusiasm and interest which has made the project not only a fascinating research project but also an enjoyable one to conduct.

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless
February 2006

SECTION ONE:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

There is growing awareness that sports performance, particularly at the elite level, is affected by many personal, lifestyle, and environmental factors. To date, little research has been conducted to explore how and through what processes lifestyle and environment factors impact athletes' performance. This research was conducted to explore the broad question: Taking a holistic approach to performance, how do elite and professional athletes account for performance fluctuations?

Methodology

We used an interpretive, qualitative method to explore in depth the experiences of 21 elite and professional athletes through five focus groups and five in-depth interviews. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed to identify and explore key issues and processes. By using an interpretive approach we focussed on understanding athletes' own experiences of how lifestyle and environment factors impact performance. The findings include our interpretations of the athletes' accounts alongside excerpts from the transcripts which illustrate and clarify specific events, experiences, or perspectives. In order to protect anonymity all participants are referred to by pseudonym.

Findings

The summary findings presented here relate directly to the full findings in section four. Illustrations and further discussion of the points below can be found within the corresponding numbered section of the findings. For example, point **2.2** below relates to section 4.**2.2** of the findings.

1.0 It is unusual for a lifestyle or environmental issue to *directly* affect sport performance. More often, a specific lifestyle or environmental issue affects performance via an intermediary variable. The intermediary

variable might be a specific task, a personal value, or a motive. For example, removing athlete autonomy can reduce the personal relevance of training which subsequently inhibits performance. Understanding the context of athletes **initial participation** helps explain how these intermediary variables came to be important to athletes' performance.

1.1 **Family relationships** were important to participants' initial involvement in sport. Several factors were common to most participants: (a) parents and siblings were often involved in and positive about sport; (b) sport provided an avenue for youngsters to *be with* and to *do things with* their family; (c) parents supported but did not pressurise children in their sporting endeavours; (d) parental support was not contingent upon success, results or achievement.

1.2 **Social affiliation** was a key motive behind most athletes' initial sport participation. Being involved in sport allowed young people to (a) feel they were part of something; (b) meet and be with friends; (c) develop strong and enduring social networks.

1.3 Participants described a considerable degree of **enthusiasm** towards sport and physical activity in general from a young age. However, participants did not necessarily end up in the sport they were initially enthusiastic about. Likewise, some athletes were not initially enthusiastic about the sport in which they subsequently specialised.

1.4 **Chance** events were important in athletes' initial participation. Although school sport served as a broad introduction to sport for most participants, a series of unplanned and unpredictable events often influenced the development of athletes' careers.

2.0 Over the course of their careers most athletes have developed some **core lifestyle values** which help explain how various lifestyle and environment factors affect sport performance. Several themes were common among most participants and these provide an alternative template of desirable or necessary lifestyle values that might be used to guide and educate young athletes.

2.1 Athletes value **ownership and personal control** of their sport career, daily lives, and futures. As athletes age and gain experience, ownership and control becomes an increasingly important issue. More experienced athletes emphasise that when they feel ownership and control over their lives and their sport they perform better. For these athletes, the reverse is also true: when ownership and control is removed performance invariably suffers.

2.2 While younger athletes speak of difficult conditions in their lives as standing in the way of them achieving peak performance, more experienced athletes often view hardships in a positive light. Among these individuals there is a belief that successfully **coping with and**

overcoming hardships provides strength and resilience which improves their sport performance.

2.3 Three interlinked aspects of **attitude** are common to these elite athletes: (a) they adopt an effort rather than an ability/talent focus; (b) they are extremely determined and committed to improve their own sport performance despite setbacks; (c) they are confident that, by virtue of their effort, they will eventually be successful.

2.4 **Relationships** are closely related to sport performance in three ways: (a) family and personal relationships provide the first line of support when things go wrong – athletes often believe that this support is critical to their success; (b) positive relationships with team mates and squad members improve performance and are characterised by "pulling together", "doing for each other" and "mutual support"; (c) a trusting, communicative, supportive coach-athlete relationship is important for some athletes' performance but takes time to develop.

2.5 Athletes' views and experiences of **balance in life** differ in relation to age and experience. Some younger athletes take the perspective that other aspects of life must be and were being sacrificed in the interest of their sport career. More experienced athletes take the perspective that balance is essential in regard to both performance and life as a whole. Commonly, athletes told how eliminating or sidelining other areas of their life adversely affects their performance and well-being. While athletes tend to believe that at times it is necessary to compromise balance in the pursuit of excellence, most believe that other areas of life had to be maintained and valued alongside their sport careers in order to perform optimally.

3.0 Several specific **lifestyle and performance environment contexts** have the potential to impact sport performance. The effects of each context are generally mediated by each athlete's own values, motives and experiences.

3.1 Athletes find that **education** provides two key benefits: (a) greater personal control and options in their career and future life; (b) balance in their life by providing a worthwhile pursuit outside sport. University education fits better with the demands of elite sport by virtue of increased flexibility in terms of timetabling when compared to school education. When clashes occur between the demands of education and sport, athletes usually compromise education before sport.

3.2 Although **employment** is an important way of retaining balance in life and providing financial autonomy for non-professional athletes, most struggle to fulfil the demands of full-time employment alongside elite sport. Those who successfully combine work and elite sport require flexible working conditions and good employer relationships.

3.3 Among non-professional athletes **funding** is often considered something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, funding frees time and provides access to resources or expertise which is often essential for optimum performance. On the other hand, funding removes autonomy and certain hardships which act as an unspoken "training ground" for elite sport. The way funding is awarded and administered is likely to have a critical influence on the degree to which funding brings positive or negative consequences.

3.4 **Communication** styles between the performance team and individual athletes can be either a source of problems or a solution to problems. A critical factor in the effectiveness of communication styles is the extent of athletes' inclusion in the communication process. When athletes are solely or primarily on the receiving end of information, negative effects to performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being are common. When athletes are involved in the communication process performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being all tend to improve.

3.5 Two further lifestyle and performance environment concerns were raised by athletes in this research: (a) Although athletes value the contribution scientific knowledge and technological innovation to sport performance, some question whether our reliance on science and technology has gone too far. These athletes are concerned that the elimination of flair, creativity, and individuality from elite sport will adversely affect performance in the long term; (b) There is concern that talent identification schemes and our tendency to encourage athletes to specialise and commit at a young age do not have positive effects in terms of long term performance and well-being. Several athletes felt that they would not have remained in their sport long enough to be successful had they specialised at a young age.

Recommendations

1. Exposing young athletes to an over-systematised regime too soon can be counter-productive as it risks denying the autonomy and personal control which experienced athletes believe is crucial to their performance. In order to nurture autonomy and the ability to take personal control, young athletes should be encouraged to engage in (and provided with opportunities for) education. Critically, education should focus not only on training for employment but also on personal growth and development. Governing bodies and coaches have responsibilities in this regard.

2. It is important to encourage and allow athletes the time and space for personal and family relationships alongside their sports careers. These relationships are rooted in their early sporting experiences and play an important role in helping athletes cope with the demands of elite sport throughout their careers. Practices which prevent or limit family and

personal relationships threaten not only athlete performance but also long term well-being.

3. Experienced athletes typically value effort above or alongside ability and talent. Young athletes need to be helped to understand and evaluate the benefits of effort as those who can see the relationship between effort and performance are more likely than those who don't to have confidence in their ability to progress.

4. Athletes considered that good communication prevents or minimises certain problems and difficulties. Provision of information and inclusion in the decision making process are hallmarks of effective communication practice. Effective communication can improve perceptions of ownership and control as athletes are less likely to feel that control of their lives and careers is being taken away. We suggest that initiatives to promote effective communication such as workshops, seminars, facilitated discussions, and interviews should be made available to coaches, athletes, parents, and other officials who work with athletes.

5. Experienced athletes in this research valued the opportunity to "give back" to sport by discussing their experiences for the benefit of others. Their perspectives and stories challenge the stereotypical conception of elite athletes as macho, obsessive, one-dimensional, or uncultured and may be profitably incorporated into athlete development programmes. This is likely to provide two benefits: (a) it provides younger athletes with an opportunity to consider and discuss their lives and careers in the light of the perspectives and stories of older athletes; and (b) it allows experienced athletes to feel they are valued and have a continuing role to play within sport.

6. Maintaining a balanced life alongside involvement in elite sport is something that was possible for some athletes but not for others. Some athletes described phases of their career where balance was present and other times when it was not. Further research is needed to explore in greater depth the circumstances through which balance might be sacrificed and the effects of this in terms of performance and athlete well-being in different sports.

7. The perspectives of paralympic athletes enriched the findings of this research and raised several issues which are worthy of further exploration. In particular a more complete understanding is needed of: (a) The unique difficulties disabled athletes face in accessing sport opportunities at all levels; (b) The ways in which career progression and performance are affected by existing sport provision for disabled athletes and social attitudes towards disability; (c) The potential mutual benefits of greater integration of paralympic and able-bodied athletes in training and preparation. We suggest that further research is urgently needed which focuses specifically on the experiences of paralympic athletes in order to tease out and develop these issues. This understanding will both

contribute to the development of disability sport in general and encourage the wider sporting community to value and integrate athletes with disabilities.

SECTION TWO

INTRODUCTION

2.1 BACKGROUND

This study builds on other research (Douglas, 2004; Douglas, 2006) to explore how lifestyle and environmental factors affect elite and professional athletes. It can be considered a continuation of ongoing interest in understanding more about professional and elite sport performance states (e.g. Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Holt & Morley, 2004; Ingham, Chase, & Butt, 2002; Kjormo & Halvari, 2002; Ravizza, 2002; Thelwell & Maynard, 2002; Wickwire, Bloom, & Loughead, 2004) and, more specifically, how a broad range of lifestyle and environmental factors can affect sport performance and well-being of elite sportspeople. Gaining a deeper and fuller understanding of these issues is imperative if we are to support those who perform at the highest level in ways which promote health and well-being alongside athletic achievement.

Research in areas outside sport has established the important roles of social, contextual, experiential, emotional, psychological, and environmental factors in human behaviour, function, and achievement. However, sport performance research has often neglected this interplay by focussing too narrowly on athletes' performance state at the time of performance. This issue has been identified in recent research carried out by UK Sport (2001). A narrow focus is likely to be a factor in why existing research and understanding fails to account for certain instances of performance decrement in elite sport. A more holistic approach is needed to address the broad range of lifestyle and environmental factors which surround elite athletes is necessary if performance is to be more completely understood.

To achieve this requires the investigation of the organisational environment in which athletes live, train and compete as well as a range of psychosocial issues that, although they may not affect the athlete's technique and performance directly, may have indirect effects through mood, emotions and motivation (Chantal, Guay, DobrevaMartinova, & Vallerand, 1996; Cote, 1999; Fletcher &

Hanton, 2003; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Hardy, 2002; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002; Kjormo & Halvari, 2002; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002; Raglin, 2001). Because much time and effort is invested in planning for a relatively small number of peak performances – especially in sports where key events occur infrequently such as the Olympics and World Championships – the stakes are high. In this context, understanding more about the organisational and performance environment is a much needed avenue of research.

Previous research provides some evidence that coaches, parents and managers believe that outside influences impact the performance state (e.g. d'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, Dubois, 1998; Johnston & Carroll, 1998; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004). However, we do not know the extent to which this happens, how this changes over the life course, or how these factors vary in different sports with different athletes. This information should be of interest to those who finance, manage and support athletic development, as well as performers themselves.

Although performance enhancement, peak performance, physical, psychological and technical assessment has provided a base of knowledge for understanding sport performance, the majority of studies have segregated an individual's "sport" from their personal values and lives with the simplistic idea that "*a really focussed athlete*" can simply switch off those factors and outside influences which do not directly influence a specific performance. It is only by understanding the individual and her or his personal values within the context of her or his sporting culture and societal influences (i.e. taking a holistic approach to performance) that we can begin to understand more fully those factors which are both beneficial and detrimental to the ideal performance state.

2.2 THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ATHLETE

Previous research has documented the need for an individual to be autonomous and demonstrate personal agency (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1995). In high performance sport however, personal agency is an often neglected issue as managers and coaches, to a certain extent, assume responsibility of and for those they manage, fund and/or coach. This is not entirely unreasonable as athletes look to coaches and managers to provide expert advice on a range of technical, practical and sometimes personal issues. However, this can lead to an over-reliance on support staff which can leave an athlete vulnerable whenever the support structure is unavailable. It can also lead to an athlete feeling they are not in control of their own life or career which in some cases has led to athletes exhibiting severe stress, anxiety and self-harm (Douglas, 2004).

Issues concerning personal agency and control have also affected the ways in which elite athletes have been studied by the research community. Often, the

voices of elite and professional athletes are removed from both the research process and the research report. As a result of the research methods used and the ways research findings are often represented, the experiences of athletes themselves are often missing from the research. Foregrounding the voices (experiences) of elite athletes themselves is one way of further exploring and challenging existing understandings of the factors that are important in achieving peak performance.

An important aspect of this research therefore is allowing each athlete to independently narrate (i.e. tell) her or his *own* experience. In this sense, the data are the accounts of elite athletes of *their own* experience of how lifestyle and environment factors have affected their performance. Inviting athletes to discuss these issues provides an opportunity for the athlete to account for their own performances in terms of the factors and issues they believe to be important. Further, this approach allows each athlete to use their own terminology and metaphors to shed light on this widely neglected dimension of athletic performance.

Important in this process is the existence of trusting and understanding relationships between the athletes who take part in the research and the researcher/s. This study benefited from having an "insider" (an elite professional sportsperson who is also an experienced researcher) lead the research team, act as facilitator in the focus groups, and conduct the in-depth interviews.

2.3 RESEARCH AIMS

In conducting and reporting this research we aimed to shed light on the primary research question:

Taking a holistic approach to performance, how do elite and professional athletes account for performance fluctuations?

In addressing this broad question we also explored several more specific questions:

(a) What individual values do athletes hold?

(b) How do athletes' sport career goals relate to their life goals and values?

(c) What external contextual influences can athletes identify which affect the ideal performance state?

(d) How do these issues vary across different sports?

(e) How do these issues vary across an athlete's lifespan?

(f) What effect does employment/unemployment have on performance?

(g) What effect does being in education have on performance?

(h) What effect do financial concerns have on performance?

(i) How do athletes relate to supporting staff and funding agencies?

2.4 TERMINOLOGY

Participants in the research include a variety of sportspeople from both professional sports where a salary is paid (i.e. rugby, cricket) and non-professional sports (i.e. track and field athletics, swimming, judo, hockey, netball, canoeing, rowing) where funding may be awarded. Throughout the report we use the generic terms “athletes” or “participants” to refer to all these individuals. Where “funding” is mentioned we refer to the receipt of monies either through salaries to professional athletes or funding to non-professional athletes. Differences between the two contexts are noted within the report.

Throughout the report participants are referred to by pseudonym in order to protect anonymity.

SECTION THREE:

METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the research was to identify athlete's perceptions of lifestyle and environmental factors that affect their sport performance. To answer this question, the research design must allow the participants themselves to identify and define issues and factors which relate to their own lives, experience and understanding. An emergent, interpretive, qualitative design was most appropriate for these aims for several reasons:

- It allows the participants' own understanding and experiences to become the focus of the research.
- There is scope for reflection and clarification of themes with participants as they arise.
- Where ambiguity exists there is scope to ask individuals to describe more fully the factors behind these ambiguities.
- Individuals are given an opportunity to narrate their life experiences in a way which sheds light on their personal values, meanings, and perspectives.
- It allows the researcher/s to discuss issues raised by the participants in order to open up explanations rather than simplistically close down issues.
- It allows new insights and understandings to guide subsequent data collection and analysis.
- There is greater opportunity for the participants in the study to feel "valued" and that they are part of a potential solution – rather than part of a problem.

