

Active Athletes Perceptions of Career and Education Services in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study examined perceptions of career and education services among a sample of active athletes in the United Kingdom. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, athletes eligible to receive support services through the United Kingdom Athlete Career and Education Program (ACE UK) were assessed in terms of their views of athlete advisers and ACE UK services. Results revealed that athletes perceived advisers as central to their career and education service provision, and that this accounted predominantly for its success. The adviser's role as a friend, mentor, and motivator was found to be as significant as the adviser being a source of information and advice, as well as a conduit to other more specialized services. Although a large proportion of athletes were aware of and were using ACE UK services, the reasons for not participating included a lack of perceived need, lack of awareness, athletes' time constraints, and access difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in the career and education needs of elite athletes in recent years. An international special interest group has been developed in association with the European Federation of Sport Psychology to exchange information on applied and investigative work in the area (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). At the practical level, there have also been several attempts by governing bodies and sports institutes to promote the development of athletes – beyond sporting or 'performance' concerns - by providing career, education, and other 'lifestyle' support services (Anderson & Morris, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). The Olympic Athlete Career Centre in Canada, for example, designed one of the first programs in 1985 to assist elite-level athletes prepare for retirement (Olympic Athlete Career Centre, 1991). The United States Olympic Committee later initiated the Career Assistance Program for Athletes in 1988 to provide support to retiring athletes during the career transition process (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvin, & Murphy, 1992).

Since 1991, the Olympic Job Opportunities Program has assisted Olympic-calibre athletes in Australia, South Africa and the United States who are committed to developing a professional career as well as achieving their sport-related goals (Olympic Job Opportunities Program, 1996). The Athlete Career and Education (ACE) Program has also been developed to provide career transition services for Australia's elite athletes (Anderson & Morris, 2000), and the United Kingdom Sports Institute has also developed its own version of the ACE Program, entitled the ACE UK Program.

The ACE UK Program

The ACE UK program was established in 1999 to provide elite athletes with career, education and personal development guidance. The program is based on the notion that athletes with a balanced lifestyle are more likely to achieve their sporting goals, cope better with problems such as injury and retirement and have more confidence in their future after sport (UK Sport, 1999). It is currently provided as just one of a number of specific athlete services through the United Kingdom Sports Institute. ACE UK shares many common elements with other career and education programs highlighted above (Anderson & Morris, 2000). Service provision is coordinated through an 'athlete adviser' - ACE UK athlete advisers are typically ex-athletes who have received training in the provision of career and education services, but primarily have been recruited because of their understanding of the needs of elite athletes. The athlete adviser establishes contact with the athlete and begins service provision with an Individual Athlete Assessment, which is used to determine each athlete's educational, career and personal development needs through an Athlete Action Plan. Athletes may then access any of following program elements depending upon their circumstance and needs: (1) Personal Development Courses (i.e., training and development workshops) covering topics such as personal finance planning, media training, and job seeking skills; (2) Education Guidance advice and support concerning access to education at all levels; (3) Career Planning advice and support on career options, planning and job suitability; (4) Transition Support advice and support for athletes undergoing personal and sporting changes such as coping with injury and retirement from sport; and (5) Olympic and Paralympic Employment Network (OPEN) offers to match athletes with meaningful career paths and flexible working arrangements.

This paper presents research extracted from a wider study looking at UK athletes' lifestyles (i.e., their balance between sport, education, work, and leisure) as well as their experiences of, and views on, the ACE UK program (UK Sport, 2001a). This paper focuses, in particular, on athletes' use and perceptions of the ACE UK program in the context of a rapidly changing sporting environment. These changes have largely been stimulated by the UK government's decision to channel an extra estimated £50 million a year (US\$71) into elite sport from 1996 as a result of extra revenues gained through the introduction of national lottery in the UK in 1994. This new funding was used in two ways to support elite athletes: (1) to provide athletes with a 'contributory' grant such that they could, in theory, increase the amount of time they spent training and competing in their sport; and (2) to increase the range and quality of athlete services including coaching, sports science and medicine, training

centers and facilities, and, ACE UK (UK Sport, 2001b). These changes, however, as will be discussed later appear to have freed athletes to focus more on sport, but also brought their own pressures which, it is argued, changed the pattern of consumption of lifestyle services in a manner not yet identified in the athlete career and education literature.

