

An Understanding of the Psychological Challenges Faced by Student Athletes and How they Manage

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ABSTRACT

Student athletes represent a unique segment of society, having to manage a set of expectations and challenges that are distinct and psychologically demanding. They are expected to achieve the highest level of sporting excellence while also performing well academically. A basic qualitative study was used to gain an understanding of the nature and type of psychological challenges faced, and ways the student athletes successfully managed or was currently managing those challenges. The results entailed two overlapping groups of challenges; internal and external, where internal consisted of emotional strain, expectations from one's self, balance between sports and studies, and present feelings of regret, while external consisted of issues with their coach, perception of others, and transition to tertiary education. Additionally, there were three ways of managing those challenges namely through problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and experiential learning. Those three domains are further explored and discussed, with consideration to the local context and the role of individual differences.

Keywords: student athletes, psychological challenges, coping, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has a long and illustrious history and meaning attached to badminton and squash, with successes in the international stage and growing popularity amongst its citizens (Nauright & Parrish, 2012). Apart from the international terrain of professional athletes, there is a unique population of student athletes, which refers to individuals who needs to fulfil the roles of a full time-student and athlete and perform on an optimal level in both areas (Dierson, 2005). This group of students face a unique set of challenges primarily due to the pressure and demand exerted from both academics and sports (Apaak & Sarpong, 2015; Gayles, 2009; Manning, 2012). It has been acknowledged that among the challenges faced, there is always a psychological component, one that is more difficult to quantify but is as widespread (Thomas, 2008). In fact, the mental impact of the challenge on the student athlete plays a large role in their overall performance in academics and athletics (Apaak & Sarpong, 2015; Geiger, 2013). The objective of this study was to understand the experience encountered by student athletes in dealing and managing these psychological challenges.

Literature Review

The balance between studies and sports are not easily achieved for student athletes as they are subjected to high demands from the academic and athletic worlds that sometimes conflict with one another which results in a never-ending process of striving for balance (Edge, 2016; Simons, Van Rheenen & Covington, 1999). It was also found that student athletes are more susceptible to emotional strains such as fatigue, burnout, stress, and emotional labour which could escalate to even more severe stressors such as self-despair, anxiety and depression (Henrion, 2009; Romo & Shipman, 2016; Thomas, 2008). This can negatively affect their social activities particularly their relationships, whether in terms of maintaining past and current relationships or building new ones (Goktas, 2010; Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Furthermore, the transition period from high school to college (tertiary education) is a challenge for student athletes primarily due to their commitment and pressure to perform optimally in sports and studies, among other challenges that an average student experiences (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Simiyu, 2010). It was also found that student athletes struggle with their perception of self, which ultimately influences other aspects of their life (Henrion, 2009; Marx, Huffmon & Doyle, 2008). Additionally, they are often subjected to various perceptions and interpretations of others on how they should be (Preacco, 2009).

In terms of coping, there are two distinct strategies of managing a challenge faced; problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The former involves managing the challenge directly, usually consisting of generating options, followed by evaluating them and then implementing measures to solve the problem faced or decrease its intensity, making it more manageable. The latter is where the individual strives to regulate their own emotions that arises due to the challenges that may seem out of one's control (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Biggs, Brough & Drummond, 2017; Moosa & Munaf, 2015).

Gaps in literature

There has been extensive research in the past on the challenges faced by student athletes that grouped them into various categories such as the struggle to achieve balance, adaptation to tertiary education, managing success and physical issues (Goktas, 2010), as well as dealing with emotional strains, such as pressure to perform in academics and eventual retirement from athletics (Manning, 2012). Past literature did not extensively address the solutions, or how the student-athletes managed those challenges and they often grouped student athletes together as a whole, by not differentiating or specifying the type of sport. They also lacked the focus on mental health, where psychological manifestations were not prioritised and studies were mostly conducted from a quantitative viewpoint. In terms of local context, there were limited studies focused on student athletes in Malaysia, what more one that is focused on racquet sports (badminton and squash).

