Original Article

Walking on the Edge – Youth development for top performance; pedagogical, social and ethical issues

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Abstract

Problem statement: This article reviews the dilemmas, costs, and benefits of raising young athletes in the framework of a boarding school, away from home and their familiar neighborhood. **Purpose:** The challenges discussed focus on lessons learned from assessing 12 years (2005-2017) of management at the Wingate Academy of Sports Excellence (WASE) in Israel. **Approach:** The article relies upon the firsthand experience of the first two authors, who held key positions at The Wingate Institute and the WASE, respectively. We believe that using a qualitative approach enables the identification of meanings, insights and significant conjunctions for the research questions discussed in this specific case. The study raises two main conflictual and moral themes: **Theme 1:** The Military Ethos, i.e. athletic career versus meaningful military service; this theme is relevant to young talented athletes at the WASE and present a unique cultural ethos for the Israeli society. **Theme 2:** No Pain- No Gain, i.e. the ethical and moral dilemma of an injured athlete and the professional team. It reviews the philosophy as well as pedagogical, managerial and moral decisions taken by the managerial and professional staff of the WASE, often on the background of disaccordance between stakeholders: the Ministry of Sport, National Sport Federations, the Ministry of Education, all of them who envelop the athletes along the journey to the top. The article points to the importance of our awareness of existing importance to other sport academies world wide.

Keywords: sport excellence, talent development, youth performance, medical dilemmas, educational issues, sport academies

Introduction

Pushing boundaries for young talented athletes has gained a wide spectrum of scientific and professional attention, and is aimed at optimizing talent identification and development. Yet, aside from the scientific issues, this process raises managerial and ethical dilemmas for the socio-pedagogical, educational and medical staff. As argued by Godber (2012), the art is balancing between the expectations, requirements and demands of national and international sporting competition with comparable expectations in the pedagogical spectrum. In this study we review the common dilemmas, costs, and benefits of raising young athletes in the framework of a boarding school, away from home and their familiar surroundings. The managerial and professional team of the Academy is often confronting ethical issues, stressing the line between implicit and explicit expectations that relate to educational, pedagogical, mental and medical aspects of the young talented athletes. Just to mention a few: an athlete is successful in sport performance but fails to meet his academic requirements- should he/she be expelled from the Academy? ; should we insist on social activities and national ceremonies when it interferes with training sessions towards a target competition?; should we suspend an excellent athlete who is crossing discipline 'red lines'?; and when it comes to medical issues: should the athlete participate in a target event while he suffers an injury?; and last but not least: to what extent is it our moral responsibility to assist an athlete who quits the Academy and has to give up on his unrealized dream?.

By using qualitative methods to analyze the interviews, articles, and discourses that have been documented, we focus on two main conflictual themes that the athletes and the professional and managerial staff confront on a daily basis: **Theme 1:** The Military Ethos, i.e. compulsory military service versus athletic career, and **Theme 2:** The Ethical Dilemma- the notion of "no pain no gain". These two dilemmas influence the young athletes and their coaches in their decision making processes along the way. This study is aimed at exploring and understanding these themes, with a strong acknowledgment of the position of the authors as 'insiders', and therefore we do not claim objectivity (Betzter-Tayar, Zach, Galily, & Henry, 2015). Rather, we are offering explanations and general viewpoints based on our experience and perceptions of the reality.

Raising a young high-performance athlete

The development of the High Performance Athlete (HPA) has been seen as a process that takes place through four transitional phases: a) initiation, b) development, c) mastery, and d) discontinuation (Wylleman&Lavallee, 2003). These phases are integrated into different dimensions of the athlete's life: the physiological level, the psychological level, and his/her academic or vocational development (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman&Reints, 2010). Proper education, along with broad social skills, pre-retirement planning, and financial independence, are crucial for a smooth transition through all the stages of the athlete's career and post-career (Stambulova et al., 2009).

Starting the route: Young athletes - High expectations

Sports academies implement the philosophy and practice by which the values of excellence are not only sport-specific but are rather a compass for life.

In order to be accepted to these high-performance academies, athletes are required to meet anthropometric, mental, pedagogical, and medical criteria; to possess fundamental skills; and, to have positive family support. But above all, each of them has to have a big dream, and the belief that "I can do it". The new life in the Academy can be described as involving routine, monotonous training hours and stressful competitions – sometimes against roommates and best friends, together with the high expectations of the coach, their family, and the athlete him/herself. As described by Godber (2012) young elite athletes experience various issues such as time management, the impact of sporting events and training on schoolwork, extended absences to attend overseas events, and a constant choice due to conflicts between academic requirements and sporting competitions. This challenge of combining a "dual career" pathway between elite sport achievements and education is known as a concern for young talented athletes. Often success in one comes at the expense of the other (Ryba, Aunola, Kalaja et al., 2016). Nonetheless, they often experience fatigue, mental stress, injury and dealing with disappointment and failure.