This approach allowed us to access participants' experiences, interpretations and meanings – and how these change over time and under different circumstances. Importantly, the participants all have direct personal experience of the topic of inquiry.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

A total of 21 athletes took part in the research (11 female, 10 male). Participants were between 18 and 44 years of age at the time of the interviews and were drawn from the following sports: track and field athletics, rowing, rugby union, swimming, cricket, judo, canoeing, hockey, and netball. Participants first played the sport in which they excelled between 4 and 22 years of age and had been involved in senior competition from less than one year to 24 years (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for further details). At the time of the interviews, eleven athletes were retired from competitive sport and ten were competing.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Exercise and Health Sciences, University of Bristol.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Two methods of data collection were employed: (a) focus-groups, and (b) in-depth one-to-one interviews.

(a) Focus groups

Seventeen athletes were identified by UK Sport as willing to take part in one of five focus groups. A basic interview schedule was used as a template for the focus groups but this was adjusted in response to the lessons learnt as the study progressed. In keeping with a semi-structured approach, the schedule was only loosely followed. The needs and issues raised by the participants served to re-direct the course of the focus groups as potentially relevant and important topics were raised. A particular strength of focus group techniques is the possibility of gaining a variety of views and perspectives on a few, literally, focused issues (Barbour, 2005). Because there is an inevitable trade off between breadth and depth, the focus group schedule prioritised gaining a broad and multifaceted understanding of two or three key issues.

(b) In-depth interviews.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used by the researchers to identify five participants from the focus groups and through other contacts who were considered likely to offer additional insight into the research question. Specifically, new or unexpected issues raised during the focus groups were developed and explored through five one-to-one in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews allowed us the opportunity to target and include participants who were at a different stage of sport career, or who were from a different

sports, to the participants already included in the study. A particular strength of in-depth interviews is the possibility of gaining a complex understanding of an individual's experiences which is only possible through extended conversation within a supportive, accepting, trusting, and confidential environment.

The interview and focus group schedules included three types of question (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001) in order to generate a comprehensive and complex understanding of individuals' experience:

- **Descriptive questions** (to learn about the participant's activities and experiences)
- **Structured questions** (to investigate specific details of these activities and experiences)
- **Contrast questions** (to clarify and check meaning and interpretation)

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Several stages of analysis and interpretation were employed:

- During the focus groups the research team repeatedly summarised and recounted their understanding back to the participants. Participants were then invited to disagree, modify, or agree with the researchers' summaries.
- During one-to-one interviews the experiences of other athletes were discussed in order to prompt further thought from the participant and to explore alternative explanations.
- All focus group and interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were second checked against the recordings in order to verify accuracy.
- Both members of the research team read and re-read the transcripts in order to become immersed in the data and develop complex understandings of the participants' accounts.
- Both members of the research team made notes and marginal comments identifying specific issues within the transcripts.
- Regular research team meetings took place to discuss, develop and refine understanding of the emerging findings.

- Emerging findings were fed back into the data collection process to inform future focus groups and interviews.

- Content analyses were carried out on all transcripts. This resulted in a list of preliminary themes which were grounded in the data.

- Through research team meetings the preliminary themes were reduced and combined to result in the key themes contained within the report.

- Anonymised verbatim excerpts from the transcripts were selected to clarify and illustrate specific events, experiences, or perspectives.

Critical to the integrity of the research process was the preservation of athletes' anonymity so that they could feel confident to speak openly and candidly about their experiences. This priority remained throughout the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting process. We have taken several steps in order to preserve participants' anonymity:

- All participants are referred to be pseudonym throughout the report.

- All potentially identifying features (e.g. dates, ages, names, places, times, specific events, competitions etc.) within the transcripts were changed.

- Within the final report we have included excerpts from the transcripts. These excerpts have been edited when we believed there was a risk of revealing the individual athlete's identity. When necessary in order to protect anonymity we have edited details such as specific sport (i.e. "rowing" changed to "sport"), specific dates, ages, locations, or events. However, in all the transcript excerpts we have attempted to ensure that the quote retains the original context and meaning as expressed by the participant.

- Details of participants' particular sport, age, initiation age, and years in competition are deliberately presented in a general manner and not linked to transcript excerpts or pseudonyms.

Figure 1: Years competing at senior level

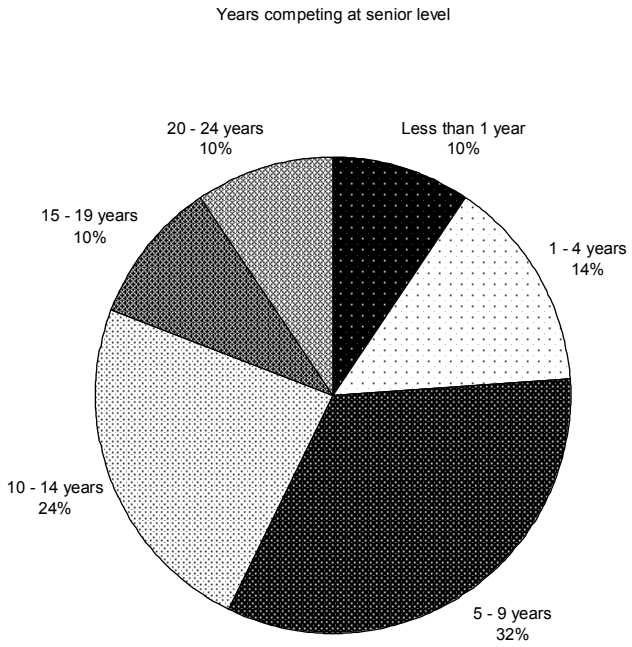
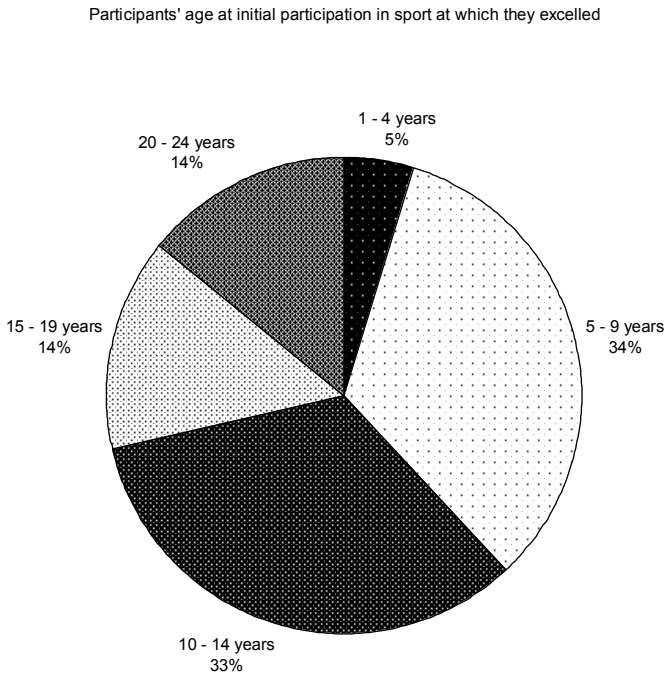


Figure 2: Participants' age at initial participation in sport at which they excelled



SECTION FOUR:

FINDINGS

In the experience of these athletes, it was unusual for a lifestyle or environmental issue to *directly* affect sport performance. More often, a specific lifestyle or environmental issue affected performance via an intermediary variable. The intermediary variable might be a specific experience (e.g. training), a personal value (e.g. ownership), or a long term motive (e.g. family). In this sense, a specific lifestyle or environmental factor can be considered to affect *"me"* (the athlete) and this change in *"me"* subsequently affects "*my"* sport performance.

For example, athletes often described complex relationships between employment, finance, time, training, and performance. In this context, the time demands of full-time employment, for example, impaired performance by making adequate training and preparation impossible. In this instance:

EMPLOYMENT → **TRAINING** → **PERFORMANCE**

affects *affects*

A second common example concerned the affects of managerial practice on performance. In this instance, while there may be no clear, direct link between managerial practice and performance, certain styles of management resulted in some athletes feeling a diminished sense of ownership and control which subsequently impaired their performance. In this instance:

MANAGEMENT STYLE → **OWNERSHIP** → **PERFORMANCE**

affects *affects*

While conducting this research, it became clear to us that in order to understand how lifestyle and environmental factors affect sport performance, we must first gain an understanding of life contexts (motives, values, and experiences) of

individual athletes. These contexts stem from, and are built upon, athletes' early involvement in sport. The context of athletes' initial sport participation can be seen to influence the development of athletes' core lifestyle values which subsequently explain how lifestyle and environment factors affect performance. In this sense:

In an effort to communicate a clear and complete picture of these interlinked stages we present the findings in three sections:

4.1 Initial participation in sport

4.2 Core lifestyle values

4.3 Lifestyle and performance environment contexts

In sections 4.1 and 4.2 we provide an analysis and description of the participants' key person factors (experiences, values, motives) which interact with performance. These sections provide the foundations for an analysis of how specific lifestyle and environmental contexts affect performance in section 4.3. Throughout these three sections we provide extensive excerpts from the transcripts which illustrate and provide context for the issue under discussion. *To protect anonymity, participants' real names are withheld.*

4.1 INITIAL PARTICIPATION IN SPORT: SOCIAL CONTEXT AND EXPERIENCES

Insight into the social contexts and experiences surrounding athletes' initial involvement in sport is essential for a holistic understanding of the athletes who took part in this research. The themes identified here can be thought of as common strands concerning the social context and experiences which surrounded these successful athletes' initiation into sport.

This understanding is important in three respects:

(i) it identifies the social contexts and experiences that facilitated athletes' successful initiation into sport

(ii) it sheds light on the processes by which core values and attitudes developed into consistent threads throughout athletes' careers

(iii) initial participation experiences equip athletes to manage hardship and adversity later in their careers (see section 4.2.2).

4.1.1 Family relationships

When discussing their initial participation in sport, nearly all athletes spoke of sport holding a prominent place within their immediate and extended family (parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents). In this sense, sport was *in the family* and an activity in which the family was involved:

> "The first thing I remember athletics-wise was my dad ran. I remember being really small and watching him run and mum used to make us little vests sort of same colours as his." (Paul)

> "My dad's a cricketer – when I was a little boy we lived on a cricket ground – he played cricket for that club. Then my brother followed him as well and 'cause I was on the cricket ground as well I sort of watched it and that's basically how I got into the playing." (Alan)

Although some athletes did not consider themselves to have been led to their sport through family links, even these individuals described a strong theme of general sports involvement in their family:

> "My dad was a keen footballer, he didn't play cricket. I wouldn't say we were overly sporty, my mum was sporty, but apart from that, my granddad played football to a pretty good standard, (but) no cricketers that I could think of." (James)

While a few athletes became involved in the same sport as their parents, others moved into a different sport as the comment above suggests. One participant described in simple terms a context that was common among the athletes: "I come from a sporty background but not in the sport I took up" (Jane). For most athletes, growing up within a climate of general family interest in sport was more important than involvement with any single specific sport.

As a result of their family involvement in sport, participants tended to consider sport to be a natural choice of activity for them and one which it was almost inevitable that they became involved. This sense is captured by the following remark:

> "I learnt to swim because of two reasons. Mainly my mum was a swimmer and so it was a sporty family so I was going to do something. Also, my grandparents lived in Spain and we used to go there for the summer so for safety reasons it was important that my sister and I could swim so that if we were messing about on the beach and fell in the sea or whatever we could swim." (Isobel)

For a few athletes, the existence of a sporting family culture provided avenues for direct competition between family members or an arena in which participants attempted to establish their self-worth. As one participant put it, "I was always very much aware that it was something my dad had always done so I was always trying to prove I could do it too" (Jill). More commonly, however, many participants identified and valued the opportunities that their family's sports culture provided for social contact and interaction with family members:

> "My dad was from a really competitive background and my mum always said she always used to follow him around and then she started to follow her girls around. She always said she was a world class spectator – we were world class sportsmen but she was a world class spectator. It's very much part of our family. It's not just your life – it's your social network, it's your family social network, it's something you do together." (Jill)

Because family involvement in sport was common during participants' initial participation, sport became a form of activity which provided many participants with a valued and enjoyable opportunity to *be with* family members. Taking part in sporting activity was therefore a way in which participants could spend time with parents, siblings, and other relatives. As one participant put it:

> "It was when I was 11, it was through school, we used to have district sports and things like that. It was fun in a way 'cause we used to meet up with other schools so I used to meet up with cousins and family and friends." (Ruth)

Another participant elaborated on the importance of having an opportunity to be with (and do things with) her family through sport-related holidays and travel:

> "When you were talking I just realised something. From the age of zero to the age of probably eight my dad was competing. Our weekends were spent at scrambles – which is basically a field where people are going around on motorbikes. My sister and I used to think we were completely free because we'd be just wandering around – everybody knew us so they'd all be keeping an eye on us but we thought we had complete freedom. And I've got so many memories of summer holidays where we'd drive out to a race some place in France and with the prize money we'd then have a weeks holiday and then move on to the next race and that would probably happen for about three weeks until we had to go back to school or whatever. But the best bit of those weeks wasn't the holidays it was the standing on the rostrum with my dad. And in the pictures you can actually see, I've looked at them, and you can see I'm standing up taller than my dad. I'm not even up to his bum but I'm holding his trophies. I'd never really thought, until you were saying then, never really put the two together of this childhood and what on earth that could mean later on … It was that being really proud when you're stood there next to my dad." (Jill)

Looking back, participants described the presence of family support which made possible and, sometimes, encouraged their early sports participation. Several participants described how support (as opposed to pressure) from their parents helped their early sport participation:

> "He was always there to give me support. My dad used to drive me to and from training. My dad came to every race and he used to bring my uncles and my mates and everything like that." (Ruth)

> "They bought my football boots, bought my equipment, they drove me to places so I think yeah in that sense they were supportive but not in a pushy kind of way at all." (Jane)

> "While I was at school my parents never really encouraged, we were all quite fit 'cause we lived on a farm, but there was never really a push to go and do sports and succeed. If you did stuff great, if you didn't well fine, it didn't matter." (Giles)

> "Supportive – in that (I got) lifts to places if I needed to get to a competition. I don't ever remember a situation where I *had* to go somewhere. It was a choice. And then once I'd chosen to do it they would help me out 100% … I never ever was pushed into anything. When I got good results it was always "Oh! Very good!" They were always supportive but it was what I wanted to do that they'd support me in." (Jill)

These comments point to a specific kind of support which parents provided. Instead of being channelled or pushed into specific sports as youngsters, participants spoke of a more general and broad based form of parental support which enabled them to take part in those activities in which they were interested. This kind of support was common to both professional and non-professional athletes. Some participants moved through a string of different sports or events during their childhood sometimes not taking part in the sport in which they have made their career until their twenties. Others settled on one sport as young as seven or eight and maintained their participation throughout childhood into their thirties and beyond. Support from family members was, however, a consistent theme in both these paths.

Parental and family support was commonly typified by two important factors:

(i) parents supported their children in activities which were of personal interest (even though these were not necessarily sport activities)

(ii) competitive success and achievement was celebrated when it occurred but it was not a requirement of participation neither was support contingent upon success.