Research Methodology

Research Design

For this study, a basic qualitative approach was carried out which centred upon how individuals construct their reality based on their interactions with the social world (Biggerstaff, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). According to Wertz (2011), this type of study enables understanding of various processes and is suitable when asking subjects to reflect on their experiences.

Participants

A total of seven participants were recruited based on the established inclusion criteria for this study. The criteria were that participants must be (1) a Malaysian and (2) a current student of a local private medical university. Furthermore, they are to (3) have a background of representing any state in Malaysia in the sport of badminton or squash and (4) have won a medal for that respective racquet sport for the annual varsity sporting event. Demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1 and all names stated are pseudo-names.

Table 1: Participant's demographic information

Participants	Gender	Type of sport played	State in Malaysia represented for that sport
Tan	Male	Badminton	Sarawak
Ben	Male	Squash	Johor
Lee	Male	Badminton	Pahang
Sarah	Female	Badminton	Johor
Anne	Female	Badminton	Sarawak
Rose	Female	Badminton	Negeri Sembilan
Lim	Male	Badminton	Negeri Sembilan
Tan	Male	Badminton	Sarawak

Procedure

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify potential participants. Firstly, a research information sheet was given to potential participants, containing details about the research such as inclusion criteria, objectives and the benefit of the study. After that, a short screening process was conducted for those who were interested to participate. Before the actual interview, an email was sent out to the participants explaining the nature of the study followed by choosing a suitable date, time and venue to carry out the interview. Next, the informed consent was given and explained to the participants. Then, a maximum of two in-depth, semi-structured interview sessions per participant was carried out. Lastly, thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse patterns of meanings and themes that emerged from the data (Harper & Thompson, 2012).