In this environment, excellence is considered to be the personal ability of self-regulation of learning; the competence to fulfill one's general potential, and the ability to push her/his own boundaries (Elferink-Gemser, 2013). Under these circumstances, the risk of dropout due to emotional and physical fatigue increases dramatically (Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009).

The Wingate Academy of Sports Excellence: A National Perspective

It is agreed that the development of sports on a national level is, to a great extent, an outcome of the national historic and socio-cultural context and tradition (Simon, 2012). A number of events in the early 1990s can be seen as milestones in the process of developing elite young athletes for top performance in Israel: a. The winning of the first two Olympic medals by Israeli judokas in Barcelona, 1992; b. The opening of a boarding school for talented young athletes, 1990, known today as The Wingate Academy for Sports Excellence; c. The large wave of immigration from the former USSR, which contributed significantly to the sport in Israel.

The Wingate Academy for Sports Excellence (WASE), which was established in 1990 with 30 young athletes in two sports, has grown today to over 170 athletes, 50% of them girls in 11 different sports. It is worth mentioning that the percentage of female athletes in Israel is currently 20% of all the registered athletes. The achievements of these athletes during their years at the Academy and thereafter as alumni, cannot be overestimated, and are far above those achieved prior to the establishment of the Academy. For example, 26 medals were gained in European championships, 20 finals in World championships and 25 participants in the Olympic Games since the establishment of WASE.

WASE accommodates boys and girls aged 12-18, who were identified and defined as talented through a multi-stage scouting process led by the sports federations and their professional staff. The process is then assessed by the professional directorate of the Academy, with representatives from the stakeholders i.e., the sport federations, the Ministry of Culture and Sport, the R&D commission led by the medical staff, and the Elite Sport Unit of the Israel Olympic Committee.

Alongside the main target of top performance in the global arena, WASE focuses on applying a holistic paradigm. This means striving to develop a well-rounded person, a whole career and a strong environment support. It is worth the professionals' awareness that each stage in the development process of the young talented athlete involves, not only one single dimension, but rather it is a multi-dimensional process of physiological, psychosocial, academic and social development.

Methods

The methodological framework of this study is based on a qualitative approach. In order to analyze and explore the dilemmas of the participants, all of them considered to be 'insiders' in the WASE, the study relies on "first hand" experience of the first two authors who served in key positions at The Wingate Institute and The Wingate Academy of Sports Excellence, respectively. The third author is a former professional athlete. This process enables to identify the meanings, insights and significant conjunctions for the research questions discussed in a specific case (Chang, 2008). The stories that follow will emphasize the barriers that were encountered by the participants, as well as their perceptions of some of the conflicts and contradictions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants: six athletes (3 males and 3 females) ages 12-18, who attended the WASE, two coaches and one medical staff member. Selection of the interviewees was based on seniority in the WASE and their professional achievements at an international level. Unstructured interviews were chosen mainly due to their great potential for eliciting participants' events, emotions, and behaviors in an authentic and detailed ways (Sparkes & Smith 2014). As quoted by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998, p. 7) "stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world". In accordance with this approach, we applied first-hand stories which provide a novel insight to the young athletes' personal narratives. We find this crucial when considering the complexity of their inner world especially in this stage of their lives. "After all, one of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality" (ibid). The interviews focused on personal and social issues, such as: What were your doubts prior to joining the Academy? What made you finally decide to join? The interviews were based on a written guide that described the topics as general issues for discussion rather than as a structured questionnaire. Except for the formal interviews led by the first author, the other conversations were often developed spontaneously. In addition, e-mail correspondence as well as organizational memos also provided a fertile ground for our data; they were all collected and documented.

A supporting addition to this study is the auto-ethnographical account of the second author (Betzer-Tayar) with regard to her personal involvement in the Academy. The account was constructed from notes and e-mails she wrote and received during the years as the Director of the Academy. The account was based on her personal involvement with the staff, board meetings, and pedagogical and personal meetings with the athletes, their parents, and the coaches. In addition, informal conversations with different key actors at WASE were then carefully analyzed within the context of Israeli cultural conceptions toward the sport arena. All of these are presented here as viewed by Betzer-Tayar's subjective interpretation of the unique local reality. Her story focused on a process in which she was directly involved and which eventually constructed the current contextual nature of the Academy.