One notable feature of the many evaluations that have looked at athlete experiences of, and views on, elite athlete support programs is that athletes tend to report favorably on the performance enhancing services, but less favorably about the lifestyle services (BMRB, 2000; Gorely et al., 2001). For example, a BMRB (2000) study of the Lottery-funded elite athlete support system in the UK, the World Class Performance Program, suggests that between two-thirds and four-fifths (64%-77%) of athletes reported coaching, sports medicine, sports science, training and competition support were 'excellent' or 'good'; whereas, just under a half (46%) said the same about lifestyle services. This result has been repeated in similar work conducted by UK Sport when evaluating its Lottery-funded programs (e.g., North, 2000). This may indicate quality concerns about lifestyle service provision; however, it is our view that this more likely relates to the notion that athletes focus on sporting concerns above all others and that wider lifestyle development is less of an issue until after retirement from sport (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993).

METHOD

The research focused on those athletes who were currently 'active' on the ACE UK program database, that is, they were either eligible for, or in receipt of, ACE UK services. All, or a vast majority, of these athletes were currently training and competing at the elite level, and a large proportion were deemed to have sufficient potential to receive targeted elite funding support. In this sense, the research presented here offers a different perspective. Despite the growth of career and education programs for athletes, there exists a lack of research among athletes during their competitive careers (Gordon, 1995; Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Based on a review of an annotated bibliography, all of the previous research studies focused only on athletes following their retirement from sport (Lavallee, Wylleman, & Sinclair, 2000).

This research utilized a two-stage methodology. Stage one was qualitative in nature and involved nine face-to-face interviews with athletes drawn from the ACE UK program database. These interviews were used to develop a grounded understanding of the language used and the key issues experienced by the athletes. Stage two was a self-administered postal survey. The aim of this stage was to examine the extent to which the issues and themes generated in the first stage were shared by the wider ACE UK athlete population.

The questionnaire employed in stage two was four pages long and consisted primarily of closed questions focusing on topics developed by examining the key issues emerging from the first stage transcripts. These included athletes' education and career profiles, short term plans, long-term plans related to retirement from competitive sport (including expected years until career termination), and plans about life after sport. Some open-ended questions were also included to allow the athletes to expand on their experiences of, and opinions on, the ACE UK program.

Sample

All 988 athletes eligible to receive ACE UK services in June 2000 (excluding the nine athletes who participated in stage one) were sent the survey questionnaire, an introductory letter, and a reply paid envelope for questionnaire return. The introductory letter explained the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality and anonymity.

A total of 561 valid and completed questionnaires were returned by the athletes (response rate = 57%). There were slightly more males (54%) than females (46%) in the sample, and more able-bodied athletes (83%) than athletes with disabilities (17%). The average age of the overall sample was 26.0 years old. A total of 37 individual and team sports were represented. In the individual sports, 20% of athletes reported that their current performance levels were in the World top 3, 24% in the World top 10, and only 9% suggested they were outside the World top 100. In the team sports, 29% reported that their team's current performance levels were in the World top 3, 46% in the World top 10, and only 8% suggested they were outside the World top 20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The current research focused on career, education and lifestyle issues and this, it may be argued, appears to have focused the minds of the respondents to a greater extent on these wider issues such that not only were they very positive about the lifestyle services they received, but much more critical of the demands and pressures of what might be termed the 'performance environment'. The results suggest, for example, that the athletes had a very positive view of the services provided through the ACE UK program. This was illustrated particularly in relation to the activities of the athlete advisers, but also some of the more specific ACE UK services. On being asked their overall opinions on the ACE UK program, three-fifths of all athletes sampled were positive about ACE UK (including 30% who were very positive), and only 2% were negative. More importantly, those segments that had used ACE UK were very positive about the program. For example, the highest user segment – those athletes who had an Individual Athlete Assessment, developed an Action Plan and used one of the specific ACE UK services – were virtually unanimous in their praise of the program (94 % were positive, including 65% who were very positive, and none were negative).