One participant (Janet) described a total lack of family involvement during her initial (and subsequent) sport participation. During the focus group Janet became upset while describing her experiences and it appeared that these experiences had brought adverse personal effects. Other participants in the focus group reacted to Janet's description by expressing surprise that she had been able to achieve so much without family support and involvement:

> "It does bother you? [pause] Well that's even more credit to you then for doing it cause I know personally there's no way I could have done what I've done without my

> mum and dad and my sister and not just my family but the network around me so that's amazing that you've done what you've done." (Jill)

4.1.2 Social affiliation

A major initial attraction of sport for many of the participants was that it provided an opportunity to *be part of something*. Affiliation with other people through taking part in varied sporting activities was repeatedly raised during focus groups and interviews as a key factor behind initial participation.

For some, social affiliation was as simple as an opportunity to *be with* friends through taking part in youth sport:

> "A lot of your friends at that time were your friends from the (judo) club 'cause you saw them every day. A lot of my friends in school, as in I saw them in school but then a lot of the things like playing out and stuff I did sometimes but it wasn't something I always did. It was more going to judo." (Marlene)

Sports clubs and teams both outside school and within school provided a regular opportunity to meet with other children in an environment that differed slightly from other school based activities in three ways. First, the numbers of children in team and club activities were often smaller than school classes which helped facilitate getting to know others and making friends. Second, participants spoke of attending a given club or team activity consistently over a period of time which allowed for long lasting friendships to be formed and maintained. Third, whereas school classes are based on age, sports groups may be based on skill level and hence provide an opportunity for children of different ages to mix. For some participants the combination of these factors provided the foundation for long lasting friendships while for others it was simply a way of becoming affiliated with other groups of young people and gaining social esteem:

> "It (sport) got me to socialise with the older girls 'cause I was only 12, 13 and I was put straight into the first team cause I had co-ordination really. And that, you know, made me "Oh! She's hanging around with the older girls" and I quite liked that." (Jane)

Participants' accounts of their early sports participation generally suggest a feeling of social belonging through taking part in sport activities. Opportunities for social belonging and affiliation were often considered more important and satisfying than the sport itself:

> "(It was) more the social aspect than anything. It wasn't particularly that I liked the sport itself." (Jane)

> "You'd see the netball team lists come up and because netball really wasn't my sport, and I'd have said it wasn't my sport, but I'd make sure I was on the list and that in itself would be my winning for that week." (Jill)

> "It began with the social side of it because we'd all just go in the changing rooms and chat for half an hour, then chat whilst we were doing weights, then chat whilst we were on the water. And then I got more into the fact that I liked I liked winning and competing." (Amanda)

> "It's more of a social thing I guess. I think there's a big social thing when you're a kid. You do what your mates do and you end up finding I'm good at that or I'm not so good at that but I like the guys so I'll keep on going." (James)

The second two quotes above provide some insight into the importance of social affiliation and belonging in encouraging young people to maintain early sport participation. Both these participants describe how spending time with friends through sport was the primary reason they took part in the first instance. Through maintaining initial participation in this way, some athletes went on to realise their potential in that sport and identify other aspects of participation and performance which they found fulfilling.

One participant described how being part of a team environment was, for her as a youngster, something special. This special quality was closely related to a sense of social membership:

> "Just being in the team, the team banter, the things you share being in the team – it's like an exclusive club." (Jane)

Another participant described how her desire for group membership and affiliation was a key factor behind her involvement in youth sport. For this woman, the experience of being asked to join the club, of literally *being wanted*, was important:

> "I think the wow factor of being asked to join this club to me was the main thing. I'd never been asked to do anything like that before so to be wanted, and that somebody thought that I was good enough, well that sort of sold it for me." (Ruth)

The need and desire for social affiliation through sport appears to retain importance for some young athletes as they move towards and into elite level competition. Ruth described how a desire to be a part of the spectacle of international competition was the key factor in her motivation for elite sport and a goal of her sporting aspirations:

> "The turning point for me when I wanted to be successful was round about 12 years old, and Seb Coe and Steve Ovett, all that hype was on television and I didn't really think that I wanted to win a gold medal or anything I just wanted to be there cause it looked like it was such fun. And again I imagined to be that centre of attention was quite nice."

While social affiliation and belonging appear to be important factors in encouraging childhood participation in sport, they are also important potential *outcomes* of sport participation in their own right. Perhaps the importance of meaningful social contact can best be appreciated when it is denied. One participant described how sport provided much-needed social affiliation and a sense belonging which enabled him to get through a particularly difficult time in his life:

> "I did join the swimming club and very quickly made lots of friends down there and, you know, started getting better and competing most weekends. But then when I was just about to make it into the national scene when I was 13 I had cancer. The sport funnily enough was one of the things that helped me get through it because I was very much isolated from school. They wouldn't let me go into school and a lot of my friendships that I had at school, didn't necessarily break down, but they certainly weren't very strong whereas I was always welcomed with open arms at the swimming club even if I was down there just to watch the other guys. They would always be really pleased to see me and so that kind of helped me get through it." (Rupert)

4.1.3 Enthusiasm

It is perhaps unsurprising that most participants described themselves as enthusiastic towards sport when they were young. Given most participants' accounts of family environments which were positive and encouraging towards sport, a degree of childhood enthusiasm towards sport is to be expected.

For some participants, enthusiasm towards sport was almost universal in that they were positive towards, and enjoyed taking part in, diverse types of sport. These individuals were the ones who took part in every kind of activity they could and often (though not exclusively) did well in those activities:

> "My family spent a lot of time doing lots of outdoor things. I did all sports at school, did everything, did every single club you could do at lunchtimes." (Claire)

> "I was captain of the football team, captain of the rugby team, used to do the athletics and stuff." (James)

> "I started judo when I was seven on one of those summer courses but I was always sort of doing sports anyway. I always played sports at school, played football, played rugby, went on to high school and played netball and hockey everything. Judo was just another something else to do. It wasn't like a serious sort of definite thing that I wanted. It was just one of those things that I enjoyed going along to." (Sally)

For those participants who were enthusiastic about sport in general, enjoyment appears to be based upon either (i) the achievement and demonstration of competence (i.e., *being good at*) through sporting activities or (ii) the

straightforward intrinsic enjoyment of sport-related experiences and physical activity.

> "I played football every single day of my life but absolutely rubbish! I just loved playing. I did enjoy sports definitely. I wasn't in the best of shape and as I said before I never would have thought I would be a professional. I never would have (thought) 'Oh yes this is what I'm going to set my heart my hopes on. I'm going to play for England. I'm going to do this.' I never ever thought that. I just played for the craic, just played for the craic … To be brutally honest the thing I really enjoyed about rugby was just the physical contact. I had two younger brothers wrestling all the time and stuff like that. I just really enjoyed the physical contact. I like hitting and tackling people. I'm not a violent person at all, but I did enjoy that." (Jeremy)

Other participants described focussing almost exclusively at a young age on one particular sport. Among the participants, it was most often swimmers who described childhood sports participation in these more focussed terms. Among all the swimmers in this research there was a strong sense of intrinsic enjoyment and a love of the specific activity of swimming. For these individuals, swimming, and being in water, provided unique and fundamental pleasures which were a key factor in participation:

> "I can remember being rescued and even then I wasn't scared. I just loved being in the water. Loved it." (Isobel)

> "I didn't set out in my sport to earn money. I did it because I loved my sport and I wanted to be as good as I could be at it." (Carl)

> "I think for me it's the closest thing you can get to actually flying because on land you can only move in two dimensions unless you jump and then your momentarily in three dimensions. But when your swimming you really can move within this cuboidal space … I think what it is, it's the ability to get hold of something that you can't get hold of. The water's got this sort of incredibly kind of illusive nature and if you fill up a sink of water and put your hand into it you can't get it but when you swim through it it's solid like a wall. And you know the harder you hit it the harder it will hit you back. It's got this permanent dynamism – it's never the same twice. And I think that's what I really like about it." (Rupert)

Even among those athletes who described intrinsic enjoyment of a particular sport there was a suggestion that competence was also a factor in participation. However their focus was more upon being able to do the activity themselves than performing better than others. The comments of one participant provide insight into this issue:

> "You're doing it really just because you enjoy it and the reason that I really love swimming I think partly, well, it's because I was good at it. I'm not an all rounder at sports and all my school sports were all ball based and I have absolutely no ball sense at all whatsoever. If someone throws a ball to me it's 30 -70% that I'll catch it not in my favour! But sports like surfing, swimming, sailing, anything that involved a

> lot of balance or kind of that understanding the way that a hydrofoil works, I'm very good at those sort of things." (Rupert)

Some participants described their early enthusiasm towards sport as being almost exclusively focussed on performance outcomes. For these individuals, it appears that the primary reason behind their initial sport participation was to demonstrate excellence, beat other people, or be the best:

> "It's more the winning that I've liked. I've gone through sports and tried to find one where I could be better than other people at and just found that rowing was the one that I could hack. I could get better than people at quite a high level. So it wasn't that when I first started that I was particularly passionate about the sport, it was the fact that it was kind of a vehicle that I could beat other people." (Edward)

The participants who described a near-total focus on winning or *being the best* first participated in the sport in which they excelled in their late teens or early twenties. It is difficult to be sure whether these individuals would have approached sport in this way when they were younger or whether their attitude developed over time as a result of a need to find an activity in which they could excel. The quote above suggests that, for this individual, sport was and had always been solely a vehicle through which to establish and demonstrate superiority over others. The quote below has a slightly different emphasis which hints at the development over time of a focus on winning:

> "I just decided that I would do as many sports as I can and be as good at them as I can so that if I couldn't do one I would do just do everything and that led me to find rowing." (Beth)

Notably absent among athletes who described their initial participation in performance terms were descriptions of intrinsic pleasure from the activity itself. For these individuals, little or no enjoyment arose from actually *doing* the activity. In this sense, enjoyment or fulfilment was only possible when athletes were successful. One young athlete described how he believed that his motives for sport involvement were a consequence of being identified and placed on a talent development programme:

> "I think it's just succeeding – like winning. Knowing that everyone else has put the same effort in but you have come out on top and knowing that you are better than everyone else. I think that's probably been affected by how I got into the sport. The programme I'm on it's purely about achieving. There is no doing. It's not about participation or boosting that. It's just purely about success. As soon as I got into the sport I knew that was why I was doing it. It wasn't for a social aspect it's just purely that's where I am and that's where I want to get to." (Edward)

A final observation worthy of comment is the belief held by many athletes that they did not consider themselves to be "talented" as youngsters. Participants often described others as "talented" or "gifted" but very rarely described themselves in these terms:

> "I'm not the most talented – not by a long way." (Carl)

> "I really don't think I'm a natural sports person I was one of those people who have a go and be determined to do it because other people could do it so why can't I. But I never thought I was a natural sports person … When you're at school and there are those people who could do any sport they wanted they were just brilliant and they could run and run and they were in the netball team and they were like brilliant to watch – I wasn't one of those and I knew that I wasn't one of those. But I knew that I could compete to a high level." (Jill)

It may be that there is an element of false modesty in these remarks or a simple lack of awareness on one's own ability. This argument is supported by one participant's description of her youth athletics experiences: "Looking back I won every competition I ever did on two feet. But I wouldn't call myself a runner!" An alternative explanation is that some participants genuinely were not "talented" and perhaps did not particularly excel as young athletes. Yet these individuals all went on to reach an elite level of performance in adult sport. This being the case, we might wish to reflect on the role attitude, effort, and individuals' differing maturation play in sport performance at youth level and beyond.

4.1.4 Chance

A striking theme in participants' descriptions of their initial sport experiences is the influence of chance happenings. Unplanned and unforeseen events and contexts were common in most athletes' accounts of how they came to be involved in their sport.

For some, a one-off chance event led them to have a go at a new sport:

> "I just started swimming when I was the age of seven and that just really came from, literally I can remember it now, just driving along in the car and I was sitting in the back seat and my mum just said 'You like swimming – why don't you join a swimming club?' And then it just kind of went from there." (Rupert)

> "I got into judo because my brother first started. I did ballet. My ballet school closed down then I used to go there (the judo club) anyway to pick my brother up on the way home." (Marlene)

> "My dad is a self confessed east end man and he knew the person who ran the lessons and he could get me on for free. So that was the sport for me! There wasn't much more behind it than that." (Jill)

Others identified a chain of unplanned or chance events which led to them developing a career in sport:

> "I suppose football and cricket, football was during the winter cricket during the summer – they were really the only two alternatives I guess … I was good at football and good at cricket. As I got bigger and slower football went, cricket took over. I started playing in my dad's works team when I was 12 'cause I was a big lad so I sort of got away with playing with the blokes from an early age. I sort of kicked on and I sort of went and developed in league cricket. The county second team scorer for some reason was based around there managed to get me a county trial a few years later on, my French teacher put me in for trials for county schools – never seen me play." (James)

For others, general unplanned factors related to their way of life as children combined to pave the way to sport participation. Two athletes, for example, described how they believed their naturally active lifestyles as children equipped them physically to become successful endurance athletes:

> "When I was younger I lived on a farm out in the middle of nowhere and consequently I could never stay behind for school clubs. I always had to go home and help my parents on the farm. They were always to busy with milking and couldn't come to pick me up from school. So that's my excuse for not taking up rugby or football … So I did loads of running and cycling around at home." (Giles)

> "I had a puppy and I used to cycle to school and back to school and back and back to school and back about three times a day to feed him and make sure he was alright … It was about five miles each way but I had to do it in a certain time because I only had half an hour and I used to cycle like crazy and I used to cycle to the stables and back and that was 18 mile round trip and do that twice a day as well." (Janet)

At times, athletes' descriptions of their transition into elite sport are at odds with the expectation of a smooth, planned transition. Some athletes were even somewhat surprised that they ended up an elite sportsperson as they did not consider themselves to possess what they imagined were the requirements of being an elite athlete:

> "When I was about 18 I finished college, did my A-levels, didn't really know what to do. Never ever thought I would be a pro athlete because I was pretty overweight and I wasn't in good shape." (Jeremy)

While many athletes identified chance events in influencing their sport participation, many also believed that *choice*, in the form of their own decision making process, was also important. Understanding the respective role of chance (i.e. unplanned events) and choices (i.e. planned actions) is a difficult task but one which has implications for how young people's sport participation might be planned and structured versus left open and varied. One participant described how, in her experience, chance factors played a role in her sport participation by affecting the choices she made in terms of which sport to pursue:

> "I could have chosen a number of different sports. I enjoyed playing all sorts of sports. I really enjoyed playing rugby – I played that when I was eight so I could have carried on with that and gone a different way. So there does seem to be quite a lot of chance things seemed to happen at the right time to make me follow the judo path." (Sally)

