



THE GAMES OF THE SMALL STATES OF EUROPE – THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DUAL-CAREER ATHLETES

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Abstract:

This study explores the lived experiences of dual-career (DC) athletes participating in the Games of the Small States of Europe (GSSE), examining challenges, coping mechanisms and support systems. Despite extensive research on DC athletes, the unique circumstances surrounding smaller nations in Europe and the GSSE remain unexplored. This study aimed to fill this gap by examining how athletes from one of the smallest states in Europe manage their dual commitments under the unique pressures of the GSSE. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight (five female, three male) DC Maltese athletes who had participated in the GSSE. Six of the eight athletes interviewed were enrolled at the University of Malta (UOM), whereas the remaining two participated in online courses offered by foreign universities. The data was analysed using reflective thematic analysis. The study illustrates athletes' diverse strategies to manage their dual careers using familial and institutional support systems. The athletes' experiences highlight the need for improved frameworks and advocacy to facilitate dual careers. The study explored how DC athletes struggled to balance demanding academic schedules with rigorous training sessions. High expectations and demands often lead to significant lifestyle sacrifices, such as social isolation and mental stress. Furthermore, the research examined the dual-edged nature of competing on home soil. While local fans and family support motivated some athletes, it heightened expectations and anxiety for others. This study evaluates support systems and highlights the need for adaptable, integrated frameworks catering to athletic and academic schedules.

Keywords: dual career, smaller nations, games, culture support

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1. Introduction

A dual career (DC) is the combination of elite sport and education (European Commission (EC), 2012). Such integration empowers student-athletes to acquire academic and athletic objectives while enabling them to lead a fulfilling life and maintain their health and well-being (Stambulova *et al.*, 2015).

This study investigates the lived experiences of DC athletes from the small island of Malta who participated in the 2023 Games of the Small States of Europe (GSSE) held on home soil. The GSSE occurs every two years and is coordinated by the National Olympic Committees (NOCs). Up to 1985, it incorporated eight small European states, but in 2009, Montenegro joined the group. This competition involves nine to ten Summer Olympic sports disciplines and one other sport that might not necessarily be classified as an Olympic sport. In order to meet the qualification criteria for such Games, a participant country must have a population below one million. The games were last held in Malta in 2023 from 28th May to 4th June, attracting more than 1000 athletes, officials and dignitaries. The 2023 GSSEs involved ten sports: Basketball, Rugby Sevens, Shooting, Tennis, Swimming, Sailing, Judo, Athletics, Squash and Table Tennis. The participating countries were Malta, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Liechtenstein, Andorra, Iceland, San Marino and Monaco (MOC, 2023). Despite their importance for small countries, the GSSEs remain understudied. Although considerable research has been conducted on the challenges that DC athletes experience, the unique circumstances surrounding student-athletes from small countries remain unexplored.

This research aims to fill this knowledge gap. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What challenges did DC athletes experience in the months leading up to the Games, and how did they cope?
- What was the lived experience of the athletes (competing on home soil) like during the Games?
- How can DC athletes be better supported?

Athletes who simultaneously pursue competitive sports and academic careers face various challenges that can impact their success. A key aim is to explore these challenges in the context of the GSSE, as well as athletes coping strategies and support networks. Additionally, the research investigates how the fact that the event was held at home affected the athletes' experiences. The significance of this study goes beyond its academic contribution. Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in current support systems enables insightful recommendations to be made to sports organisations, educational institutions, and policymakers. Such recommendations may improve athletes' well-being and performance in pursuing DCs.

The terms 'DC athlete' and 'student-athlete' will be used interchangeably throughout this study. Both terms refer to individuals who engage in competitive sports and academic pursuits concurrently.

2. Literature Review

Elite athletes dedicate substantial time and finances to pursue sporting achievements (Breuer *et al.*, 2018). However, only a few athletes can earn an income during their athletic careers sufficient to support them beyond retirement. As a result, numerous athletes follow a professional career in addition to the one in the realm of sport (Rossi & Hallmann, 2022).

The motivation to pursue a DC career is not solely determined by micro-level factors such as the athletes' characteristics, including age, gender, sport, international experience, and academic qualifications. Motivation comes from meso-level factors, including friends, relatives, educators, and coaches, as well as macro-level factors, such as academic establishments and sports organisations' administrations. DCs also depend on conditions such as global, national, regional and local government regulations, which can be further shaped by sociocultural, media, and economic influencers (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016; Duffy *et al.*, 2006; Li & Sum, 2017). Hence, facilitating elite athletes' academic efforts throughout peak competitive years significantly relies on stakeholder connections. These should collaborate and follow a structured monitoring system to ensure efficient DC programmes and regulations (EC, 2016; Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). In its Position Statement on athletes' DCs in Europe, the European Federation of Sport Psychology addressed several aspects, as Stambulova *et al.* (2023) analysed. The Statement focuses on the challenges athletes face in managing DCs, the resources and support required, and the environments that facilitate their DC pathways. Maintaining a balance where DC athletes achieve good grades and excel in sports activities, especially in higher education, can be exceptionally demanding (Ryan, 2015). In this light, a DC can be considered a psychological stressor for student-athletes (Van Rens, 2019), and an ideal environment and support are necessary for their successful development (Linnér *et al.*, 2019).