Explaining the quality of the ACE UK program requires a different slant to that proffered in the existing literature on athlete career, education, and lifestyle services. In particular, it concerns the role of those individuals responsible for coordinating and in some cases delivering these services, for example, in relation to ACE UK. These individuals are the athlete advisers. Previously, the literature (e.g., Gorely et al., 2001) has tended to depict these individuals as one-dimensional conduits between the athletes and a range of specific services (e.g., career advice, education guidance). There appears to be little discussion of the dynamic between the athlete, athlete adviser, service provision and how this benefits (or otherwise) the athletes. This research addresses this weakness by taking a more detailed look at the athlete – athlete adviser relationship and, indeed, the results illustrate how central this relationship is to the success of the ACE UK program.

ACE UK Athletic Advisers

The research suggests that the athletes were particularly impressed with the services offered by the athlete advisers. These positive impressions, however, were based on more than the simple notion of the adviser as a conduit to more specialized career and education advice and support. Specifically, the athletes appeared to value the athlete advisers on a more personal level, as a source of 'friendship, mentorship and motivation'. This result was underpinned by both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

For example, as outlined in Table 1, the research collected information on seven adviser characteristics: 'friendliness', 'communication', 'confidentiality', 'sensitivity', 'knowledge', 'reliability', and 'flexibility'. The results suggest that athletes were particularly impressed with the advisers' friendliness (very satisfied - 84%), communication (very satisfied - 73%), confidentiality (very satisfied - 73%), and sensitivity (very satisfied - 67%) – all characteristics that could be said to be implicit in good and personalized relationships. The qualitative evidence provides greater insight into the content of the relationship and the motivations involved:

"I think [the ACE UK adviser] is somebody different to talk to but who understands and is interested in your life and what you do. I think I would never want to be an ACE UK adviser, I think that it has got to be the worst job out because you listen to everyone's life and times and what their cat did yesterday and all of that. [They also provide] guidance and information and even if it is information that isn't from ACE UK they can point you in the right direction and tell you who to talk to and give you encouragement and motivation to take responsibility for yourself."

"I have been having a lot of contact with my ACE UK adviser recently and s/he's like a social worker. Originally [I thought ACE UK would] help me with my career and life after sport, but it has been brilliant [because] when I come back from really horrible training session [there is someone there to help] ... [ACE UK] is an outside agency, it is somebody who does not know anything about [the particular issues in] my sport – this is great because I can sound off when I like it and I know it is not going to go any further. It is confidential but I know that if there was anything that my ACE UK adviser could do to help, then s/he would. It is like having, not a psychologist, but just somebody there. Personality wise we get on very well. I think the personal interaction and the fact that you can get them pretty much any time [is very positive]."

"My relationship with [my adviser] is not a teacher-pupil relationship where s/he's giving me advice and I'm just sitting here absorbing it. I'm older, so it was more an individual to bounce ideas off and talk round areas. That's the way that I've used her/him pretty much all the time ... I'd say the main benefit [of ACE UK is] having somebody who knows me personally very well and I am able to bounce ideas off them and get an educated response."

The above quotations illustrate many different elements to the athlete-athlete adviser relationship. For example, the adviser is cited as being a listener, confidant, social worker, motivator, and general mentor. This is an interesting new perspective on the relationship and how it helps the athlete. However, the real key to this relationship appears to be how it benefits the athlete beyond the support offered through more traditional networks, most obviously, family and friends – that is, the adviser's knowledge of the pressures of being an elite competitor, and especially the increasing pressures associated with the introduction of lottery funded support and services; and coaches and other sports specialists – that is, the advisers are interested in issues beyond sporting performance concerns.

The Athlete-Athlete Adviser Relationship

The relationship between athlete and athlete adviser appears to have gained greater meaning as a result of recent changes in elite sport in the UK, and in particular, the introduction of Lottery funding and service provision. Although athletes were generally realistic about the pressures of being an elite athlete currently, a large proportion were still clearly concerned about the difficulties of balancing sport with education, work, and other commitments in this environment. For example, the results suggest that a third of athletes had problems taking up education opportunities because of the problems of being an athlete. This figure increased to a half (49%) of those currently in education. Over half the respondents (55%) suggested they had problems taking up work opportunities because of the requirements of being an athlete, as suggested in the following quotations:

"It is just trying to fit everything in really. Time to study and time to train and the money, that's the major thing really, it's just the money ... the domestic competitions you have to pay for yourself, your hotel and stuff. You can't get a Saturday job because you are training".