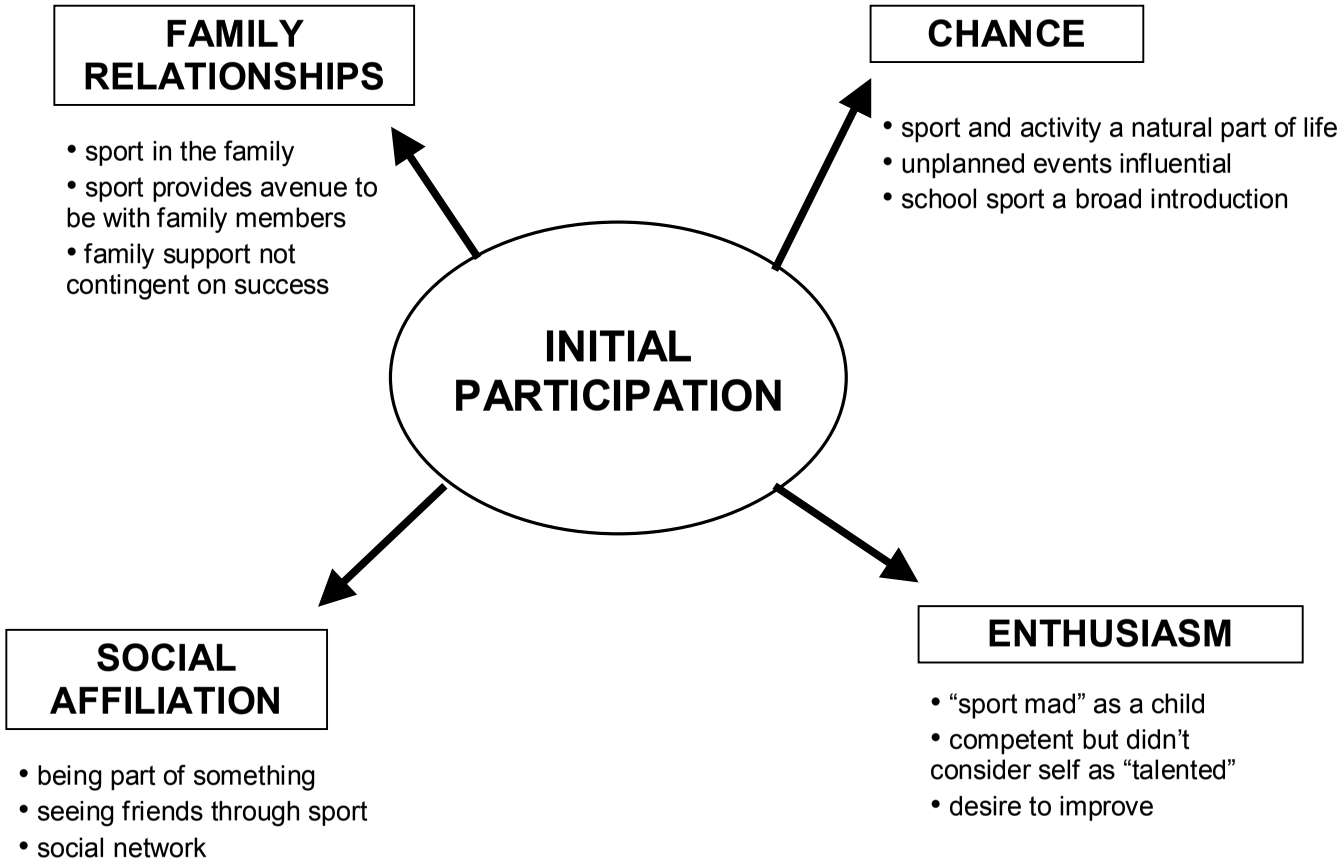
This perhaps is the most satisfying interpretation of the role of chance in young athletes' sport participation: that chance events can play an important (but unpredictable) part in influencing sports careers by affecting the choices and decisions athletes make. This balance is reflected in the observations of one retired athlete:

> "There's got to be elements of luck within all this. Whether you have a bit of a plot or a plan from being a certain age, there is always going to be somebody or something that you're going to meet in your future, as you're a kid, that is going to poke you or prod you or offer you a couple of doors to choose from. But you might pick the wrong door, you might pick the right door." (James)

In this sense, eliminating the influence of chance events through over-planning and regimentation of young athletes' careers might be considered a threat to the holistic development of young sports people.

Initial participation

Social context and experiences



4.2 CORE LIFESTYLE VALUES

In this section we focus on the core lifestyle values which experienced athletes (either retired athletes or those who are further into their sport career) believe were important to their career progression. These values are based to a large extent on the reflections of experienced, high achieving athletes as they look back over their sport career. In this sense, the themes we present here can be considered "lessons learnt" from lives in elite sport.

It is often assumed that in order to be successful elite athletes must prioritise sport performance above all other aspects of their lives. Indeed, in this research there were some participants who followed this template. For them, sport performance appeared to be the most important focus of concern in their lives.

We consider athletes who take this position to have a *primary* or *total performance focus.* In this research, there were two scenarios when a primary or total performance focus was described:

(i) Younger athletes and those who were in the early stages of their sports career were more likely to describe their lives in the terms of a primary or total performance focus. However, not *all* the younger athletes adopted this perspective.

(ii) A few of the more experienced athletes believed that they had adopted a primary or total sport focus during certain early stages of their sport career. There were mixed feelings among the participants over whether or not this approach was beneficial or desirable (in terms of sport performance, lifestyle, and well-being).

Athletes of all ages and experience levels valued sport performance and considered it a priority area in their lives. This is perhaps only to be expected among a sample of elite athletes who have made sport a focus of their lives. However, among experienced athletes and some younger athletes, sport performance was not necessarily the *most* important aspect of participants' lives. For these individuals, a more complex picture emerged where several other aspects of life were valued alongside or above sport performance.

Five distinct themes emerged from the data which, while being varied and at times contradictory, represent the core lifestyle values which have provided a foundation for athletes' successful career progression. These values, we suggest, have been important to athletes' lives in a holistic sense and are closely linked to their sport performance.

We describe here these five core lifestyle values and provide illustrative quotes from the participants. An understanding of experienced athletes' experiences, perceptions, and views with regard to the values which have been important in their lives and careers fulfils three purposes:

(i) it explains how and why specific environmental contexts affect performance

(ii) it helps explain why, even when all performance related factors are in place, athletes' performance may still suffer

(iii) it provides an alternative template of desirable or necessary lifestyle values that might be used to guide and educate young athletes.

4.2.1 Ownership

A strong theme which has emerged in the research is the value many athletes place on ownership and personal control over their sport career, daily lives, and futures.

Younger participants – those in the early stages of their sport careers – tended to voice ownership and control issues less strongly than older, more experienced athletes. Younger athletes, while expressing some frustrations, were more willing to sacrifice ownership and control in the service of their sport careers.

As athletes gained experience and grew older, ownership and control became an increasingly important issue. More experienced and older athletes emphasised that when they feel ownership and control over their lives and their sport they perform better. For these athletes, the reverse is also true: when ownership and control is removed performance invariably suffers.

The following excerpt communicates with some clarity the level of feeling athletes from a variety of sports expressed concerning the value that is attached to ownership and personal control:

> "They are so intent on controlling you. I mean I have an issue controlling an 18 year old and obviously dealing with an 18 year old is different to dealing with a 30 year old or whatever. But the thing is you're *elite* athletes. At some stage of your career you're going to have very clear idea about who you are and what you are about. And to be treated like you're an 18 year old or whatever is just rubbish … Something trivial, but it was affecting, something simple like travelling on a team coach. We've got one guy from Leeds, one guy who's in London, I live near Sheffield so we'd literally pass 100 yards past the end of my house to go onto the M1 to go south and yet the coach was insistent that we travelled on the team coach *all* the time. None of the lads cared a monkey's whether these guys were in a car, arrive in a hot air balloon – they didn't care! But the coach was insistent because it was setting a precedent. But so what? What's that got to do with us playing at Leicester tomorrow? What's it got to do with it? … They get a principle in their head and I mean you can understand the principle of a team being together – but the principle isn't practical … The fact that they're in control becomes the whole point … Yeah, it massively bothered me. I felt like I wasn't in control of what I was doing. There was

> only one person as far as I was concerned who knew how to get the best out of me and that was me. If any part of my life, if any part of control is taken away it affects me." (James)

For some athletes, personal control was straightforward – they believed they knew best what they had to do to achieve optimum performance and therefore needed to simply be given the freedom to do this. One athlete described this process in the context of day-to-day training and preparation:

> "I knew what I had to get done in that day – there was only me that knew what I had to get done in that day. So it was only me who would govern that." (Jill)

The above comment addresses the debate between coaches and athletes over "who knows best". Depending on the context, either is possible. The point is that negotiation between athletes and coaches is necessary in order to ensure that the process of deciding a course of action does not remove athlete autonomy.

For others, removal of personal control and ownership served to create dissatisfaction or even resentment which undermined mood, well-being, and performance:

> "If the team's not happy the team doesn't play well and if I'm not happy as an individual then it affects my performance. If I'm just playing like an idiot I've just got to look at myself. But other things are management based – because they are so intent on controlling you." (James)

Several athletes compared how different coaching and management styles served to either increase or decrease their perceptions of ownership and control. Inclusive practices where athletes were made to feel that coaches, managers, and athletes were all part of the same "team" were more effective in this regard than "them and us" type approaches. One retired athlete provided a good example of the effects inclusive and exclusive coaching practice:

> "The coach we deal with now, he started out two, three, four years ago hugely inclusive. 'Come on lads we're in this together! We want to help each other! I'm new at this…' And it worked perfectly. We had a buddy system to help out the young kids and all the senior players felt great that they were able to help out the kids. It wasn't any of this 'We'll train at 9.30 this morning' – facilities were available and we found that everybody would train anyway instead of, 'Well, I ain't goin' cause somebody's told me what to do.' But then it slowly sort of reversed round. This guy got picked as assistant coach for England and suddenly next season it was, he knew all about dealing with a bunch of guys and about his coaching and all that inclusive style which was about letting everyone have some sort of say in what was going on which makes you feel, as a senior member, it makes you feel good, the kids feel like they are included, all if a sudden it went the other way and he was more worried about his England credentials and all of a sudden we've got to do this, 'because this is what the England team do.' We had the best team on paper in the entire country and we got relegated. It had a massive, massive impact on the dynamics of the group and how it behaved and how we played." (James)

Another participant described how the coach's approach of handing responsibility to the athletes was, in his experience, effective and reasonable:

> "He (the coach) puts the onus on the boys to try and take responsibility for themselves. So he says, 'It's extremely important you eat right, look after your bodies, recover. If you need to work on things physically you need to speak to the fitness coach. You need harass him about getting a plan.' So he puts the onus back on the boys which is good 'cause then he can say, 'Boys, if you haven't done it then it's your own fault. Don't be coming to me if you're not selected, if you're not strong enough' – which is fair enough." (Jeremy)

There was much discussion during the focus groups about the ways in which athletes perceived that ownership or control was taken away from them as a result of a range of issues surrounding coaching, management, selection, competition, and funding. A critical problem, for several participants, was what they perceived as the removal of certain freedoms or rights which are typically afforded to adults within our society.

In this sense, athletes' descriptions at times communicated a feeling that they were being "treated like children" rather than adults. At times there was a feeling that control over irrelevant or petty issues was taken away from athletes resulting in discontent and annoyance that could have easily been avoided. The dislike and dissatisfaction with being treated in this way was more marked among older (i.e. late 20's and beyond) and more experienced athletes. Several examples will clarify athletes' perceptions of the denial of freedom through the removal of ownership and personal control:

> "We were on a training camp in Florida and we weren't allowed to sunbathe at all ever. So we had a day off so we decided we'd swim out to the rocks or go on the peddleos – which was allowed. So we sat on a bench putting suntan lotion on and we were sitting doing that and so it was assumed we were sunbathing … So he (performance director) went to my coach and said 'She's sunbathing!' My coach says 'No she's not. I know she's not because this is her coffee cup and she's sitting right here so I know she's not.' The next morning he made us do timed sprints and at my age I don't recover very well … I did a max 100 but because I didn't win that one I had to do three more. So I couldn't train for probably about three days – this is a month out from Olympics. And he just turned round and went 'That will teach you.' And, you know, it's like, I'm 30 years old. If you've got a problem just say to me. I'd rather you didn't do that." (Isobel)

> "You're only allowed to a wedding if it's yours or you're best woman." (Beth)

> "We had a performance director who would go through all the bins to look at all the wrappers we put in and would tip them out on the table and say 'Right. Who's is all of that?' … Oh no, you're not allowed to be an adult on the team. Oh no, oh no. You have an athlete's agreement which tells you." (Janet)

> "So this has actually happened: I get rung up and told that if I don't go to a particular session somewhere in London for training then I'll have my lottery money taken

> away from me. Your employer could never actually do that. I mean that's just unbelievable. Not paying any national insurance, not paying any pension, and you have no employments rights, but you can have this guy who is able to tell you all these things and is able to take it away within a week's notice." (Beth)

Personal relationships are one area of life which, in our society, is typically left to the personal control of each individual. A few athletes voiced their experiences of how the externally imposed requirements of their sport and training impeded their chance to maintain a close personal relationship with another athlete:

> "Over the summer when we were training for the World's they really did go out of their way to try and make sure, like, I mean we – you're not allowed to be seen together because relationships are a no go." (Amanda)

> "The head coach made it quite clear that he didn't like us together that much. We used to have, after the end of each day, a debrief of the day and it would come up every other day: I had spent five minutes too long with her and that sort of thing and it just got ridiculous." (Edward)

Several participants described the effect of age-related issues on ownership and personal control. One retired athlete had experienced a process of increasing ownership and control as she progressed through her sport career. Differences in the need and ability to assume control are something she has noticed between younger and older athletes in the squad:

> "When you're a junior you're in a program you go from A to B to C and your teacher tells you that you have to turn up at this time. It's very different to then being at university where there isn't any programme and you have to set that discipline. In endurance sports, and especially rowing where you can row for hours and hours and hours, routine is key. So you're going from a situation where someone has enforced this situation upon you to now you have to make your own routine … I think that's a skill that everyone who comes into rowing from a mature level has to have ... but that is very much a difference between younger and older people who come into our sport." (Beth)

It is difficult to deduce from our data to what extent the lower levels of ownership and control which seem to be accepted by younger athletes are a benefit or a hindrance to the individual's development in a holistic lifestyle sense. Certainly, more experienced athletes generally believed that taking greater personal control and ownership was desirable in terms of their lifestyle and values. However, different views existed concerning whether as younger athletes they benefited from more or less personal control and ownership.

Some athletes believed that a gradual increase in personal control and ownership as they matured suited them best. For these individuals, too much personal control at a young age was seen as a potential problem. Other athletes felt that they would have benefited from being allowed more control and

ownership at a younger age. One participant's description touches on this issue and raises an important question which is worthy of further exploration:

> "I'm only just getting there now to that stage where I feel confident that I know what I want to do or that this is best for me. You know I'm 23 and … I've just started gradually questioning my coach on certain things. At first he found it quite hard but then he'd come back to me afterwards and said I think you're right about that and maybe we should try it this way or that way … Maybe it should be developed earlier and encouraged that bit earlier. You know, if I'd started thinking more for myself when I was 18, 19, 20, would I have taken slightly different paths?" (Sally)

4.2.2 Coping with hardship

While younger and less experienced athletes spoke of difficult conditions in their lives (such as lack of optimum training conditions) as standing in the way of them achieving peak performance, older and more experienced athletes often viewed hardships in a positive light. Among these individuals there was a belief that successfully coping with and overcoming hardships had provided personal benefits in the long term. Many took the view that *getting through* adverse experiences provided strength and resilience which helped both sport performance as well as life in general. Subsequently, many of the participants retrospectively considered the process of coping with hardship and adversity to be a valuable life experience.

Several athletes described their experiences of how difficult conditions in their life relating to sport ultimately had a positive effect on their lives. In the example below, a retired rower describes how "getting through" the hardship of training under difficult circumstances contributed to making that period of time a memorable one:

> "So we got this coach from Henley who agreed to coach us, and we spent pretty much every weekend driving down the M4 from Gloucester to Henley with a boat. Arriving at Henley at eight o'clock in the morning … we left at around 5, 5:30 from Gloucester, drove, got here for 8:30, 9, did two sessions, went back in time to go to the Union in the evening and we kind of did that for a year … There were so many times when people would try to drop out or there was loads of days, it happened to me, when I wouldn't wake up to my alarm or wouldn't feel like getting up and you'd have the rest of the seven people driving round to your house and pulling you out of bed and going 'No! You're coming!' And it was all that which made it so special."