The *challenges* of a DC can vary across diverse developmental stages, as noted by the holistic sporting career approach (Wylleman, 2019). Such demands include athletic, educational, psychosocial, psychological and financial challenges. Athletic challenges can involve injury setbacks and expectations of a higher level of performance. Educational challenges consist of a more demanding level of studies, while psychological challenges include family support and the maintenance of a social network and relationships. Psychosocial challenges involve sustaining the individual's motivation to shoulder responsibility and shape one's identity. Financial challenges occur when the athlete struggles to meet financial needs (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Burlot *et al.*, 2018; Debois *et al.*, 2015; Stambulova *et al.*, 2015).

DC athletes should be attentive to the conflicting responsibilities to adjust to and cope with them (Stambulova *et al.*, 2021). One significant challenge when pursuing DCs arises when the demands of one career conflict with the other, such as when an examination coincides with a sporting competition on the same day (Linnér *et al.*, 2021). The most commonly mentioned obstacles to a DC are the substantial time commitments

and heavy workloads. Despite heavy workloads, athletes are not sufficiently compensated financially (Breuer *et al.*, 2018).

In Ryba *et al.*'s (2015) study, participants stated that only a few athletes could turn their sport into a viable career. Rossi and Hallmann (2022) highlighted various *financial challenges* experienced by DC athletes. Some participants argued that selecting a specific academic program that allowed them to balance their DCs was costly. Athletes observed that a decline in sports performance directly led to a shortage of financial support, as funding was intricately linked to their level of performance. Once their financial support was discontinued, the athletes overcame hardships to return to their previous performance levels. Tekavc *et al.* (2015) also report that some student-athletes claimed they faced financial issues upon completing their educational careers after their scholarships ended.

Other findings have discovered a diversity of DC demands; for instance, a decrease in social interactions (Debois *et al.*, 2015), noncompliance with the unique circumstances faced by elite athletes (Kristiansen, 2016), the possibility of taking a longer time to complete a degree, resulting in an even longer time to start a professional career; and fatigue (Condello *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, as the level of education increases, pursuing a DC becomes even more challenging to maintain (Harrison *et al.*, 2020). In certain instances, the cumulative stress factors of a DC may contribute to the development of mental illnesses (Sorkkila *et al.*, 2017).

However, pursuing a DC also comes with *benefits* and can even ensure a stable future after a career in sports (Harrison *et al.*, 2020). When student-athletes pursue a DC, meeting the demands of both careers improves their physical and mental wellness (van Rens *et al.*, 2019). Defruyt *et al.* (2021) found various reasons for pursuing higher education as part of a DC. These consist of the ambition to pursue elite sports, feeling confident, and having a support network. In this case, social support networks that include institutional support, coaches and relatives are crucial for student-athletes (Condello *et al.*, 2019).

2.1 Balancing Act: Education and Sport

As young athletes approach pivotal points in their careers, decision-making becomes important. Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) transition theory (Figure 1) explains the complex transitions that athletes experience at four levels: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational.