"I went through comprehensive school, sixth form, university, and straight out of university I became a full time athlete, I've had little experience - work experience - so obviously I don't know what the big wide world of work is like out there ... I'd feel much more comfortable competing and training knowing that when I decide to finish that I've got something that I can fall back on almost immediately. The fact that I haven't, and I'm not quite sure where I'm going, causes me concern, and consequently, I spend a lot of time investigating areas [rather than training]".

A number of respondents also suggested that sport has become all-pervading and that this may sometimes have a detrimental impact on all aspects of their lives – sport, education, career, and leisure:

“The reason why I went full-time athlete in the first place was to put the work and education aside for a bit, put it on hold as it were, and then pursue the athletic career to see how far I could actually go. [When I first started full-time] I was up in the morning, train, back, eat, train, sleep, that was it. It was like a military thing. I used to get a bit of a complex, actually, because I’d be sitting in a bar or pub or something, and I’m like, I’ve got a competition next week, I really shouldn’t be here ... After the world championships in 1997 in Athens, I really performed badly – I mean really badly – and my coach was head in hands going, “oh, my God!” I’d just had enough of it, and I just sat in the hotel room thinking, I’ve had enough of this, I need break. After that I had a month and a half off, I did nothing. It was the end of the season, I wasn’t competing. I just thought, right, I’ll start back training again and let’s sort this out properly. Then I tried to sneak in a bit of a social life as well ... I mean, I wasn’t a complete boring sod, but ... my friends used to phone up and say, “we’re going out” ... “oh, well, now, I’ve got to train” ... I thought, right, that’s going to stop. I want to do my training, but I’ll put it aside, not bring my sport home ... [Before Athens] I was training hard, I knew I was [competing] well, and then there was a lot of pressure on me, and... I remember watching my performance on television, the commentators were really building me up, and then I was absolutely terribly, it was really embarrassing. I’m embarrassed to talk about it now, it was so bad. I thought, it’s got to change. So I changed my lifestyle and trained here, socialized there, competed there... 1998 was my best ever year for achievements and consistency, I made the final of the European Championships, I came fourth in the Commonwealth Games; and all year I was just super-consistent. So I think finding that happy medium after 1997 really helped my 98 and 99 season”

“You have no other focus other than sport. You don’t have anything, if the sport is going badly, you don’t have anything else that is a major focus. Because, effectively your hobby has become a job as well, so there is no escape from it and also I don’t find it as mentally stimulating as having a job and trying to balance more than one thing and thinking about different things”

Although these issues are far from new (e.g., Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom, & Annerel, 1993), the wider research on which this paper is based suggests that elite competitors are spending more time training and competing and much less time concentrating on education and work issues as a result of the lottery although other issues are also important (i.e., the athlete’s place in the sports competitive cycle, their existing resource base) (UK Sport, 2001a). Furthermore, many athletes have noticed a significant change in the attitude of ‘performance’ support staff such as coaches and sports specialists. This, of course, is not surprising since professional standards and requirements for this group have also increased as a result of the new funding, and often the latter are explicitly remunerated for getting results. Yet for many athletes, the introduction of a lottery-funded system appears to have contributed to an over-emphasis on performance-related factors:

"Once you walk away from the team, they (coaches and performance directors) are not too concerned about where you go after that. I think to some degree these officials are paid in order to achieve performances, and so the majority of their activities is productive towards that end. There isn't a slot of their salary, put aside, to make sure your athletes are all right when they're finished, and consequently maybe they don't have the time, the energy or the resources to be involved in that. I would like to feel though that the relationships that you develop with the officials within your sport, especially in a sport where you're in it for such a long period of time - I've probably been in the sport longer than most of the officials have - and I would like to feel that it's not just a professional relationship you have with them it's a social relationship, you're friends, and it would be nice to feel that they were concerned about your long-term well-being afterwards. Unfortunately there aren't too many individuals who at this moment in time I would jump out and say are. They'll ask after you, "how are you doing", sort of thing, but that's just as far as they go. If you're struggling or whatever or you were in a bit of a crisis, I can't see too many of them bending over backwards to help you."