Sports related hardships such as serious injuries or selection problems were often experienced by athletes as significant hardship or adversity. However, experiences of being injured or failing to be selected were considered by some participants to provide valued benefits in the long term. These periods of hardship or adversity were, for some athletes, retrospectively considered to be a teaching ground for other more general lifestyle skills or values.

In times of hardship, many participants across different sports had experienced what they considered a lack of support from those within their sport:

> "When things were fine then it was fine. But when things turned and I wasn't going so well, and the pressure of doing both work and sport was getting too much and my performance started dipping, they were not there to support me. They were there to say 'Well there's your bloody international for you!' when things didn't go well – which was a quote heard by a friend of mine from the coach when I wasn't playing very well. So it wasn't a case of how can we help you to play better, you're obviously struggling, it was a case of 'Well, I thought he was supposed to be our star player. Look at that. What's the world coming to?'" (Christopher)

In coping with hardship or adversity, athletes frequently employed two distinct strategies:

(i) relying upon support from relatives and close friends

(ii) returning to (or remembering) the intrinsic satisfaction of doing their sport for themselves or for its own sake

Both of these coping strategies stem directly from two initial participation experiences identified in section 4.2: family relationships and enthusiasm.

> "My injury that felt like a hardship, thinking that my whole world was going to be my sport and then you realise hang on a minute there was a bit of a problem there because if you get an injury you can't do it. It was a good year out of competition and that was hard, that was really hard. And the only support I got was from my club and my family. At that time I was the top person coming through from the juniors and I had no support from my governing body. I didn't even get a phone call 'How are you?' I didn't get any of that. And you kind of think well hang on what is my worth in all this? And it's like 'You're doing it for you, for the sport, not for anyone else.'" (Jill)

> "It was just hell the Olympics – the whole 12 months leading up to it. I was in pieces because of the coach. I mean my coach, I remember him shouting at me on the pool side cause I was in tears swimming in tears over something [another member of staff] had said to me and he was going 'You don't fucking swim for that bloke you swim for yourself!' And I'm crying, doing my training like that, 'Fuck him. Fuck him. Bastard!' My coach is going, 'You don't swim for him you do it for you!' … If it was anything outside like injuries and selections and things like that I was quite good at like burying my head in the water kind of thing and I would turn to my sport to escape … I was usually quite good at going 'Right. I don't care about that 'cause I've got my swimming and this is what I'm good at. So screw you lot.'" (Isobel)

The excerpts above suggest that the process of *going through* hardships or adversities such as serious injury or selection problems can lead to personal learning regarding one's own values. Often, the values which come to the fore during times of hardship concern areas of life outside sports performance (such as family, friends, or intrinsic enjoyment of doing their sport).

The experiences of two particular athletes in this research provides further insight into how even times of severe hardship can, for some people, have positive consequences in a lifestyle sense. These athletes had experienced serious illness which, while being difficult and traumatic for themselves and their families, ultimately resulted in a positive change in personal lifestyle values which, these individuals believed, benefited both their sport and their life in general:

> "When I first got diagnosed with cancer I didn't know if I would live. So I didn't know if I would get six months, six years, sixty years but I knew that I wanted to make the most of my time from that point on, that I'd been a bit slack as a teenager, I'd been a bit lazy … There was no point thinking about what *had* happened. But I knew I wanted, with whatever time I had left, to make the most of it. And I also thought to myself if someone told me that someone in my school was diagnosed with that then I wouldn't feel particularly sorry for them, you know, I'd be like 'Oh that's shame. What's for tea?' You know. That would have been my attitude so it made me feel that people wouldn't feel particularly sorry for me so I can't feel sorry for myself. So that was my kind of idiot's logic so that kind of set me on a path: OK there's no point feeling sorry for myself and I want to make the most of my time whatever that it is and I'm not sure what I can do. I know I can swim – let's have a really good crack at that. And that's kind of how it came about. And I feel it was like a couple of extra tools in my athlete tool box which I wouldn't have had. I never would have been as good a swimmer if it hadn't of happened … I was a victim of circumstance really in that I didn't have all the skills that I think an elite athlete would need until I had cancer. I didn't have the determination, focus or the motivation." (Carl)

> "I never believed I was going to die and I thought as long as, literally, as long as this doesn't kill me then I will be alright. Which has actually, funnily enough, been something that I now apply to all my races – when they start to get really painful I think to myself this isn't going to kill me so I will be alright. And it's funny it's kind of ironically carried through." (Rupert)

4.2.3 Attitude

> "Attitude is massive. Attitude, regardless of talent sometimes, can often go a lot further." (James)

Attitude is often suggested as a key psychological factor which is implicated with performance at the elite level in sport as well as other areas of human endeavour. Among the athletes in this research (particularly the more experienced individuals) some common themes emerged in terms of their attitude towards sport and life in general. We identified three interlinked themes or values which might be broadly considered as attitudinal factors among the majority of the participants:

(i) Effort focus

(ii) Determination/commitment

(iii) Belief that "I can do it"

While we separate these three themes here in the interest of clarity, in reality there is a significant interdependence between the three themes. We suggest that, for some athletes, the three themes are mutually supporting and, perhaps, serve to characterise the attitude of many successful sports people.

Among this sample of experienced high achieving elite athletes from different sports there was a distinct feeling that effort was *as* important or, even, *more* important than ability or talent. In this regard, it was not uncommon for participants to believe that they were not particularly *naturally talented* at sport but that their success had arisen through a combination of other factors which included effort and hard work:

> "I really don't think I'm a natural sports person. I was one of those people who'd have a go and be determined to do it because other people could do it so why can't I? But I never thought I was a natural sports person. I'd end up being in the teams but that was more from hard work than ability." (Jill)

> "I wasn't quite in the rugby side. Some of the brighter guys, younger guns, were getting into the first team in the fifth form. I didn't. And I remember someone doing a screw kick, one of those wonderful torpedo kicks, and I thought 'Hmm. Why can't I do that?' And I can remember finding that very difficult because nobody actually taught me but just practising, practising, practising until I eventually began to work out how to do that consistently." (Christopher)

> "I'm one of them I'm not the most talented – not by a long way." (Carl)

Athletes' belief in the importance of effort alongside or above ability is potentially significant in that effort is personally controllable while ability is not. In other words, psychologists suggest that an individual who believes effort matters more than ability is more likely to strive for success than an individual who believes ability or talent dictate success. In these athletes' experience, it seems, a focus on effort has been associated with athletic excellence and achievement. As one participant put it:

> "You imagine success is about perfection and success is actually just about getting on with it." (Beth)

From a lifestyle perspective, there was also a view expressed by some participants that effort was also related to the psychological rewards athletes experienced when they were successful. For these individuals, success was only meaningful when it required significant effort to be achieved:

> "I've just been to the RDT championships and we got two silvers and a bronze but I did ten minutes training a week. Now I know that medal is sitting in my drawer at home but it has no comparison to a medal that I would get in the world championship because of the amount of training commitment which has gone with it." (Beth)

It is unsurprising that athletes raised commitment and determination as key factors or values in their sport careers. These athletes were focussed on working harder than others and doing what they could to continually improve their own performance. Most athletes recounted examples of commitment and determination which were considered prerequisites for success:

> "I used to part of everything that I could be… at school I did pretty much did every club I could because I saw it as an extra part of training. That was the kind of mentality I had … It's weird, the more that I did the more I felt that had one up on people. I don't know, you've probably done the thing when you go out for a run and you see a lamp post and that lamp post is someone else and once you'd made it you'd beaten them. I still do it now. Like I'd go training on Christmas day, I still do it, so I know that no-one else in the country or in the world could have done any more than me. I always wanted to make it feel that there were no minutes in the day that hadn't been used that someone could have done more than what I'd done." (Jill)

Commitment and determination, while apparently common among the participants, appeared to be particularly marked among the Paralympic athletes in this research. Speculatively, it may be that one result of successfully coping with disability (see also section 4.2.2) is the ability to achieve and maintain unusually high levels of determination and commitment. The following excerpt suggests that this may sometimes be the case:

> "When I found a coach who really clicked with me I approached him at the national swimming championships and he didn't know me from Adam. At the time he had the four fastest guys in Britain and some of the fastest women all training at Kingston. And I was coming as a Paralympic swimmer – good within my world but I was never going to make it onto even the Kingston team. But he took me on board, he tested me, he had me along to some morning sessions. You know, 'You've got to be there at five o'clock in the morning' and I said 'OK, fair enough' and I'd do that to begin with. And then he realised that just because I didn't actually bring anything to the team in terms of racing my general attitude brought something to the team. So he was very much person focused as opposed to, 'Oh no, you can't do that time, can't do that time.' But actually my attitude brought more than virtually any of the other swimmers because of the amount of effort I was putting in and he often used me as an example as you've got to look at the attitude and what can be achieved and that's about being person focused rather than getting caught up in tick the box for that time." (Carl)

Perhaps as a natural result of an effort focus and high levels of determination and commitment, most athletes communicated a view that, eventually, *they could do it*. In other words, although they might not believe that they were exceptionally talented at their sport, through extreme commitment and hard

work they would, eventually, be successful. This self-belief, and its importance to continuation, is suggested in the following remark:

> "When we got beaten by them in a race it was kind of like, you know, we went 'What on earth are we doing? Trying to do this?' Because we knew we had the potential to be good. It's having that belief that you know there is a potential there … .If you just thought you were always going to be bad and that was your place in life you wouldn't do it anymore." (Giles)

4.2.4 Relationships

There was a general feeling among participants from all sports that family and personal relationships played an important role throughout athletes' careers. These relationships were particularly important in times of hardship when family and friends were usually the first line of support. Without these personal relationships – or when relationships were compromised or sacrificed – some athletes described how performance suffered as they had no access to the personal support they needed.

> "I won every competition - I think there was one exception where I got a silver -and then I wasn't selected for the World's. So I was a bit like 'What? What do you mean I'm not going?' … It was just like someone had just punched me in the stomach, seriously. And I was away from home so my phone bill was through the roof cause I'd phone my mum at three in the morning – God bless my mum – I'd phone her at like three in the morning just crying because I couldn't, I couldn't envisage not going to the World's … I was lucky really cause I've got good family and friends." (Marlene)

It was clear from the focus groups and interviews that the demands of elite sport have the potential to conflict with the maintenance of personal and family relationships. All the participants agreed that, ultimately, "some things are bigger than sport". In other words, if it came to the crunch, they would put their family before their sport. However, there is significant social pressure to conform to the view that "my family comes first". One athlete described how the requirements of elite sport had damaged personal relationships by forcing him to become "a different person". This led him to make a stark choice between sport or family relationships:

> "You become consumed in your sport … I dumped my girlfriend, I got to the point where I just felt that I want to be an athlete, I felt that sport is what I should be. I'm here at this top academy, I've come this far, invested money, time, I need to give it as good a shot as I can and I can't be doing with you moaning at me down the phone. I was becoming a different person. No I'm not. I'm me. I've been channelled – you know, identified – and said that, 'You've got the potential to do something.' But I always knew from meeting a lot of the athletes that I was training with I wasn't like them." (Paul)

Another participant described how a serious family relationship problem affected her sport performance:

> "Looking back on my career when I had a boyfriend who wasn't very well at the time and his parents lived abroad and he was going back to live with them and that affected me massively in that I wasn't really interested in sport. This was more important to me than sport was at the time. Cause he just wasn't very well at all and there are some things that are bigger than your sport." (Jane)

More experienced and retired athletes also attached great significance to relationships they had formed through sport. There was a commonly held view that sport-related relationships were one of the most highly valued aspects of their career.

This is not to say that *all* sport-related relationships were positive. Indeed, there were numerous examples of relationship problems within all sports which affected either performance or lifestyle in a more holistic sense. Within the context of striving and working for success in sport, and the struggles this sometimes entails, certain positive relationships appeared to take on great personal significance:

> "I spent the majority of my rowing career at the back of the field all the time. I mean for the first few years at university we were terrible … And funnily enough the people I've met and trained with at university are still, that's probably the part of my rowing career I look back upon most fondly because again it's the camaraderie thing. There were the eight of us and it was us or nothing." (Giles)

At times, relationships between athletes were sufficiently strong that athletes put the needs and well-being of others alongside or even above their own. Often, this strong sense of comradeship or team identity resulted in improved performance and results. The following excerpts communicate a feeling of strong and valued interpersonal relationships between athletes which were sometimes forged under difficult circumstances:

> "Well we train as an eight and this is eight frightened girls all wanting to be part of the team, all trying to impress. Even if girls were injured you didn't want to tell them (the performance team) they're injured because they just wanted to be part (of it)." (Ruth)

> "As we arrived at the Olympics we were still trying out different line up combinations. It was to the point, 'Put Jay into the stroke seat.' We weren't going well. You'd be really good first off and then you'd deteriorate. Jay was comfortable enough to turn round and say guys, and bearing in mind that the stroke seat is the glory seat, 'I think I should be in a different seat.'" (Beth)

> "That year was very special because that guy in charge was, he was quite evil actually, I don't think he would have got away with it now with the systems that are in place monitoring what goes on. It was not so much camaraderie as kind of needing to flock together to protect each other. Because there would always be at least one

> person being picked on … Because the training was so hard – it was ridiculous – there was always somebody who had dropped off the back. But if you were in the front you'd be going 'Phew! It's not me today' but at the same time you'd never say anything – you were always trying to keep a low profile so that you didn't get picked on for that day. But you'd … always sort of be quietly supporting the one at the back who was getting the finger because it was 'It's you today.'" (Janet)

Perhaps as a result of the value many athletes attached to relationships within sport, the views and regard of other athletes were sometimes important criteria for judging one's own success and contribution to the sport. One athlete described how, for her, the esteem of others, developed by going through the shared experiences in elite sport ("the journey") was a key personal motivator:

> "People always ask me 'What was it? Why did you want to win? Was it the accolades?' Because there's no money involved and I'd chosen a sport with a particularly low media profile. I wanted to be able to walk down the road and I wanted respect. But I didn't want respect from anybody on the street – I wanted respect from the people I would value their respect. So it was my people. So it was the people I had made that journey with. I wanted for them to say, to me the proudest thing would be for someone who I rowed with in my novices boat to say, "Oh yeah I rowed with Beth." Now if you went straight from here to here you would never have got that … The enjoyment comes from the journey, your friends come from the journey." (Beth)

Being competent to perform one's sporting role took on extra significance among those athletes who valued relationships with team-mates and squad members. One swimmer provided an illustration of how, through being a competent swimmer, he feels comfortable in team events as his team-mates can depend on him. This comfort contrasts with his dislike of doing team activities where he felt incompetent:

> "I hated the fact that they were team sports at school and I wasn't very good at them and I hated the fact that people were relying on me and I would let them down. Whereas ironically one of the things I love most about swimming now is the relays because I know people can rely on me." (Rupert)

Among some athletes there was a feeling that, at times, the value of positive social relationships within sport is underestimated. A specific concern voiced by one athlete was that performance centres, by prioritising sport performance above all else, might not provide the best working atmosphere for athletes in a holistic sense:

> "We still get social swimmers, they're still competing at a top level and they're good but they'll never make the jump into being GB team worthy medallists or whatever – purely because their main focus for being at the club is social. But that doesn't mean that they're not important people to have within that structure … I think perhaps it is very difficult to spot what they do bring to it. The easiest way to look at it is to look at programmes that don't have those kinds of people and how they do function differently. For instance, the performance centres all by their very nature cluster

> together people who all want to be brilliant which is great but they're not particularly nice places to operate in … A lot of the time you get on with these people because you have a lot in common with them because you all love the sport but in terms of lasting friendships, of twenty-odd years of swimming I could probably say I've got four people that I would class as really true friends and I'm really lucky – I've got lots and lots of friends." (Rupert)

Alongside relationships with other athletes, the athlete-coach relationship was often singled out to be of particular importance. When athletes worked with a coach over an extended period of time the coach can become a trusted confidant or friend who can offer valued emotional and personal support which short-term coaching relationships do not. A close relationship and understanding, which takes time to develop, was critical to performance for several athletes in individual sports. The importance of this relationship typically became clear when athletes were compelled to change coaches for any reason. At times, athletes would go to extreme lengths in order to continue working with their own coach – officially or unofficially:

> "Initially my coach was going to be team staff but he had a bit of a falling out so he was dropped from the team … he was there [at the Olympics] but he wasn't accredited. He had tickets. I spoke to him through the fence thank God otherwise I would have been going home as well." (Isobel)

> "I moved around the country trying to find the right coach once I'd finished my education. So I didn't really feel that I had found the right coach that I could stick with that I thought was able to offer the right kind of guidance until I was about 24, 25. I just kept moving around trying to find someone who could communicate with me – that's what I felt was missing. It's alright having technical knowledge but not knowing how to communicate it to you or not knowing how to give relevant feedback or the right feedback at the right time. So it took me a long while to find somebody like that and once I found him I stayed with him and moved houses when he moved jobs because that was important to me." (Carl)

A positive personal relationship with one's coach was considered essential by several athletes. In particular, effective channels of communication through the athlete and coach being able to relate to and understand each other was of primary importance in the athlete-coach relationship.