Results

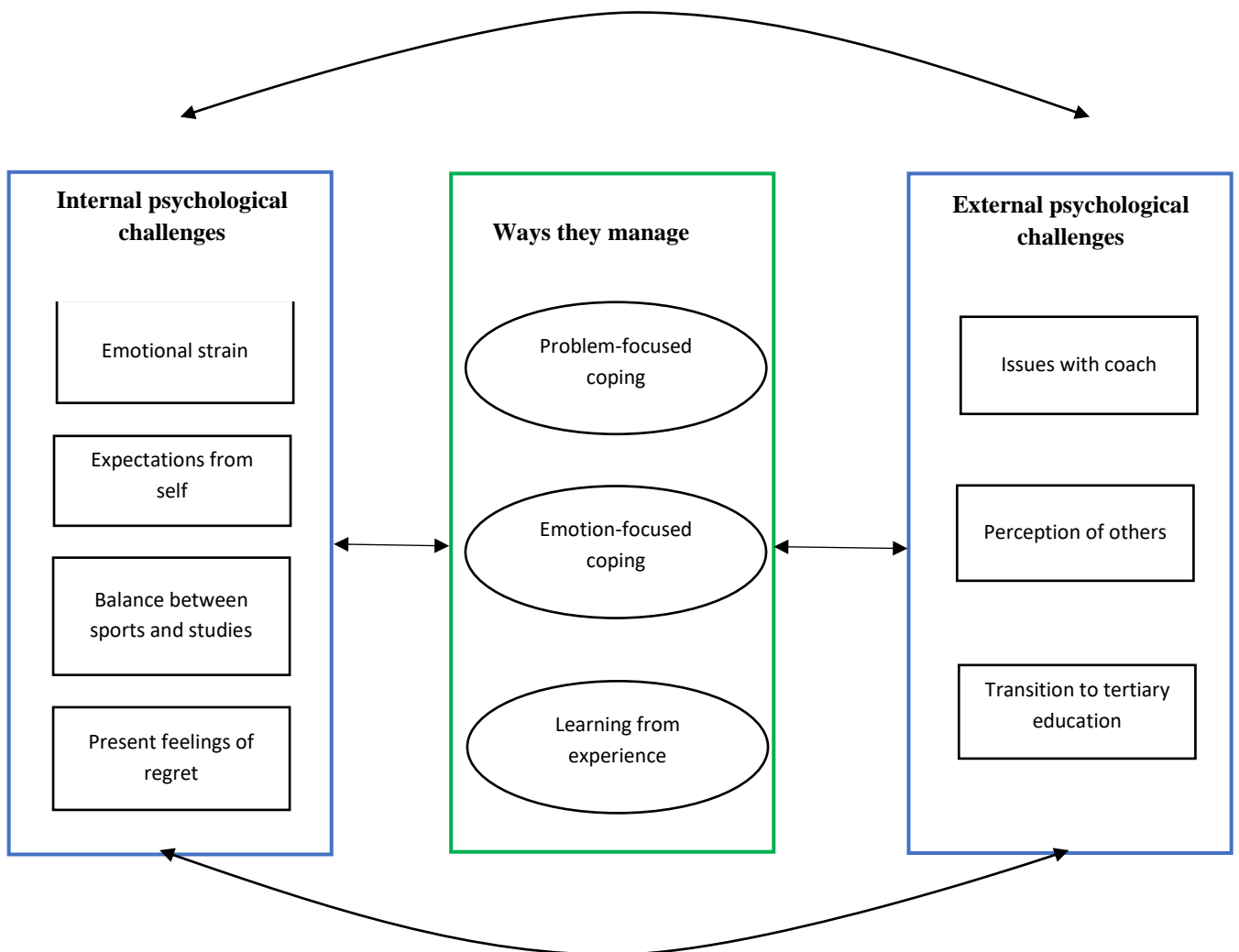


Figure 1: Results of Study

Figure 1 refers to the results that has been grouped into internal psychological challenges, external psychological challenges and ways to manage them. Internal psychological challenges consist of emotional strain, expectations from self, balance between sports and studies, and present feelings of regret. External psychological challenges consist of issues with coach, perception of others, and transition to tertiary education. The ways to manage them consists of problem and emotion focused coping as well as learning from experience.

Internal psychological challenges

II-Emotional strain

A majority of the participants (6/7) shared that they faced emotional demands and pressure due to the high intensity of the student-athlete lifestyle. Participant 2 cited strained emotions such as fear and stress that arose especially when he began to perform below par.

“Whenever you’re going through training... sometimes you have bad days and you don’t really perform very well and then you see your other colleagues, like your friends, your team, they’re like performing really well.... Then you think, hmm am I really cut out for this? Am I really good enough for the sport?” Ben (P2, male)

I2- Expectations from self

More than half of the participants (4/7) shared that they put expectations, pressure and goals upon themselves, and it posed a challenge. Participant 4 shared that wanting to inspire and be a role model for others contributed to her expectations.

“It’s more like wanting to be someone that others look up to, wanting to achieve something la basically. So, that’s a certain expectation of what I want to achieve in that tournament.” Sarah (P4, female)

I3- Balance between sports and studies

Interestingly, all the participants felt that they struggled to find a balance between their academics and their sport of choice in their earlier years. Participant 3 shared how he reached a stage where he accepted that balance was almost impossible, and that he could not shine in both domains at the same time.

“During high school, the age of 13 and 14, I still trained full time. ... So, you have to accept the fact that your results will be bad la. ... To be honest, studying is actually better than playing badminton la, its best if you can balance out both la but if you really can’t handle the studies, you should reduce your time playing badminton and study more.” Lee (P3, male)

I4- Present feelings of regret

About half of the participants (3/7) experienced feelings of regret at the present time, after reflecting and looking back at their earlier student-athlete life. The feeling that they could have performed better as a student-athlete led to regret for participant 2.

“Because I kind of have a small feeling of regret that I didn’t go to the sports school, like that until today... Ah! I should have went! ... and could have been better, I feel like where I am, is not my maximum potential as a player yet, I just have to accept I probably will never reach my maximum potential.” Ben (P2, male)

External psychological challenges**E1- Issues with coach**

More than half of participants (4/7) shared how various issues could originate from interactions with their coaches. For example, participant 6 said that some of the challenges she faced were indirect, arising from certain actions by her coach.