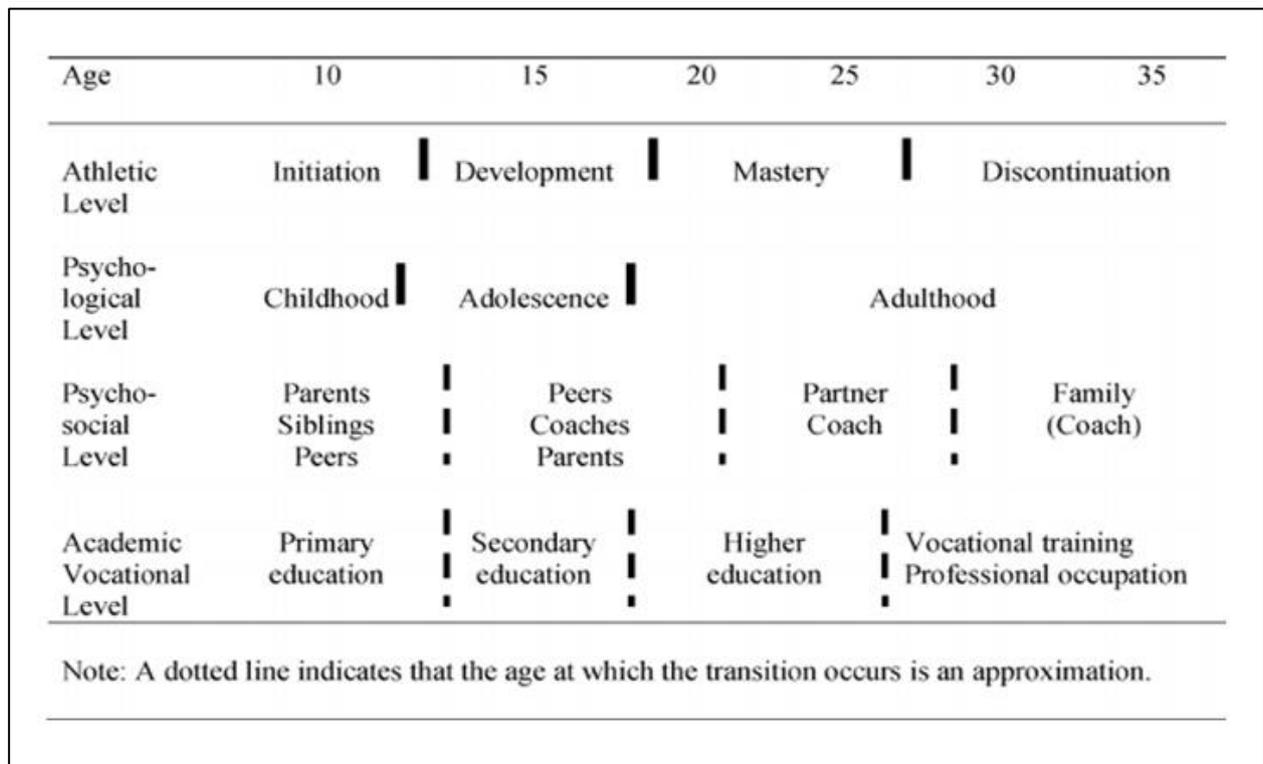


Figure 1: Developmental Model of Athlete Transitions by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004)

Around the age of fifteen, athletes must often make important choices regarding balancing their commitment to sports and academic responsibilities. According to Wylleman and Lavallee (2004), this age range falls within an athlete's career's 'Development' stage, when higher academic standards and more intense training demands coincide. It is an age when individuals are shaping their identities and career paths more than ever. Hence, balancing academic responsibilities with sporting goals becomes increasingly important. The psychological component emphasises adolescence as a crucial time for identity development and self-discovery. Psychosocially, their interactions with coaches, relatives, and friends shape their decision-making processes. Since the educational path taken during this stage can significantly impact future employment opportunities, the academic and vocational layers become increasingly pivotal as athletes navigate adulthood.

Research which involved former elite athletes in various social and cultural settings reported that athletes on a DC pathway were found to have a more effective transition to the life of work when compared with those who only prioritised sports (Aquilina, 2013; Torregrosa *et al.*, 2015; Tshube & Feltz, 2015).

O'Neill *et al.* (2017) found that educators recognised that student-athletes could not balance sports and academia without particular flexibility. Coaches, too, acknowledged that DCs were essential for all student-athletes; however, the extent to which this mentality was integrated into coaching practices varied significantly. Some coaches seamlessly incorporated them into daily interactions, while others addressed them only during formal developmental discussions with athletes (Ronkainen *et al.*, 2018).

Primary *coping techniques* that student-athletes consider effective involve being resourceful, proactive planning, adjusting priorities, reaching out for social support, and staff communication (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2015). Student athletes' coping techniques and capabilities may be divided into four DC competency components. These are DC management, which involves self-control and time management; career planning, that is, figuring out what one desires to accomplish shortly; emotional awareness, such as stress-coping techniques; and social intelligence and adaptability, which relates to the ability to seek support and develop relationships (De Brandt *et al.*, 2018).

Linnér *et al.* (2021) delved into student-athletes' challenges in Swedish universities. They found that DC athletes knew the importance of studying. However, they found it difficult to cope by reducing their sports activities. Hence, some even decided to reduce sleeping hours and put social life on hold. The participants reported receiving limited *support* from the university and sports clubs and sought support mainly from relatives. Increased pressure to balance education and sports, particularly without support, can result in an athlete's premature retirement from elite sports (Aquilina, 2013; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Rossi and Hallmann (2022), on the other hand, found that vocational and educational institutions assisted athletes in various ways. This assistance facilitated communication between educators and employers, reviewed missed material, provided flexible exam timetables and working hours, and recognised athletic achievements.