While the athlete-coach relationship is clearly important to performance, for some athletes it is also important in terms of personal well-being. This particularly seems to be the case for younger athletes who sometimes depend on their coach for personal support:

> "We had a competition where we'd had our hopes set on a certain finishing position and then it became apparent after the semi-final that it wasn't going to happen and it left me quite de-motivated. But I relied on my coach far more than any other people – I didn't even talk to anyone else about it. I wanted them to think that I was still optimistic about it so I relied on him to, to really lift me up again I suppose." (Edward)

> "I value my coach a lot … I'm not really that positive in terms of my performance – when I've done something decent I don't really think it's great. In school's we always have nationals championships but 18 and under and I was just like, 'I'm not going to get through the heat' and he was like, 'OK, yeah, whatever' If I ask him 'Do you think I can do it?' he says 'Yeah I think you can do it.' He's just there to motivate me mentally or just talk some sense into me, give me a clip on the ear when I need it! And he really brings me up if I'm down and he's really somebody I can talk to if I'm – I don't talk to him about all my problems but things that can affect sport I can talk to him about and he's not biased to anybody or anything like that. He can see things from everybody's point of view." (Amanda)

> "The head coach put a greenhouse round me mentally and said I was to be left alone and he verbalised that: I was to be excluded from the banter, you know, just to be left to sort of 're-grow'. And so I was aware sitting in changing rooms and the coffee room there would be fairly sharp banter flying around but I was not involved until I just began to feel happy enough to start chipping in." (Christopher)

4.2.5 Balance in life

Perhaps the best single word to summarise the varied and at times contradictory values of experienced athletes is *balance*. Often, participants spoke of needing to find some kind of balance in their lives in order to incorporate diverse needs and values in a functional way.

The issue of balance in life has been a topic of much discussion and thought among the participants. Once again, there is a noticeable split in athletes' views and experiences depending on experience and age. Younger, less experienced athletes have tended to take the perspective that other aspects of life must be, and were being, sacrificed in the interest of their sport career. More experienced athletes have taken the perspective that balance has been essential in regard to both performance and their life as a whole. Commonly, athletes told how eliminating or sidelining other areas of their life (for example, relationships, work, education, social life) adversely affected their performance. While athletes tended to believe that at times it was necessary to compromise balance in the pursuit of excellence, most believed that other areas of life had to be maintained and valued alongside their sport careers in order to perform optimally.

We present here illustrations of athletes' feelings and perceptions regarding achieving and maintaining balance in various aspects of their lives. Most athletes believed that having other dimensions to their lives besides sport had a positive effect on their performance:

> "I really don't think I'd have been so successful in sport if I hadn't had things to supplement it because it worked for me. Even at school level I remember thinking 'Oh great I'm going to training tonight I can forget about everything at school' then I'd

be at school during the day and forgetting about sport and that worked perfectly for me and that just carried on through my life." (Jill)

A key area where many athletes believed balance was necessary was employment and education. More experienced athletes typically believed that it had been important for them to keep their options open concerning education and future employment. On several occasions, it was an adverse situation such as injury or selection problems which had prompted athletes to reconsider the relative position of sport and work in their lives:

"My sport's very important to me – I've been doing it for 17 years so it's my life. However decisions haven't always gone my way for selections and stuff and so I've always learnt that you can't always rely on others to have things, you've got to be self sufficient. If I had a horrendous injury tomorrow, which has happened to a few athletes, and then they have to start their education again at 20, 21, mid-20s – I just didn't want to be that. I didn't think 'Oh God I'm going to get injured tomorrow' but I knew I was smart enough to go to university so there was no reason why I couldn't." (Marlene)

"I feel as I've got older and especially after this injury that you know hopefully I will get back but you know people don't get back from this injury. That does make you think. I'm 24 now, I haven't been to uni, so I need to think about other things." (Jeremy)

"I always thought I'd do something else with it rather than just doing sport 'cause that would have driven me mental because I had such a full life that I still needed that. So I got a job but in that year I got a bad injury and realised that the life only lasted as long as your body was in one piece … The people I'd been working for said you've got your A-levels and you got good results why aren't you at university? And now I suddenly thought this isn't such a bad idea." (Jill)

"With every step I made, if my sport failed at that point, I was still following a pathway separately." (Beth)

For some athletes, there was little sense of balance between sport and education or employment. In particular, younger athletes and some older athletes who reflected on their time at school communicated a view that they had put sport first sometimes at the expense of other areas of their life. Social aspects of life, education, and employment/financial opportunities were three areas of life which several athletes believed had suffered as a result of their sport focus:

"I definitely sacrificed the money for the sport. I don't own a house, I'm still renting and I can't afford to get on the property ladder and I don't go on big holidays. Like friends who are of my age who are living in London earning a massive wage and driving nice cars and stuff and I've not chosen that path but I definitely sacrificed for my sport." (Jane)

> "I don't have a social life in my life at the moment … I think it's just part of – I think the fact that I'm at school makes that harder – because I've barely got time to fit the two things in let alone have a third thing so I just think get through the next eight, nine months and then I can start filling in the other bits of my life." (Edward)

> "I have to say that relationships have suffered because of my sport. So if I hadn't been playing sport then maybe I would have still been with a certain person so I chose sport really ultimately." (Jane)

Several athletes described times in their lives when, in their view, their lives had become unbalanced in that they were prioritising sport too highly. For some this prioritising took the form of valuing sport above all other areas of life, for others it was simply devoting too much time to sport and therefore excluding other aspects of life. A common theme among athletes' descriptions of these times was reduced levels of well-being in a broad sense:

> "I've had an instance when we didn't qualify for the Olympics where I thought my life had ended and it was the worst I'd ever felt for like half a year probably. And you know that's quite a bad state to get into. To think that your life just revolves around that you are just a sportsperson and your perception of yourself is just I am just a sportsperson and I can't do anything else but you know it's important to keep an eye on reality because you're not, I won't always be a sportsperson and there are bigger things than sport." (Jane)

> "I think definitely for me its been important to have something else as well otherwise you end up with your sport as the one thing you've got and if your sport's not going very well that means your whole life isn't going well. I spent eight or nine months where all I did was sport just because of the volume of training we had and the amount of camps we had. I just had a break from work for about nine months and that was definitely the case then – if you have a bad training session you have bad day." (Julie)

> "When I qualified (for the Olympics) I went full time and I spent the only year of my life when I've never done anything other than sport and I hated it." (Janet)

One young athlete described his experience of the effects of losing balance in his life when he moved to a performance centre and subsequently regaining balance when he left and moved back home:

> "I pretty much remember being back at training and deciding that really I'd given everything to my sport in the most single minded way I could do. I felt that I had upset a few people. I'd kind of broken up with my girlfriend, I didn't really speak to my mum and dad, I didn't really see much of my family, I didn't see friends, I didn't really have any other friends outside of training, I didn't know anyone from church. It was all based around training – completely. And I just felt that's crazy. What happens when I'm not an athlete? I feel like I've really gone back to basics, I've got back to me, spending more time with my girlfriend, spend a lot more time in church, and training to be a PE teacher. So I'm working toward a future outside of sport. I don't train maybe as much as I did there but I'm running just as well, I'm fitter, I have

around me people that care for me, people that want to help me in sport and so I think that was just something that I just needed to get other parts sorted." (Paul)

Common among athletes was a valuing of family relationships and the belief that, in times of need such as serious illness or bereavement, family comes first. No participants disagreed with the view that, in times of need, family relationships should be prioritised above sport. However, one athlete expressed concerns that this view was not always encouraged or supported by coaches and managers:

"Things like family illnesses, cause with sport you do so much travelling and you could be on the other side of the world, and if something happened I'm sure within the drop of a hat I'd be home. But then when I was younger you know sometimes you can be so blinded by the fact that it's so good to be an elite sports person that you'd sacrifice absolutely anything for it. I've seen things where people have done certain things and I think will you regret that in a couple of years time … A team mates sister had a miscarriage and she was away on a training camp and her sister really wanted her to go home and the coach kind of suggested she shouldn't go home – so she didn't … To her sister she's away playing sport and sport's just pathetic and in the grand scale of things. It is just a game. And I think a lot of people just lose sight of that. I think you do just have to keep one eye on reality because when you are surrounded by people who want the same goal you can be blinded by it. And coaches can be blamed for that – they can totally blind you and in some instances they can emotionally bribe you about things … I hope a coach would see people as a human beings and that some things are bigger than (sport)." (Jane)

Given the pressures of elite sport, athletes often believed that some kind of "release valve" was necessary. A "release valve" often took the form of activities which provided a temporary escape from the pressures of elite sport by returning athletes to "normal" activities appropriate for people of their age group:

"I've got other things I enjoy doing and I think about other things. I love my sport when its going well and I hate it when its not going well … I'd like to think I've got other things … I think that's a release for me. Cooking. I really enjoy cooking. There's a few of us that enjoy cooking and we have a cooking evening every week … I go to the theatre. I went to see the ballet on Saturday, amazing, that was really good. " (Jeremy)

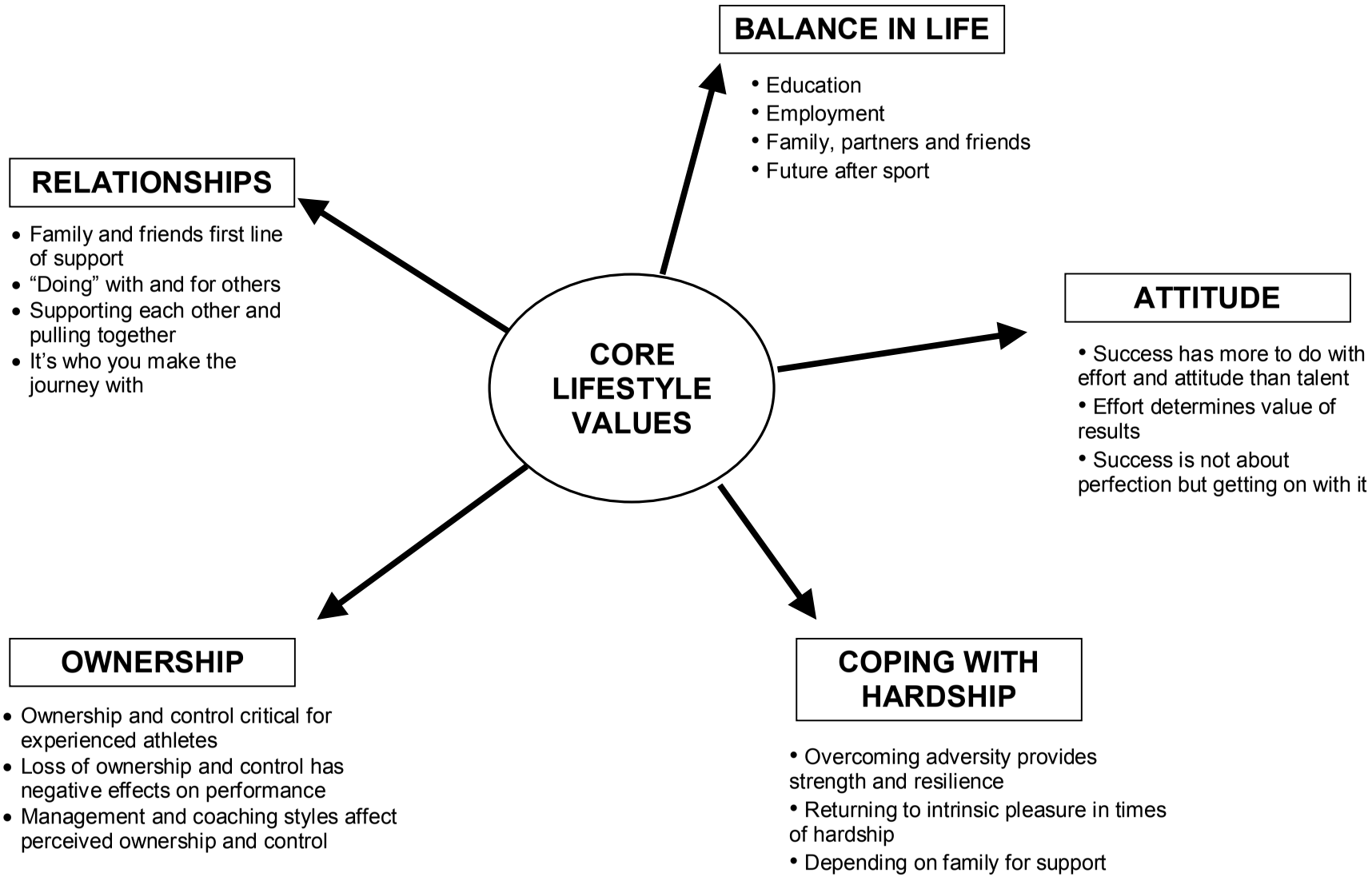
Some athletes described social drinking as an example of a "release" from the pressures of elite sport. One participant suggested that a periodic release from sport improved performance by helping him to stay "fresh":

"Good coaches smile when you turn up in the morning with beer on your breath. They'll have a little smile to themselves because they know that you're there and as long as you don't tell them they'll add an extra 4K on the outing to make you really sweat and as long as you do it and don't complain they're like, well that's fine. In the middle of winter and times like that a good coach would expect you to be able to live life a bit, as long you're still doing what needs to be done and its not damaging you. Mentally it just keeps you very fresh." (Giles)

While athletes recognised that being an elite athlete necessarily involved some sacrifices, they also felt that, from time to time, athletes should be allowed to "be human", have fun, and relax so long as this did not adversely affect training or performance. Experienced athletes believed that, in the long term, a degree of balance is desirable in life and that this was something that they strove to attain and maintain. For some athletes, the need to maintain a balanced life was more important than continuing their sport career:

> "My wife had always been utterly supportive but you know my daughter spoke the things we dare not speak. She said, you know, 'Actually daddy, I don't like you going off playing sport all the time' as I disappeared out the door after coming in a minute before. And that was the right time to stop. No regrets." (Christopher)

Core lifestyle values



4.3 LIFESTYLE AND PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT CONTEXTS

4.3.1 Education

For most athletes, their participation in sport at school had not been directly linked to their subsequent sport career. Instead, school sport had provided a general introduction to sport which was usually perceived as beneficial:

> "Every school I went to I played a lot of sport. It was just it was either football or rugby or athletics. So I think those sort of things get you involved and interested in sports. I can't say that school sport was irrelevant at all – just irrelevant as far as my particular sport is concerned." (James)

Typically, as discussed in section 4.1, family involvement and chance events were instrumental in young athletes' subsequent progression:

> "From my perspective school gave me the opportunity to try different things but it didn't provide any links to take me any further. That was driven by my parents. They were the ones who got me involved in sport clubs. The way that I feel, looking back and through some of the school's I've visited, there doesn't seem to be a particularly good link from school to the transfer into the clubs. That only happened to me because of my parents not because of any kind of linkages between the schools and local provision." (Carl)

> "My PE teacher she played for a local club and she suggested that I went up to the club … I played in the third or second team and then just progressed. I think a lot of it was cause I was available as well like you know and I just took some opportunities where they went can you play in this game and I was, 'Oh yeah, OK' and I was only 13, 14 and then I progressed to the first team by age of 14, 15." (Jane)

Some of the younger athletes described how links between their school and a local club had been instrumental in leading them into their sport. These kinds of initiatives are likely to be particularly important in recruiting young people to sports which are typically not taught as part of the physical education curriculum (e.g., rowing, sailing, canoeing, judo).