By using an auto-ethnographical account, we attempt to provide the readers with an insight into one participant's life experience, in accordance with the discursively constructed realities. In addition, we wanted to provide a better understanding of how the perceptions, decisions and way of thinking of the authors were shaped and contextualized at that time (Betzer-Tayar, Zach, & Galily, 2016).

Results

Theme 1: The Military Ethos

Athletic career versus meaningful military service

A significant issue which is unique to the Israeli society is the narrative of military service, which is compulsory in the State of Israel for every man (32 months) and woman (24 months) at the age of 18 years. Yet, elite athletes who meet certain criteria may benefit from a special status, and may facilitate conditions that will enable them to continue their athletic routine during service. However, fulfilling a meaningful military service in one of the elite units is highly appreciated by the Israeli society. As quoted by a senior coach (H.) with regard to the post career of our athletes:

Some would rather choose a meaningful military service. In our country (Israel) being a pilot is not considered less respectful than being a successful athlete (February, 2015).

This attitude does not represent the young athletes only, but can be seen among most of the general civil society. For example, when applying for a job, the information regarding one's military service, the position held and the unit in which he/she served in are considered by the employer in the selection process of candidates. We therefore claim that the ethos of the Israeli combat soldier and the sense of belonging to this unique ethos, has been incorporated into the Israeli culture where even in recreational sports, military symbols have become a statement of one's social identity (Lev & Hertzog, 2017; Hertzog & Lev, 2019). It influences the decisions of most of the 18 year-old Israeli youngsters as well as our young elite athletes. Whether to continue their athletic career or to volunteer for an elite unit is a dilemma considered with regard to their future, but also in relation to socio-cultural explicit and implicit expectations. It was clearly illustrated by N., an 18 year-old volleyball national team player, before graduating from the Academy:

I grew up in a Kibbutz (communal cooperative settlement), where it was clear that we would serve and contribute to our country in an elite unit. Now, being three years at the Academy, I'm very confused: ... on one hand, a meaningful military service is important for me and for my close surrounding, ... on the other hand, the coaches and the WASE have invested so much in me, I'm a good player. It is very difficult. I think that to fulfill myself I need to contribute 3-4 years to the army – it is stronger than me (May 2017).

This meets the national ethos of the "Army of the People" (Sasson-Levi, 2006), and is further demonstrated by O., 17.5 years of age, captain of the junior volleyball national team. At that time O. was scouted for an elite military unit:

For me the dilemma is huge. My father is my coach, my mother was also a player. ... My parents guide me to do what I want. I know that by joining an elite military unit I will promise myself many options later

in my career. But it will make it almost impossible to play in the best leagues.... Emotionally, sport is my love, and therefore quitting my sport career is a great sacrifice for me (March 2014).

M., an elite swimmer, presents another point of view of this continuous dilemma:

I have dreamed of participating in the Olympic Games since the day I remember myself. Last year when I received the option for my military service, I experienced some confusing days. After discussing this issue with my coaches and friends I realized that my future is in sport... However, I do hope that by the time that I retire from my sport career, society in Israel will have a greater appreciation for elite sports and for top-performance athletes (May 2016).

The interviews quoted above and the dilemmas as expressed by our young athletes, emphasize the philosophy of WASE and its responsibility for developing not only top athletes but also well-rounded persons, valuable citizens with a strong national awareness and a sense of commitment to the Israeli needs and the social ethos. It cannot be denied that sometimes the route they choose means giving up on their sport career and their life's dream.

Moreover, this illustrates the view of the second author, Betzer-Tayar, that the development and the choice of the post-career venue is very much in the context of the socio-cultural atmosphere of each country, and is specific to the community in which the athletes are being raised.

Theme 2: No Pain-No Gain – A Double Message?

Ethical Dilemma

The injury risk is high among adolescent elite athletes. Aside of having consequences on sport performance, injuries often have negative psychological responses and feelings of self-blame and a loss of identity (Rosen, Kottorp, Friden et al., 2018). Being a young HPA at the WASE means challenging one's mental, physical and cognitive limitations. The athletes are surrounded by a supportive medical staff which is characterized by the tendency to pursue discipline and control through an educational approach (Lev, 2020) and occasionally instructs them to slow down or temporarily stop any sport activity in order to recover. At the same time, the coaches push the athletes to continue training and to overcome their pain. Thus, meeting with the medical staff creates a conflictual moment for both the athletes and the professional staff. This conflict is expressed by L., a 17-year-old female volleyball player, which after three and a half years at the WASE, she was seriously damaged in both shoulders. Medical analysis recommended surgery followed by a prolonged rehabilitation program:

The game is part of me, I'm not willing to give up on my dream: playing on the national team. Elite athletes are born to suffer and I'm ready for that..... You know that sticker "No Pain-No Gain"? I have it on the door of my room and in my head – this is what I have been educated to follow. This is what my coach is expecting of me and he is very important for me (December, 2008).