“My coach, he is a bit straightforward, and will directly point out your mistakes in front of everybody, I will feel angry, so I will smash harder.... But you will feel scared because he points out your mistakes, especially if you do it again, he will scold you again, in front of everybody.” Rose (P6, female)

E2- Perception of others

One major challenge from the surrounding environment was how other people perceived student-athletes, where more than half (5/7) of them agreed that the impact of people around them pertaining to their ability, confidence and performance as both a student and an athlete, led them to struggle heavily to live up to those external expectations.

“I think because it gave me a lot of stress, and expectation is higher from people. That means people are looking at you already, ... and saying “Wow!”. And if you do something bad, you will die! (laughs) People will start to gossip about you!” Tan (P1, male)

E3- Transition to tertiary education

Over half the participants (4/7) mentioned that they faced difficulty in adapting and adjusting to their college life. Participant 7 cited that it was due to the lack of opportunities to play sports.

“I feel that there’s less time for sports in this university. Not a lot of opportunities, that’s what I feel. One week only badminton club. That’s all you get...I’m just trying to find time for myself to do sports and stuff.” Lim (P7, male)

Ways they manage the challenges

C1- Problem-focused coping

Despite varying in the type and nature of strategy employed, all participants engaged in this form of coping through the use of compartmentalization, and by being self-disciplined and proactive as explained by participants 2 and 3.

"I'm the kind of person who puts 100% into one thing at one time. I can't do like 50-50, I feel like it's not my full, I feel like I'm not giving it a 100%. So, umm when I go to school, I finish at 2. At 3.30, I play squash. It's like 100% done, 100% done. Then after squash, I take a nap, wake up then 100% of my work again. That was like my life for probably 6 to 7 years la." Ben (P2, male)

"Make time for your studies.... reduce your entertainment. You have to make sacrifices la. You have to reduce time on phone, watching television, dramas and even going out with friends. After a long day at training, you should go home, take a shower and rest! Wake up after that and study." Lee (P3, male)

C2-Emotion-focused coping

Here, the techniques used varied as well, but were all consistent in terms of prioritizing the emotional distress to be dealt with. Participant 2 shared that by having faith and believing in himself, he utilised his skills and abilities to cope with the challenges he faced.

"So like what I do is umm going into the match right, I would tell myself to not hesitate to play a shot. ... You have to like believe in yourself...like you cannot for a second hesitate, you cannot doubt yourself that you will fail another shot, you have to completely believe. And when you play a shot right, you have to completely follow through to the very end. That's what I keep telling myself." Ben (P2, male)

Participant 4 mentioned that she tries to reframe her thoughts of the expectations faced from others into a more positive and encouraging attitude to cope with them.

"I view the expectations as a positive motivation la, for me to keep striving towards a higher (goal), better to be a better player. Means that the stress that I have from seeing my friends are better than me would sometimes, motivate me to work harder. But sometimes, I would also fail to manage it and that's why I will self-pity (laughs), I think "Why I'm so bad at this?". It's not like I manage it well every time, it depends." Sarah (P4, female)

On the other hand, emotional composure was also used to manage the challenges faced by participant 5.

"Because I'm like those people who will feel sad for certain things when it happens, but after that I will recover very fast. Maybe like she scold me today, then I'll be sad for that day itself. After I wake up the next morning, I can forget. I won't put it in my heart la actually. Ya, the emotions don't last long. I tend to distract myself to other things easily so that I will not keep those emotions in my heart for so long. My emotions can come and go very fast actually!" Anne (P5, female)

C3-Learning from experience

This way of coping was unique, because it relied on the student-athlete's own experience, where some of them (3/7) shared that maturing through their experiences guided them to cope with the challenges they faced. Participant 7 discussed how his own experience served as a platform to compare the past and present, often being able to extract the lessons learnt from the past to be applied to his present circumstances.