> "There was a scheme that ran between my school and a club where they just came to an assembly and they had people on the machines and were talking about the sport and said just come and try out. So probably about 30 of us went and then people just either left or stayed. And I stayed." (Amanda)

For those athletes who were involved in elite sport while still at school there was a strong feeling that the demands of school or sixth form college conflicted with the demands of their sport. A key issue concerns the requirement for school students to *be there* all day and every day while at school:

> "I think definitely, especially at school, you've got to be there. It's not like university where you've got a lecture every now and again. You've got to be there all day. And then I finished school, go straight to training, leave training probably eight o'clock, get home and just eat food and go to bed 'cause I didn't have any energy to do homework and that would suffer. It's hard. They always say – you hear coaches always saying – that an elite athlete should thrive in both their sport … and the other aspects really well. And I'm not quite sure how they manage it to be honest. You don't have the time. If you do the training right you don't have the time or the energy to finish off the homework and then you get stressed about that and then the stress will affect your performance." (Edward)

> "I definitely think sport in the A-level year is just the worst. Being an elite athlete at the age of A-level years is just horrendous … A-levels are hard anyway whatever and then also you're just starting off in your sport so you are so focused wanting to be the elite sports person that it does – it distracted me from my A-levels definitely." (Jane)

An inevitable consequence of athletes' perception that there is not enough time to fit in school, sport, and other aspects of life is some kind of sacrifice in one or more areas. The young elite athletes in this research consistently prioritised their sport first – over and above other aspects of their lives:

> "I often chose not to do the homework and go out so you know it's whatever you prioritise at the time and for me it was sport then social then education. So obviously education suffered." (Jane)

> "Sport comes first and I just get as much homework done as I can." (Edward)

Athletes found that university education fitted much better with the demands of their sport than school education. Flexibility and autonomy over working hours and sometimes a low number of lecture hours per week allowed most athletes an opportunity to work training and competition into their study commitments:

> "I thought school was hard. University's a lot easier. 'Cause my timetable's quite spread out I can go to all my lectures. I have seven lectures a week so I have free mornings, pretty much free afternoons and free nights so I can train, relax or whatever. But when I was at school my attendance in my last year was something like 60% cause I was always away – I'd have training camp or something so I'd need Friday off or I'd go to the physio because I was injured or whatever." (Amanda)

> "I could go to the gym at my uni between lectures I had two hours, I could go to the gym, and then my university was about ten minutes from my club so for me it all kind of fell into place." (Marlene)

> "When I was an undergraduate I lived at home so that I could train at my same club. So when I had two hours between lectures I'd be in the gym and things like that. So my training timetable was completely my control to make sure everything would fit in." (Jill)

Competitions which involved prolonged travel sometimes posed more of a problem for athletes who were studying full-time. This was a particular issue when important and unchangeable university events (such as exams) clashed with important competition. At these times, there was the threat that athlete's prioritising of sport over education might have serious consequences for their studies and qualification. However, the athletes in this research described how, in their experience, universities had generally been flexible in allowing exams or deadlines to be rescheduled:

> "The university were really good about me being away in exam periods and allow me to sit them at other times and that really helped because if they had said no to that then I really don't know what I would have done." (Jane)

> "I missed my exams when I was in Australia so I just did them when everyone did their re-sits. My uni was really supportive … My friends at other universities were being told if you don't sit those exams that's a fail. Because they weren't sports students and it was almost like 'If you aren't in the sports department then why are you doing sport?' Yet at my university I wasn't in the sports department but I was made to feel really special because I was achieving and they would do anything to help me out." (Jill)

Athletes' prioritising of sport over education is an interesting issue and there were mixed feelings among the participants over the wisdom of putting their sport career first. All the participants who had attended (or were attending) university were doing so to gain an education rather that to enhance their sport career:

> "(I went to university) for my education. I wanted to study languages. I wanted to study law. I did have other interests outside of my sport and that was the best place (to go)." (Marlene)

Despite valuing education, athletes typically still prioritised sport over education as the following remark indicates:

> "While I was at university … everything had to fit around sport. It wasn't ever anything other than that." (Jill)

It is clear from the participants' experiences that gaining an education while being an elite athlete is no easy task. Once again, the concept of *balance* comes to the fore in two respects. First, athletes in education necessarily have to balance the demands of education and sport. In doing so, it is not unusual for considerable compromises to be made in either or both areas. Typically, it seems, young athletes would prefer to risk compromising their education before the requirements of their sport. Second, despite sometimes difficult circumstances and demands, athletes' belief in the importance of *balance in life* serves as a strong motivator to encourage athletes to persevere with their education. Finding a workable balance between education and sport allows

athletes both a degree of personal control over their present lifestyle as well as greater choice in terms of their future career path:

> "Education was very important to me… I didn't want to be beholden to sport because sometimes the people you get mixed up with in sport at a management level are just the worst people on earth. They're bad managers, poor communicators … I'm talking about performance managers, team managers, performance directors. Sport is littered with them. One of the things that has been great when I've been on the team is I've just thought if I want to I can just quit this now and I can go out and I can get a job earning the same amount of money and my life, where I live, isn't in danger. There are a lot of people on the sports teams now where they haven't got a further or higher education and you do kind of look at them and think what are you going to do if you don't do sport? Literally what are you going to do?" (Rupert)

4.3.2 Employment

Among professional athletes for whom their job is their sport there was no evidence of any tensions between sport performance and employment. Among non-professional athletes, there were mixed feelings over the possibility of maintaining employment alongside their sport careers.

As discussed in section 4.2.5, there was a feeling among some non-professional athletes that being in employment provided an element of balance within their life. For these athletes, employment provides three benefits. First, athletes believed that being in employment creates better prospects for the future after their sport career ends. Second, income through work provides financial autonomy and independence from funding agencies, governing bodies, or parents. Third, work serves as another dimension of daily life which can improve sport performance because it brings relief from the demands of high performance sport. This relief can improve both work and sport performance because the individual returns to each activity mentally invigorated and therefore able to give more to each aspect of their life. A sense of escape or distraction was common for athletes who worked in jobs which required their full attention, focus and application. One athlete described his experiences:

> "I enjoyed having the let out of my work and I enjoyed having the let out of rugby. On their own each one could become too pressurised and too introspective. There were guys whose careers were just so out of proportion and they just couldn't sleep at night because of what the boss was going to say to them tomorrow. And similarly in sport you can get so tied in and worried where the next performance is going to come from, what the fans think, what the press think. And actually, to go to work and realise that rugby is just a sport, and to go to sport and realise that my work is more important – that got me through jobs in a way that I would have found difficult." (Christopher)

One track and field athlete, retrospectively at least, believed that being in employment had no adverse effects on her sport career:

> "I never had any money and I worked part-time for a while and then I got to a stage in my life where I thought I can't afford to let sport ruin my outside life so I had a full time job. And to be honest when I had a full time job it was fine. I had my best few years." (Ruth)

However, among non-professional athletes the more dominant view was that it is impossible to hold down full-time employment while fulfilling the demands of elite sport:

> "My employers liked the sound of doing well at the world championships … so they were quite excited I was doing something else so they gave me some money, sponsorship. But although they made noises about giving me time to do things and being flexible that didn't actually work because what they said was you palm your work off on other people. You can't do that – you can't rely on other colleagues to do your work. So I just ended up doing all the normal hours and I made myself ill." (Janet)

Among those athletes who did not feel able to maintain full-time employment alongside their sport careers several ways of coping financially were described: working part-time, relying on unemployment benefit, relying on sport-related funding, relying on parents. It was not unusual for athletes to seek out ways of living more cheaply (e.g. living with friends or family) in order to devote their time to sport.

One athlete suggested that it was possible, with careful planning and time management, to engage in flexible part-time without sport performance being affected. In response to our question of whether returning to work had affected his sport he said:

> "Well, no. It had a detrimental affect at first because I'd been a full-time athlete for so long that I'd forgotten what it was like to really have to juggle your life around and stuff like that but once I kind of pinned it down it doesn't really have any affect at all." (Rupert)

A characteristic of this particular athlete's line of work was flexibility – he was in control of when and how much he worked on a week by week basis. Given the demands of elite sport, it is likely that work of any kind, employment or self-employment, should ideally allow athletes flexibility in order to accommodate seasonal variations in training, competition, and travel. For employment to fit within athletes' lives some degree of awareness and flexibility on the part of employers (and communication on the part of the athlete) is necessary:

> "It ended up that my employers were so supportive. I couldn't have asked for anything better. 'Cause they knew my background. I came into it and they knew my dad, they knew what I'd done in the past. So it carried a lot of weight with them when I came in and said 'I've got a physio appointment.' They'd say 'OK. Get in when you

> can.' When I was going away to Belgium: 'OK. That's fine. See you in a week.' I found all the time along the way that as long as | communicated with people that they'd happily sort it out for me." (Jill)

There was some discussion during the focus groups of possible problems with athletes being "placed" in employment. Once again, the issue of ownership and control seems to be important here. While it may be easier for an athlete to have a job arranged for him or her, this may not be the best scenario for either the employer or the athlete in the long term:

> "People say find me a job and I'll do one. I was there. I had to get a job I needed more money. I had just got married needed a mortgage and stuff so I went around knocking on doors. I saw a nameplate for business consultant, thought 'business consultant – what's that?' I knocked on the door said can you speak to me a few minutes about what you do? He said 'yeah' and I said 'what does a business consultant do?' I went round and thought about it and phoned him up again, and I said 'have you got a job?' And he took me on. And I spoke to him a little afterwards … and said what would have happened if somebody had phoned you up and on my behalf and said we've got this athlete on our books who has an interest would you give him some work? 'No, I would have turned him down straight away.' He said 'You came in here, you had the balls to come in here off the street, take the time to find out about it – I knew you were the sort of person … would actually do the work and do a good job.'" (Giles)

4.3.3 Funding

The provision of funding for athletes in non-professional sports was considered by most athletes as essential if they were to achieve peak performance. Similar beliefs were evident among athletes from professional sports – the primary difference being the source of funding. A key benefit of funding (or being a professional) was to free up sufficient time for athletes to train and prepare thoroughly by removing the need for them to work outside sport.

Younger athletes communicated a sense that it would be impossible to *be* an elite athlete without funding – that elite athletes are therefore deserving of financial support. Older athletes from non-professional sports who *had been* full-time athletes without funding valued and were more obviously appreciative of the broad range of benefits funding brings (e.g. covering living expenses, freeing time, travel, facilitating optimum preparation):

> "I bridged the gap from being an athlete who had to be on the dole to being an athlete who had lottery funding and so there was a world of difference. Before that I was someone who was trying to do part-time stuff and then as a full-time athlete I had to go on the dole otherwise I couldn't train properly which was depressing. Having to lie about the fact when I went to sign on about trying to find work when I was going to sign on 'cause if I didn't lie I'd lose my £26 a week or whatever it was

> … it devalued the whole thing about representing your country – totally. The financial support allowed me to train to the best of my ability … Certainly before lottery funding you were, definitely, you were totally on your own, totally and utterly on your own … it was family support or just putting yourself out and going you know on the dole or whatever it was." (Carl)

> "We compete against other counties that are funded very well and a lot of them are funded full time … and they get supported really well. Now that our lottery funding is gone we're climbing up a ladder with no steps on it." (Jane)

> "My trainer in Birmingham was about to move and I could not have gone with him if I had not just got my lottery funding. It enabled me to stay with my coach, pay a rent instead of sleep in – well I wouldn't call it a squat – not in great accommodation. It didn't change my passion, but it did enable me to do what I was doing better." (Carl)

In addition to allowing athletes time to train and compete, funding also provides the possibility of obtaining the best support in terms of technical support, nutrition, rest and recovery, and treatment:

> "I was lucky enough to get sponsored by a physio before lottery money came onboard. Then when lottery money came on board I went with EIS. It made a huge difference – well it extended my career massively. If I hadn't been sponsored by my physio I'd have had to retire in 1995 … I had a hip injury which the NHS physio just insisted on frictioning all the time to help it recover which all it did was just exacerbate the situation. I had months and months off and then in the end I got to see this private physio and he said 'It's your back.' He fixed my back and I went back to training the same day." (Carl)

Despite the benefits of funding, several older athletes expressed concern that funding at times became something of "a double edged sword":

> "We're definitely more successful as a team now we have funding because it allows us to put a better preparation, have better training, be exposed to high level competition more frequently … But the attitude of some athletes who expect it is not necessarily a good thing." (Julie)

> "I think there is an issue now within British sport with how the lottery's been set up. My perception is that some of the passion and pride has been removed and it's become more like a job to some people." (Carl)

Resolving or balancing the tensions between intrinsic motives and values such as pride, passion, and love of one's sport with extrinsic motives such as financial rewards is likely to be a subjective and personal task. However, some experienced athletes suggested that they benefited from *not* having sufficient funding available during the early days of their careers. There was generally a perception among these participants that a degree of financial hardship during their early careers provided "fuel" that helped them reach the top in their sport:

> "I had to find work because I didn't have enough money at the time so I had to find a way of supporting myself before I could think of actually starting training and it was a really difficult year. I took out some loans, I worked in a few pubs, I worked for some landscape gardeners. It helped me perform – at that time it didn't stop me it actually helped me because, OK, it wasn't necessarily the best environment to get the absolutely the most out of me physiologically, but the hunger that it gave me just absolutely completely made up for all of that and made up some more besides." (Giles)

> "I think for me, I seemed to get funded quite early on, got some amount. It was never enough that I could think 'Ah! This is the life!' or be comfortable. But I did see that with some people I was with at 16, 17 when the lottery was first on they'd receive massive payouts straight away because they'd won the Youth Olympics or something. Then two years down the line they're finished in the sport. Where I was never quite like at that level I always had to work that little bit harder and I didn't get as much. But I'm the only one who's still in it and most of them have dropped out." (Sally)

No participant believed that financial hardship should be deliberately created in order to improve performance – as identified above, the absence of funding creates considerable barriers to achieving optimum performance. It does appear, however, that some kind of balance needs to be found between the opposing implications of funding: On the one hand, funding clearly provides access to resources or expertise which enhances performance. On the other hand, funding removes certain hardships which act as a necessary and valued "test" of commitment and motivation – an unspoken "training ground" for the demands of elite sport.