The value of total commitment, never giving up, goes along with the feelings of this young volleyball player, as she expressed them after her first surgery:

I'm hurt and I have a huge pain all over, but I'm strong and passionate to be back on court. My rehabilitation trainer and my coach will not let me fall.... That pain is part of the game (August, 2008).

Fulfillment of the athletic ethos causes a professional conflict also between the medical staff and the sport federations that expect the coaches at the Academy to deliver best results. In a staff meeting the WASE's physician clearly stated:

We are obliged to the athlete's health – this is the number one target of my staff. Coaches must follow the medical instructions with regard to an injured athlete (August 2014).

The reply of the judo coach emphasized the gap between the two agendas:

We (the coaches) have the responsibility, the knowledge, . I will make the decision whether to send them to the clinic or to continue the training program (August 2014).

But "No Pain- No Gain" refers not only to physical pain and injuries. Often, it is the mental-psychological stress that plays a dramatic role in the wellness and security of the young athlete. As N., a top table-tennis player said when she was 17 years old, regarding the challenges at the WASE:

When I was in grade seven, two new athletes joined the Academy.... they were very cruel to me, trying to make me quit. I almost left, but I then realized that these girls were just another challenge in the development of my career; they left the Academy and quit sport and I am the European Champion" (1st in Europe, 2nd among the top ten) (December 2013).

These quotations are just an example of the ethical dilemmas that staff members and partners in and around the WASE experience on a daily basis. The view of the former director of WASE might shed light on a solution to this conflict:

At WASE we teach the athletes to give 100% of their ability in any training session. We stress the importance of winning, and help them shape their dreams to be a champion. However, when they are seriously injured or in pain, we are obliged to change the tone and to adopt a different approach.

Discussion

Sport academies play the role of a second home, and sometimes as the first one for the young talented athletes, during a significant phase of their late childhood and adolescence. It is therefore obvious that the WASE staff is facing on a daily basis, important questions that might have a major impact on the athletes' lives. In this paper the authors attempt to discuss a number of those questions that are characteristic and sometime unique to the Wingate Academy of Sports Excellence. Reviewing the reality of sports in Israel on a national level, it is evident that sports clubs are not able to develop a large number of outstanding athletes at the International level (Ashkenazy 2014). Being a young nation, Israel has no tradition of top sport achievements and sport development has not been highly prioritized by governmental bodies. This situation is similar to the one presented by Shippi (2012), who describes limitations relevant to small countries as Cyprus, Israel and alike. It is not only the size of the population but also the poor sporting culture and the lack of a consistent sport policy, which results in lower chances of the young talented to become top athletes in the international level.

Aside these limitations, the process of developing a young elite athlete along his route to the top requires a delicate balance between stakeholders, and thus involves major managerial dilemmas while "walking between drops". The mutual relations between three main "players": a. the talented athlete and his family. b. the Israeli sport and governmental bodies and c. The Wingate Institute and its Academy of Sports Excellence should carefully be maintained in order to lead the athletes along their way.

One should consider various, often contradicting expectations of these stakeholders: e.g. The Ministry of Sport, The Ministry of Education, The National Olympic Committee, the national sports federations (NF), school, parents and above all the athletes themselves.

For example, the issue of academic excellence, which is the main requirement of the Ministry of Education, sometimes does not go in line with the target of the Ministry of Sport, i.e., striving for athletic achievements. Practically, this issue raises questions regarding the balance between school hours and trainings hours,

In this view, the philosophy of the Academy is in accordance with Aquilina & Henry (2010), stating that educational-pedagogical processes and scholastic achievements are important and have a pronounced effect in HPAs' (High Performance Athlete) employability and entrepreneurship during and after their career as sportspersons. It is therefore not surprising that over 90% of the Wingate Academy's athletes, graduate high school with a complete, high marks matriculation, far above the national average. Yet, alongside with these impressing results, the constant strain between the daily training schedule as set by the coaches, and the academic requirements set by the regional-school, is an ongoing issue that cannot be overstated. One way to partly balance between this burden is to adopt the European model and to build in-house learning facilities similar to those in the INSEP, France and the German elite schools system. It enables planning a weekly schedule based on the preferable training hours along the day, while adjusting the school hours accordingly. Yet, one might argue that separating the young athletes from their versatile age group has its socio-pedagogical price. Obviously, this concept serves as an example for managerial and ethical dilemmas, which need a careful review prior to any decision making.