"I am not thinking of anybody in particular, but you do get some coaches, they get so focused on what they are doing, and their job as a coach, that they don't tend to see the wider picture. Whereas you get other coaches that take a more holistic approach to it all and say well, "if the athletes are happy off court, then they are better on court", so they look at the whole wider picture and get more involvement."

Elite sport appears to be placing increasing demands of the athletes, both physically and psychological. Performance staff were often seen as too focused on performance issues, lacking concern for athletes' wider needs. As a response to these pressures, the athletes appear to have used their athlete advisers as a kind of 'release valve'. The advisers provided independence, friendship, reassurance, motivation, and a 'sympathetic ear' while still understanding the athletes' perspective - that is, showing an understanding of the institutional and performance requirements of high-level sport. Some respondents suggested that athlete advisers should take a more active role mediating between themselves and performance staff. These factors, perhaps more than any others, appear to underpin the positive athlete response to ACE UK.

The athletes' perception of the adviser as a source of friendship, mentorship etc. was reinforced by other similar or 'softer' roles not typically identified in the literature. For example, a number of respondents suggested that their athlete advisers provided some much needed credibility when negotiating with education providers and employers. This, as the following quotations highlight, proved to be a highly valued support service:

"Having an organization which can act as a voice on my behalf [is very useful]. I ring up a [education provider] or something like that and say, "I'm a sportsman, and I'm trying to find out information about this", then yes I might find a bit, but there's a good chance that I maybe wouldn't get the same level of service that I would if [my athlete adviser] rang up and said,

"I'm ringing up on behalf of ACE UK, which is a UK Sports Council initiative, and I'm trying to put together a program of information or a package of information for this, that and the other – can you help me?" I think that carries a lot more weight than old Joe Bloggs ringing up."

"If I went to the university and said "I am athlete and I need a flexible course" and this that and the other, they don't tend to listen. But if you are someone from an organization like ACE UK then they take you more seriously. If it is just me and my mum they just like don't care sort of thing, but if it is someone from an organization they tend to take you seriously."

The results also revealed that just over three-fifths of athletes were very satisfied with the reliability (63%) and flexibility of their adviser – and just under a quarter (23%) were fairly satisfied (Table 1).

"[The delivery is] excellent for me. I live 2 minutes up the road, and [the advisers] here. Usually I can knock on the [her/his] door and s/he'll welcome me in straightaway and find time to talk about it. If s/he can't do it immediately then usually it's some time in that day."

Despite this, respondents who provided open responses in the main survey frequently mentioned concerns about delivery issues. In particular, they were concerned that there were insufficient athlete advisers to effectively cover all athletes who would like to receive services.

"Our ACE UK adviser is very busy and it is quite difficult to find time to accommodate us all in this area, therefore, another more casual ACE UK adviser would be useful."

Athletes were also concerned that there was not enough communication and feedback from their athlete advisers – perhaps as a result of the fact that the advisers are very busy dealing with other cases. The respondents wanted more one-to-one meetings with their ACE UK advisers, and they wanted advisers to show more interest. This illustrates a major policy finding from the research that for the athlete advisers to perform the role effectively, it is a full-time physically and emotionally intensive activity, and thus the athletes quickly realise when resources run short.

The Adviser as a Source of Information and Conduit to Other Services

When athletes were asked for their views on the athlete advisers' 'knowledge', it was found that over a half were very satisfied (56%), just under a third were fairly satisfied (31%) and 2% were dissatisfied (see Table 1). This is supported by evidence from the following open responses:

"[ACE UK athlete advisers] open your eyes to what is available. [There is] always someone to talk to, to get advice from. The adviser has knowledge that is useful, gives you options."

"[My athlete adviser] came over and each meeting I would discuss where I want to go and that has been quite good because at the beginning of the year I was quite confused and now I have thought about what I want to do."

Although encouraging, the 'very satisfied' figure for athlete advisers' 'knowledge' was ranked the lowest for all the adviser characteristics covered in the survey (see Table 1). In some respects, the role is difficult because the advisers are expected to have knowledge of a wide range of areas (i.e., specific career and education opportunities). So were there any problems with the advisers as a source of information and knowledge? Evidence from the face-to-face interviews and open responses in the main survey suggest that advisers could improve their knowledge in two not necessarily complementary areas.