"For me now, if I feel that it was from experience, like as you mature, you see things, then ... that thought comes and you're thinking, did I do this last time? I shouldn't be doing this, then you change your thought about everything. And that's where I look back and I'm like I shouldn't be like that and now when I think, where am I now, if I was like this last time, it would have been a big difference." Lim (P7, male)

Discussion

I1- Emotional strain

All the participants underwent emotional strain, where the type and intensity varied for each of them but one major issue that stood out was stress. It is undeniable that a student athlete would face the element of stress that stems from multiple sources, both internally and externally. One of the key stressors was when an athlete underperforms, whether during regular training or competition time, it would lead them to feel stressed (Preacco, 2009; Thomas, 2008). Another emotional challenge faced by student athletes is competition anxiety, where they feel fearful or intimidated due to the intensity, pressure or opponents (Caine, Walch & Sabato, 2016). It is safe to say that experiencing a certain level of continuous stress is inherent in being an athlete that if not managed can lead to emotional strain.

I2- Expectations from self

Hurst, Baranik and Daniel (2012) found that stressors faced by most students are those that stem from their own expectations and goals for themselves. Thus, it was not whether they saw themselves as a student or an athlete that made the difference, but it was the nature of expectation they put on themselves, for both academics and athletics posed a challenge for them.

Student athletes can be susceptible to idealistic commitments as they begin their active roles in both domains, but it slowly decreases as they understand that reality does not match their expectations (Marx, Huffmon & Doyle, 2008). These athletes may thus learn to develop more realistic expectations so as not to burden themselves too much.

I3- Balance between sports and studies

As compared with past studies, all the participants in this study unanimously agreed that balancing between academics and athletics was a recurrent challenge for them. In contrast to past findings, the participants in this study usually chose to let go of their sport, instead of their studies. This can be attributed to the norm in Malaysia, where academic achievement is highly emphasized by parents, teachers and society and these values tend to be inculcated into children from a very young age. It was also found that many Malaysian students experience excessive academic stress, largely due to the cultural pressure to succeed academically (Hj Ramli et al, 2018). Since all these student athletes grew up in Malaysia, it is fair to state that they would most likely have had external pressure on top of their internal pressure to perform well in their studies, which could explain their tendency to let go of their sport to focus on their studies.

I4- Present feelings of regret

Hoffman (2016) found that the desire to constantly perform better is common among student athletes which often leads to regretting certain decisions to not be more committed to their sport. Also, it was found that student athletes primarily regretted not putting more effort into their academics and often prioritizing the sport (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Tokuyama, 2015). This was contrary to the participants of this study, who had few regrets concerning focusing on their academic domain, which could be attributed to the fact that they anticipated retiring from the sport someday and becoming a full-time student.

E1- Issues with coach

During their prime-time as an active athlete, some of them faced difficulties and issues with their coaches that impacted their psychological well-being. That situation comes as no surprise as the coach-athlete relationship is a pivotal aspect in an athletes' life that impacts not only their sport but extends to their physical and psychological development (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Thus, a coach has a broader impact on an athlete than most would imagine, where a positive relationship would impact the athlete positively and conversely for a negative relationship. If a coach exhibits or adopts a negative or abusive attitude towards the athlete, it can lead to difficulty coping, feelings of being exploited, and developing anxiety and depressive symptoms in the athlete (Thurston, 2017; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, Brown, & Paskus, 2015).

E2- Perception of others

Student athletes are constantly reminded of being expected to be role models who should excel in both sports and studies, and conversely, on the other end of the spectrum, as being 'dumb jocks' which implies merely being tough athletes with less intellectual capacity (Preacco, 2009). Due to this duality of expectations, they constantly face the struggle of having to live up to a particular image for the public, who collectively defines what success is for them.