A further problem voiced by some more experienced athletes concerning funding was the loss of ownership and control of one's career which participants believed can accompany receiving lottery funding:

> I was an athlete in '96 before there was any money – there was a tiny bit of money to pay for our expenses. I remember sitting down and working it out – I sat down and I wrote it down: Food – I need food can't reduce any of that. Car – well I need my car to get to training. What's the other big outlet? Rent. So I never paid any rent … It was only one night in that Olympic year that I didn't actually have somewhere to stay … one night I slept on the physio couch. But I got ill. If you're living out the back of your car, in other people's rooms and houses, you're going to get ill. It was not ideal … but because I had ownership I could make those decisions. There was no money. I was fully in control of all the decisions I made. If I didn't want to go somewhere I could quite easily turn around and say to the performance director 'Can't afford it. I'm not going. Sorry.' And I would use that as an excuse because it wasn't in my interests. Now it's a totally different kettle of fish if you don't jump when they say jump." (Beth)

As discussed in section 4.2.1, athletes believe that loss of ownership and control has a significant impact on performance. As the excerpt above suggests, athletes told how, at certain times in their career, funding was used

as leverage to direct or force an athlete into courses of action which they would not have otherwise taken. In this way, funding can be a way by which ownership and control is wrested away from individual athletes. One athlete told of his experience of being "forced" to work with a different coach in order to retain his funding:

> "I actually got made to move coaches. They said if you don't do what we say your funding will get cut. You'll get nothing … They actually forced me into the move." (Robin)

Perhaps the real question is not so much 'Should funding be provided?' but rather 'How should funding be administered?' Athletes' experiences suggest that some degree of financial support is necessary if elite athletes are to achieve optimum performance. However, it is clear that, at times, the way funding is administered can have adverse effects on athlete well-being, motivation, and performance. Thought needs to be given to several key issues:

(i) At what age should athletes begin to receive funding?

(ii) What level of funding is appropriate at different career stages?

(iii) What conditions are attached to funding?

One retired athlete offered some thoughts on how this difficult balance might be achieved:

> "How do you get the hardship *and* the support? I think there are two things. The journey to the edge of the team, that journey needs to have ownership but it needs to be hard. That guy living out of the bag – that actually might be one of the best things for him. It means more to him than the guy whose been put up been put up in the fancy hotel. If you give up everything in your life to get to the edge of the team, I hate to say it, but you're probably only ever going to get to the edge of the team. But if you can get to the edge of the team and hold down a part-time job, when you go full-time you'll probably move into the medal zone. There's too many people who are just around the edge of the team who are training full-time to get there and they never actually, they're not going to move into that last zone." (Beth)

On the basis of this research, it appears that there are drawbacks to providing too much funding too early in an athlete's career. Experienced athletes believed that successfully coming through a degree of financial hardship had provided strength and resilience which ultimately helped their performance and career. Further, participants' accounts suggest that when funding is used as a lever to control athletes' behaviours or the conditions attached to funding (obligations, responsibilities, criteria) remove autonomy there is a real risk that performance and athlete well-being will be compromised.

Based on participants' experiences, we make two suggestions:

(i) Any funding for young athletes should be administered in such a way that financial support is seen as a facilitator of progression. Athletes should be encouraged to see financial support as a tool in the service of achievement, progression and improvement rather than an end in itself.

(ii) Some degree of perceived ownership and control must remain with the individual athlete. Given that funding agencies may require certain commitments from athletes, negotiation and communication between funding administrators and athletes should be encouraged in order to find working arrangements that enable individual athletes to retain control over those areas of their lives which that individual believes are important.

4.3.4 Communication

Communication styles and practices between the performance team (performance directors, coaches, managers, selectors, etc.) and individual athletes were a major topic of discussion throughout the research. Many athletes had strong feelings, based upon their own experience, about various facets of communication. It was clear from the views participants expressed that communication could be both a source of problems as well as a potential solution to problems.

Athletes often held the view that good communication can help prevent or minimise problems and difficulties. A key factor in this is the provision of *information* to athletes. Good communication practice allows athletes to be informed of the reasons behind decisions and be involved in decision making processes. This, according to the participants, can improve athletes' perceptions of ownership and control as they are less likely to feel that control of their lives and careers is being taken away:

> "The two things that I felt really hard done by and had to work through and they were both things – one was completely out of my control, it was an injury – but the other one something could have been done about it. Just an explanation would have done." (Jill)

> "You can have lottery funding that's fine – there's no reason why it can't work. But it's the style and the way that it is carried out that creates a sort of 'stick' environment. And it doesn't need to be like that at all. The way it's communicated can change it from a 'stick' to a 'honey pot'." (Beth)

> "The other thing, that ownership thing, that's absolutely, absolutely the most important vital thing that has been totally lost because of lottery funding. I speak now to athletes constantly and say 'What's the problem?' 'Well this is the problem. We've been told to do this and told to do this, we can't do this.' I go to speak to the

> performance directors and the people who are organising and a lot of the time what they've put in place with the resources and funding, they've got a good system that's workable. But they're not communicating it to the athletes in the right way. They are going to the athletes and saying 'You must do this, this and this. You must be here, you must be here, you must be here or else.' And it happens in almost every single sport and it would be the easiest thing in the world for them to sit down with the athletes at the beginning and say 'Right. This is the situation. This is the money we've got. We need to find the best way of spending it. We think this is the best use of resources doing this and we think to do that really we need to train here and we need to do this and we need to this. What do you think?' Most of the time people will look at it and go, 'Yeah. I can see that's the best way.' And once you've got people saying that then people say 'OK. This is a sacrifice or this is awkward but I see why this has to happen.'" (Giles)

A critical factor in whether or not athletes perceived a specific communication practice to be effective, positive, and desirable concerned the extent of their *inclusion* in the communication process. When athletes were solely or primarily on the receiving end of information during the communication process, negative effects to performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being were common. When athletes were *involved* in the communication process performance, motivation, ownership, and well-being all tended to improve. The following excerpts addressing the contexts of selection and strategic planning are indicative of this:

> "We used to get notes underneath our doors telling you what the team was … They'd brings us together for this team meeting and they'd say 'You've all trained well blah blah blah' and then we'd say 'Right. When are we going to find out the team?' and they'd say 'We'll let you know' … What wound us up even more was you'd have the head of coaching who hadn't even seen me train just having feedback from other people making the overall decision, sitting back. And so you'd just wait to see if a piece of paper came underneath the door and it had 'Yes, you're in the team.' And that was it. And it was only about three years ago a younger coach talked to you and said 'How do you think it should go?' and we went along and did the second fastest time by a British team. Since then they've gone backwards." (Ruth)

> "In the Olympics we had one of the best coaches for organisation but he had the worst people skills of anybody I have ever known in my life. He completely refused to countenance the suggestion that we were a team which he was a part of and we were all in this together … It was he was the coach and he told us what to do. And right from the off we were wanting to discuss with him, we were wanting him to explain his decisions to us … and he'd say 'It's just because I think that's best.' There was no reason for it. It immediately takes away the trust of the athletes." (Giles)

Many participants voiced a need for transparent two-way communication between athletes and members of the performance team. The responsibility for two-way communication this lies with both coaches and athletes if misunderstandings are to be avoided:

> "I don't know whether talking to coaches and being really close to them is a good thing or a bad thing. I've had experiences with coaches where I haven't spoken to them at all and it's been a really good thing. I haven't gone up to them and harassed them about my selection or why I'm not playing and that's sort of been noted by them and they in turn think 'Yeah, he gets on with it, he's not worried about it, it's good we don't need to worry about him too much.' But then I've had coaches who where I've done the same, I haven't spoken to them because I thought that was the way forward, not hassled them or not moaned at all or got on their backs, and when I have done it they're like 'Well you never come to see me, you never speak to me about it – I don't think you're bothered." (Jeremy)

In addition to athletes themselves benefiting from open communication channels, there was a suspicion that the performance team may also benefit from this change through the more open and honest provision of feedback. This perspective was particularly prevalent among older, more experienced athletes. Greater involvement in decision making processes is, perhaps, a particular need of established athletes and something that, by virtue of their experience, they could profitably contribute. As one retired athlete put it:

> "It boils down to communication. So if you split it into two sides, which is the athlete and their management, communication flow tends to only go one way. I mean we get told what to do, we have to know how to receive feedback, we've got to take it, swallow it, and get on with what you're doing. But it doesn't go the other direction. It's very difficult for an athlete to say to their team manager 'If you want some feedback, actually we didn't handle this very well and maybe it should be structured differently' … I think personally as an athlete it wasn't until I was getting into my 20's when I really began to understand what was right for me. Now we've got quite a few people a lot younger than that so to a certain degree they do need to be told what is best practice – but it's how it is delivered." (Carl)

4.3.5 Other lifestyle and performance environment issues

Two further lifestyle and performance environment issues of note arose during the research: (i) the relative role in sport performance of science/technology versus flair/creativity; and (ii) talent identification and development of young athletes. These issues were raised by retired athletes who continue to be involved with and care passionately about the development of elite sport in the UK and the well-being of young athletes and sports people in general.

While athletes generally appreciated and valued the contribution scientific knowledge and technological innovation to sport performance, some questioned whether the reliance on science and technology had gone too far. Implicated in this was a concern that the elimination of flair, creativity, and individuality from elite sport would adversely affect performance in the long term:

> "(The current coach) has got very good strengths, very technical, he's got everything on his laptop. But then that overtakes sport which is not science. You tend to get the impression that (if) there's a certain problem, well, the solutions on page 63. That's how you get the impression with a technology influence within sport – which is fantastic, I'm not poo-pooing it – but ticking boxes doesn't solve all the problems." (James)

> "Just now I'm looking back at all those people, all the antiestablishment crowd, and they're the ones with all the flair, they're the ones who know how to make things work, they're the ones who know how to train, they're the ones who have that thing that you don't get from ticking all the boxes and doing all the coaching courses. You know, we're not tapping into that at all." (Janet)

Several participants also voiced their concern that contemporary talent identification schemes and the tendency to encourage young athletes to specialise at younger and younger ages did not always have positive effects. Several of the older athletes believed that they specialised quite late in life (typically late teens or early twenties) and, in rowing in particular, some did not even try their sport until their twenties. Several athletes felt that they would not have remained in their sport so long had they specialised at a young age:

> "I revel in the fact that I was a late starter – I mean I might have been involved in it but I didn't make the international team until I was 19 and relatively in athletics that's quite late … If you look back at the record tables and the ranking tables of the juniors at my time 50 or 60% of the athletes are either injured or they've just had enough of the sport because they were in it so competitively at a young age that they just didn't want to do it." (Ruth)

Another athlete voiced the concern that early specialisation and dedication to sport may not be a good thing in terms of the well-being and overall development of a young person:

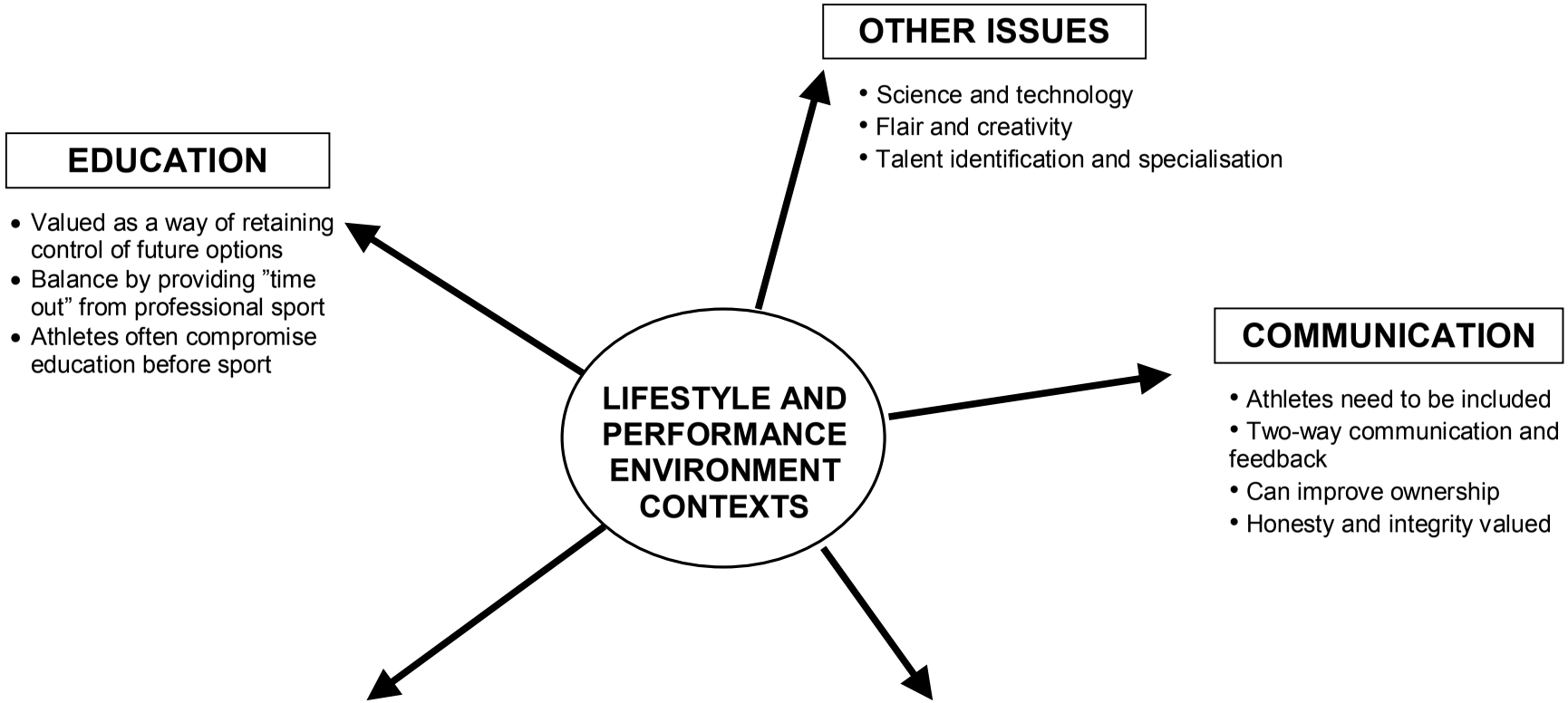
> "There are so many schemes to identify talent, to give them the best training programmes, say this is what you need to do to succeed, you've got to move here, you've got to do this. And they completely forget that people still have to live their life. You get the situations where young people are moving to an area probably not with enough money to survive. A lot of the time because they're young they're moving straight out of home, they haven't been to university, they haven't learned to fend for themselves, they're not independent, they can't look after themselves. A lot of them can't even go to Tesco's and shop … We are creating this system and what is happening is these people who are potentially very good are coming and immediately performing worse because they're upset, they're lonely, because they haven't got their family or parents around them and they haven't been able to develop a network of friends around them." (Giles)

Particularly when it comes to young and impressionable athletes we might wish to consider the relative importance of family, education, long-term personal development, and sport performance. Arguably, our sporting culture tends to celebrate those who are able to endure difficulties and make personal sacrifices

in order to achieve success. While this may be admirable at times, there is an associated risk of foisting the sole responsibility for coping onto the individual. While young athletes may not feel a need to develop and maintain a support structure around them and may believe that they are able to cope alone, this will not always be the case. The experiences of older athletes suggest that support of this kind is important and should be provided for young athletes. One retired athlete reflected that sports people are not always as resilient as they might like to believe:

> "It's just a view point from some one who's just finished as opposed to when you're in the middle of it you think 'Oh sod it,' you think you're bullet proof, you're invincible. And now I've found myself not as bullet proof as I thought I was." (James)

Lifestyle and performance environment contexts



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