Firstly, the respondents commented that the advice they received from their adviser did not meet their specific or technical education and career needs. This criticism tended to come from those athletes with higher qualifications and/or who were looking for career opportunities in highly specialized and technical areas, as indicated in the following quotations:

"Obviously, ACE UK and Open are really new. But as they develop and progress, they will get better and their umbrella is going to get wider and the advisers will get more experienced in what they are doing. I think their advisers are quite inexperienced. I can only really talk about [adviser], but [s/he] was an athlete, and [her/his] actual experience of careers or careers advice, must be pretty minimal. [Her/his] experience comes from being a full time athlete, so [s/he] can relate to that side, but I don't think her/his experience as a career adviser is particularly high. But obviously as the scheme evolves and [s/he] spends longer in the job, [her/his] level of expertise is going to increase, assuming that ACE UK offers their advisers the necessary training for them as well. I think the basic [ACE UK] idea is right, it is just going to take a while to flush out."

Secondly, the respondents suggested that they would benefit from their advisers having more knowledge about the specific details of their sport:

"I wouldn't expect [my ACE UK adviser] to go out and read ten books on [my sport] but I just find it frustrating when I say, I did this, and this is about classification."

"An ACE UK adviser was brought in as I was being dropped from [my program]. S/he had no knowledge of my sport and therefore was no help at all. Try to encourage a wider selection of former sports persons to become ACE UK advisers. Athletes need to feel that adviser has some knowledge or experience of their sporting environment."

Others were content with the services, however:

"I think it is good to have specialist knowledge of combining sport and work, and rather than if you went to any other careers adviser. They (careers advisers) are used to dealing with people who are solely looking for a career, rather than trying to combine it with sport. I think that athletes are a case to themselves, so it is good that you have got someone specifically to look with that in mind."

The advisers also provided a number of specific services to the athletes, for example, action planning, informal career or education advice; or provided access to relevant services provided by others. The research allowed for the analysis of athletes' views on these services. With regard to action planning, the results suggest that about three quarters of athletes (76%) who developed a plan found them useful, including just under a quarter who found them very useful (23%) (see Table 2). Although these results are positive, they are not quite as positive when compared with education and career advice alluded to below. This may reflect the 'journey' rather than the 'destination' nature of the action plan, that is, it is part of the process rather than the actual acquisition of new skills and ideas.

The results also suggest that some athletes were less than convinced by the level of formalization implicit in the action planning process. Athletes may feel tied by a formal plan when they need to retain flexibility to fit in training and competition as well as work and education. Over two-fifths (43%) of athletes who had an Individual Athlete Assessment had decided not to develop an action plan. Just over one-in-ten athletes who were aware of ACE UK were using other ACE UK services without reference to an action plan. Although useful for many athletes, the action plan may not necessarily be seen as central to lifestyle service provision, since to some, the level of formalization may discourage the take-up of other ACE UK services in some athletes.

Nearly all (97%) athletes who had used education guidance suggested it was useful, and over half thought it was very useful (51%). For example, several respondents commented favorably on their athlete adviser's attempts to find them a place at university that was flexible to their needs as athletes. Others were simply impressed by the advice on training courses received although some athletes suggested that they received only limited help in relation to their specific training requirements.

Just over nine out of ten athletes (94%) who had used personal development courses suggested they were useful, and just under half (46%) reported they were very useful (see Table 2). The research indicated that respondents had used and valued a wide range of courses although some suggested that there should be more consultation with athletes on course content. A number of respondents with defined career paths suggested that personal development courses were not specialized enough for their needs. Interestingly, several athletes made favorable remarks about media training, including the following from one athlete in the study:

"The [media] course was useful. I do get reporters coming up, and we do get cameras up your nose and up your bottom, and if I can learn to face them a little bit better [that's good]. I have to present myself so that it would help the sport, because if the sport gets a bit more highlighted then [we will all benefit]."

Just under nine out of ten athletes (88%) who had used career planning suggested that it was useful, and just over two-fifths reported it was very useful (42%). Respondents reported feeling more aware of the career opportunities open to them, more organized in relation to their career prospects, and having something to focus on when injured from sport. However, just over one-in ten athletes (12%) who had used career planning suggested that it was not very useful – again this related to the need for more specialized help and support.