E3- Transition to tertiary education

The transition to tertiary education (college) proved to be a problem for most participants of this study. Murdock, Strear, Jenkins-Guarnieri and Henderson (2014) found that when student athletes move to college, and especially for those who have retired from professional sports, if they were not able to venture into some form of sporting activities, it could lead to feelings of distress. Equally important was being able to adapt to the full-time studying life, as priorities shifted from both sports and studies to academics alone.

C1 & C2- Problem and emotion-focused coping

Steiner (2010) describes that problem-focused coping constitutes directing efforts to define the challenge, coming up with alternatives, weighing the cost-benefit ratio and then selecting an alternative to act on. Facing

the problem head-on is effective provided the student athlete has a sufficient level of maturity and life experience to come up with alternative solutions to the challenges they face.

Another equally prominent coping style, emotion focused coping is often divided into two categories; active and avoidant emotion focused coping. The former is an adaptive way of regulating emotion while the latter focuses on avoiding the problem (Ryan, 2018). From this study, both types of emotion-focused strategies have been extracted. Firstly, there were two types of active emotion-focused coping strategies used by the former student athletes which included cognitive reframing and techniques of self-belief and self-determination. As for avoidant emotion-focused coping, emotional composure played a huge role for the participants, who were able to control and manage their emotional states to remain composed under pressure. Evans (2018) added that the coping strategies used by an athlete would change to match the demands faced and the context in which the problems occur. Therefore, a student athlete should ideally develop a wide repertoire of coping skills based on the challenges faced both in sports and studies.

C3- Learning from experience

Among all three ways of managing challenges, this one is distinct, where participants built upon their experience and used it as a tool to assess and tackle the difficulties they presently faced. Along the same lines, the term 'experiential learning' refers to learning from experience. This form of learning begins with the wide variety of experiences of the individual, which they then reflect upon some point in time in the future which in turn often paves the way for personal growth and the acquisition of new attitudes and skills (Hansen, 2000; Lewis & Williams, 1994). Fountain (2012) added that extra-curricular athletics do play a role in coping, where they sharpen skills and create new habits that is spread out to other domains of the athletes' life and can predict academic and working success. Partaking in such activities especially those involving a team, guides an athlete to acquire the skills needed to manage their challenges. Thus, student athletes who actively participate in both academics and athletics would have the ability to relate to their experience to develop the necessary skills and strategies to cope. Finch (2007) uses a track analogy to illustrate an athletes' experience in college, where each lap around the track constitutes additional experiences ranging from gaining new skills to academic accomplishments. Thus, the more laps they finish, the richer and wider their development. This again emphasizes the blend between sports and studies and how it is able to add more value and depth to the experiences of student athletes.

One aspect to be considered are the individual differences, as most participants relied on their personal experience to deal with the challenges, which was subjective for each individual. Hansen (2000) adds that despite the similarities of learning from past experiences, it is still a relatively subjective component. Hence, just as the experience differs, the way of learning from the experience would vary among student athletes as well.

Implications and conclusion

All in all, student athletes face psychological challenges, both from within themselves and from their surroundings. Out of the seven psychological challenges, three interesting findings stood out. First, it was found that the expectations the participants placed on themselves made a bigger impact compared to how they viewed themselves. Secondly, being former student athletes, they were susceptible to feelings of regret. Lastly, it was found that their coach played a huge role in the overall student athlete experience.

With regards to coping, there were a variety of problem and emotion focused coping strategies used, which can be explored further not only by student athletes themselves but also their mentors, student counsellors or universities to support them. One prominent finding of this study is that student athletes relied on their lived

experience to manage these psychological challenges, where they drew upon lessons learned from their past to tackle current and future problems.

In sum, student athletes are a unique facet of society. However, they are no stranger to psychological challenges, that may be covert and may not be visibly noticed. In terms of managing the challenges, many participants coped considerably well, while the rest are still learning and coping. Despite the challenges faced in being a student athlete, it can be a worthwhile experience as Ben (P2, male) summed up in his interview when reflecting on his overall experience:

“Being a student athlete was a real journey, one that I was very happy to go through and amidst the challenges that I faced as a student athlete, that phase was a huge part of my life.”

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