Another issue which is quite unique for the Israeli society and has been widely described in this paper, is the narrative of military service which is compulsory in the State of Israel for every man and woman at the age of 18 years.

Although as previously described, elite athletes who meet set criteria may benefit from a special status which enables them to continue their training routine, yet, fulfilling a meaningful military service in one of the elite units is highly appreciated by the Israeli society. But this moral issue not only affects the young athletes and their families. Once again it represents contradicting interests between the Academy stakeholders: the Ministry of Sport, the NFs and other sport organizations, who invested in developing the talented ones, see the path of a meaningful military service as a "failure of the Academy". On the other end, high-schools and the Ministry of Education are expecting the athletes to fulfill their moral obligation and to prioritize the path of a meaningful military service in the IDF. (The Army of the People, Sasson-Levi, 2006).

Confronted with this dissonance Betzer-Tayar adopted a semi-formal attitude toward this conflictual dilemma:

Facing some criticism related to these contradicting messages, we at WASE have developed our own approach towards the military service question. Being part of the Israeli context, we state that alongside with our educational agenda striving for holistic excellence and simultaneously aiming for top athletic performance, we fulfill our target when young athletes make a decision to follow a military and/or academic career, as long as they strive for excellence in any path they choose.

Aside these moral, educational and pedagogical conflicts, medical issues, both physical and mental, need special attention. Aiming for best-practice, our policy focuses on the well-being of the athlete as our primary ethic commitment. We at WASE created a protocol that assists with current medical situations that are often applied; for example, when an athlete experiences a recurrent injury, and the medical and managerial staffs are facing a doubt regarding his /her return to a full-scale performance. Yet, under no circumstances we replace parental responsibility. Thus, the parents must be involved in any decision regarding their child's health. It is not surprising that this policy has been a conflictual managerial decision. It raised again an inherent conflict

of interest among stakeholders, mainly between the Ministry of Sport, NF and the managerial staff of the WASE. Once again the WASE attitude is well expressed by the former director's words:

I believe that in any decision we are taking with regard to the athletes' health, physical as well as mental, it is our responsibility to consider prior to any other interest, that of the athlete's future. We then have to involve the parentsIt is crucial to make a separation between the interests – sometimes hidden interests – of the coaches, and those of the federations, out of our concern regarding the future and well-being of the athletes.

In spite of disagreement that is often raised by various bodies that are involved in developing talented athletes for top performance, they are all aware that among those that are going through a long journey, only a few will realize their dream: to hear Israel's national anthem played in their honor. Therefore, in accordance with Aquilina & Henry (2010), we see our responsibility to provide the athletes with the tools and skills for their future.

Moreover, one of the WASE's primary targets is to develop leader-based values as citizens, and to create role models that will have a positive impact on other circles of youngsters in the country. This is clearly expressed by J., one of the WASE's top swimmers:

At an early age the athletes define their target, they do what they love doing, and are mentally strong and decisive persons.... Athletes manage a strict, precise daily schedule; they perform under continuous tension which develops strength for later in life, whether or not he/she eventually quits their sports career. (J. came 7th in the final; London 2012) (December 2013).

When reviewing a decade of WASE alumni, it is evident that this philosophy enabled some impressive careers which are not necessarily related to the athletic domain, but rather to academic, political and social top achievements.

As decision makers while holding top managerial positions at the WASE and at The Wingate Institute, the two first authors are not claiming what is right or wrong as far as solutions to the different questions raised herein. We are pointing to the importance of our awareness of the existing complexities in the case of the WASE, which is expressed by other researchers (Rutenkranz, 1986) and probably exist in other sport academies around the world as well.

Conclusions

All of the dilemmas presented in this paper have more than one single answer and may be solved in various ways in sport academies world-wide. Each of these questions relates to a specific domain: educational, pedagogical, social, mental and medical. Yet, they should all be viewed as ethical-philosophical themes. It should be evaluated in the context of the nation's culture and sport tradition as well as its social attitude to sports and sports achievements in the global arena.

May we suggest that the main fundamental question confronted by managerial and other professional staff is: while being committed to values of excellence and to "best practice", is our primary commitment and responsibility to the sport bodies and the Israeli government that aim for national achievements in the global sports arena? Or, are we primarily bound to the young talented athletes and their families, who rely on our professional and ethical judgment in the development process of these young athletes?

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