Despite an overwhelming interest and support for the principles underpinning the OPEN network, it appears as if respondents' experiences to date have been rather modest. The problems perhaps relate to the relative newness of this service provision (it was not fully established at the time of the research and was recently re-launched during the writing of this paper) and, more specifically, how much time and resources it takes to develop this kind of service effectively. Although just over a half of the athletes (56%) who had used the OPEN network suggested it was useful (including 44% who thought it was very useful), just under half (44%) thought it was not very useful.

Reasons for Not Utilizing ACE UK Services

Although a large proportion of athletes were aware and were using ACE UK services, between just over a third and half of all the athletes were not aware, had not used, or had only a very minimal use of ACE UK services. The research looked in more detail at why these athletes were not using ACE UK services and revealed that it was related to the lack of perceived need, lack of awareness, athletes' time constraints, and access difficulties.

The results suggest that the main reason why the athletes did not use ACE UK was because they perceived that there was little or no need. This reason was mentioned by just under a quarter of athletes (23%), by a half (49%) of those athletes who were aware of ACE UK but had not used its services to date, and by a third of those athletes (31%) who had an Individual Athlete Assessment but not taken ACE UK service provision any further (see Table 3). There are a number of possible explanations for why respondents believe that they do not need ACE UK services, but it seems likely that most are related to the existing education and work profile of the athletes, which in turn are largely a function of age and life-cycle factors (Lavallee, Gordon & Grove, 1996).

The next main reason why athletes did not use ACE UK services relates to a lack of awareness (12%). Approximately 8% of the sample had not heard of ACE UK. However, lack of awareness extends beyond the recognition or otherwise of the brand 'ACE UK' – and respondents appeared discouraged from using ACE UK because they were unaware of the nature and content of services underpinning the program. For example, one in ten athletes who had heard of ACE UK implied that they did not use ACE UK services because they were unaware of what service provision entailed. A number of athletes were also concerned about general access to ACE UK services because they were uncertain about their eligibility.

Another reason why athletes were not using ACE UK services was related to athletes' time constraints. Moreover, about 7% of athletes, and 14% of athletes who were aware of ACE UK but had not yet used its services, suggested that they did not use ACE UK because they were too busy training, competing, working or in education; or because personal development courses, in particular, were provided at a time when they were otherwise pre-occupied (see Table 3). In some instances this may relate to the time in which the fieldwork was undertaken, that is, in the run up to the Sydney Olympics. However, as indicated in the following quotation, it is clear that some athletes feel too constrained by the sporting demands in their lives to consider using ACE UK:

"As an athlete, I feel that during competition time there is no point putting ACE UK programs on, because my time-table is so demanding that I cannot make time to attend. There are programs I am very interested in and therefore it would suit myself and others to schedule them during off season, as this is not as critical a time."

Finally, about 4% of respondents suggested that they did not use ACE UK services because they had difficulties accessing services. The athletes reported that the geographical coverage of the ACE UK advisers was often limited, that is, they did not cover all of the UK in an even manner. They also reported that they had difficulty attending events because of where they lived.

Future Use of ACE UK Services

Those athletes who were unaware of ACE UK, or who were aware but had not used ACE UK services to date, were asked whether they would use the program in the future. The results suggest that just over two-fifths (43%) would use ACE UK, including over half (54%) of those who were currently aware of the program. This suggests that if awareness of the program, and in particular awareness of the content of the program, could be raised, then take-up of services will continue to increase in the future. These figures would also presumably increase if many of the issues raised above (viz., relevance, timing, and location) were addressed.

"I haven't used ACE UK to date because I hadn't needed to. It's not because I didn't want to, it's just because I hadn't felt as if I needed to yet, if that makes sense. I know it's there, I know what they do, but I've just been concentrating on my sport and I've been away training a lot, and I just thought, well, that's something to do another time ... I really want to learn a language, so maybe if I find, "right, I've got time to do this now, let's really go for it, then I know that I can phone up, one phone call, and say, right, I want to do this course –is there anything you can do, can you send me some information, can you help me out?" So I know that they'll be there. But to date the reason why I haven't phoned them or contacted them is because I haven't actually wanted to do that yet. And I use the word yet."

“Though I have not yet used ACE UK services it is reassuring to know they are there when I choose to use them. [ACE UK] helps lessen worries about future beyond sport, knowing that there is some sort of system to help guide and advise me in career matters.”

CONCLUSION

Sports governing bodies and institutes are increasingly coming to recognize the importance of providing athletes with lifestyle services such as career and education advice beyond the provision of other more performance related services such as coaching, sports science and sports medicine. Various programs have emerged over the last 20 years, and the ACE UK program represents one of the most recent incarnations of this ever-developing model. At the same time, the literature's understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of these programs is also increasing – be it from a low base – as agencies commission and undertake evaluation and research in this area (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000).

The research presented in this paper has contributed to this growing understanding in a number of ways. First, it has looked at the experiences and opinions of athletes who are still training and competing, an issue that was considered to be a weakness in the existing literature. Second, the research design – a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches – has provided a detailed analysis of the issues involved, highlighting in particular the important role which is played, or could be played, by those who deliver the lifestyle services to the athletes - in the case of ACE UK, the athlete advisers.

The athletes in this study generally perceived athlete advisers as central to ACE UK service provision, and this appeared to account for a large share of its apparent success. The surprising issue, however, was that it was not the typically depicted role of the adviser as a source of information and advice and conduit to other more specialized lifestyle services that that athletes considered important. Rather the athletes appeared to value more the role the advisers play as a friend, mentor and motivator. This appears to have been compounded by recent changes to sports funding and service provision in the UK, resulting from the introduction of the UK's national lottery. This has not only increased the pressure on athletes to devote more of their time to sport and delivering sporting performances, at the expense of other lifestyle considerations, but also it has affected – the athletes argued – the environment in which they are training and competing as shaped by performance staff (e.g., coaches, sports scientists). The athlete advisers act as a release valve from this environment; they are people that athletes can trust, talk to about their problems and generally gain the personal/emotional support which all individuals require when dealing with problems.

Although these personal/emotional issues were very important, the athletes still used the athlete advisers and other services provided through the ACE UK program as a more instrumental source of information and advice. Here the advisers did slightly less well than in relation to the more personal/emotional issues – although generally the feedback was still positive. For example, a majority of athletes was very satisfied with the education and career guidance they received. But like all ‘consumer’ groups, athletes can be segmented by their particular needs and requirements. Thus younger, less well-qualified, less experienced athletes were more likely to see value in the education and career advice they were offered than those with established education and career paths. This highlights a particular concern for the athlete adviser, and subsequently international career and education programs, as to how can they be all things to all athletes? How can they have the requisite knowledge of sporting issues, detailed and technical education and career guidance information, and also have the ability to deal with the personal and emotional placed upon them by the athletes?

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TABLE 1.***Percentage of Athletes' Views on ACE UK Athlete Advisers Characteristics***

	Very Satisfied	Fairly	Neither	Fairly Dissatisfied	Very
Friendliness	84	14	2	0	0
Communication	73	22	3	1	0
Confidentiality	73	18	8	1	0
Sensitivity	67	22	11	1	0
Knowledge	56	31	10	2	0
Reliability	63	23	12	2	0
Flexibility	61	23	16	1	0

Base: All athletes who have met an ACE UK adviser and who expressed a view on the service offered.

TABLE 2.

Percentage of Athletes' Views on Action Plans and the Specific ACE UK Services

	Action Plan	Educ. Guid.	Personal Devel. Courses	Career Plan.	OPEN Network	Transition Support
Very Useful	23	51	46	42	44	60
Fairly Useful	53	47	48	46	11	40
Not Very Useful	20	3	6	12	44	0
Not At All Useful	4	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Base: Athletes who had used action plans or any specific ACE UK services and who expressed a definitive view as to their use.

TABLE 2.

Percentage of Why Athletes Have Not Used ACE UK

	No Need	Not Aware	No Time	Access Difficulty	Quality Problems	Other
Unaware of ACE UK	8	92	0	0	0	0
Aware but no Usage	49	11	14	11	2	8
Had Indiv. Athlete Assessment	31	2	5	2	2	0
Had Athlete Assessment Made Action Plan	16	1	8	2	2	1
Total	23	12	7	4	1	2

Base: Athletes who provided a definitive response to the question.

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