When flexible curricula are absent, student-athletes consistently encounter challenges balancing their academic and sporting careers (EC, 2016). The Swedish National Guidelines for Elite Athletes' DCs (Swedish Sports Confederation, 2018) suggest that a sports university must (a) offer flexible study options customised for student-athletes by local regulations; (b) collaborate with sports associations or clubs to enhance training conditions; (c) support student-athletes in maintaining a balanced lifestyle and managing career transitions; (d) employ a DC facilitator and support professionals to promote flexible learning, guiding staff to understand DC athletes, and fostering collaborative initiatives between sports and academic pursuits.

The University of Malta (UOM) inaugurated the Student-Athlete Support Programme (SASP) in 2017. This initiative resulted from UOM's participation in an Erasmus+ project in collaboration with other European universities. The SASP helps athletes cope with the frequent clashes in their timetables between sports and academic commitments (UOM, 2018). Student-athletes are paired with a dedicated sports mentor from their faculty who guides the students on any complex matter in their academic journey, such as clashes between exam times and participation in international events (UOM, 2018).

Support may also come from relatives, peers or professional support from entities like DC service providers or assistance programs. Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) maintain that support network members should identify DC athletes' demands, resolve issues, and overcome challenges. *Relatives and coaches' emotional and practical support* was essential to deal with the stressors derived from DCs (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Tekavc *et al.* (2015) stated that athletes continued to view the supportive role of parents as highly significant in their DC development, specifically in their academic endeavours. Athletes

in this study revealed that their relatives strongly encouraged them to maintain their focus on education and successfully obtain a degree. Parents supported athletes throughout their career transitions (Li & Sum, 2017; Harwood & Knight, 2015; Elliott *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, parents incur the cost when other sources do not provide the financial resources required (Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2015). Coaches also support in athletic performance (Maier *et al.*, 2016), the transition to a high-level environment (Verkooijen *et al.*, 2012), and the transition to a post-athletic career (Park *et al.*, 2013; Torregrosa *et al.*, 2015). In their support, coaches should mitigate any issues and obstacles and empower student-athletes to take charge of their DC-related duties (Debois *et al.*, 2015; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016).

Psychological support is necessary as student-athletes are vulnerable to detrimental mental health effects (Etzel *et al.*, 2006) due to the various pressures they experience. Student-athletes may be more vulnerable to dealing with psychological distress (Etzel *et al.*, 2006; Moreland *et al.*, 2018) due to clashes with coaches and teammates, injuries, the need for athletic success (Etzel *et al.*, 2006; Sudano *et al.*, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2007), and the unavailability of time that deters student-athletes from participating in academic endeavours and from broadening their social connections (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Eisenberg (2014) claimed that only one-tenth of the student-athletes who suffer from anxiety or depression seek psychological support due to scarcity of time to pursue services (Lopez & Levy, 2013), social prejudice and self-criticism (Wahto *et al.*, 2016), and not being aware of the symptoms of psychological disorder (Gulliver *et al.*, 2012).

European, governmental and Olympic Committee support is also crucial. In order to successfully facilitate elite athletes' transition from sports to the workforce market, in 2005, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) developed the IOC Athlete Career Development programme in collaboration with a local association and offered online Athlete Learning Gateway courses. Even though several NOCs of Member States already offer this programme, by the end of 2012, it had only supported approximately 11,000 elite athletes from over 60 countries worldwide (IOC, 2015).

Following the establishment of the European DC guidelines (2012), studies on DC athletes have become more widespread (EC, 2012). The EC acknowledges the importance of athletes in European society and the significance that sport has on the European economy (Kleissner & Grohall, 2015). The EC (2019) provides national DC guidelines, supports collaboration among DC stakeholders, and encourages the sharing of ideas on the ideal approaches to DC development. The EU Guidelines (2012) motivate legislators in the Member States to implement these guidelines whilst advocating DCs on a national scale. The guidelines raise awareness among government entities, educational institutions, and employers to develop a suitable environment for DC athletes. Such an environment should implement financial and legal procedures and incorporate an approach acknowledging the disparities among diverse sports. These EU guidelines were not intended to become a legally binding document. Differences in expertise and customs are highly respected across various policy fields in the Member States. The guidelines propose a framework of potential international protocols and call upon the EU to implement further measures, mainly due to the high mobility of athletes. They address

the particular demands in various sports among smaller Member States to simplify DC arrangements (EC, 2012).

Herold *et al.* (2021) examined the execution of the EU Guidelines from the athlete's point of view, conducting a comparative analysis across various countries. The study emphasised that even eight years after the guidelines' publication, DC athletes were still not well informed about them as these guidelines were not given sufficient importance. Although the EC encouraged national authorities to implement a specific strategy for DC athletes, this has not been executed in all EU countries. Athletes did not receive adequate help from stakeholders, and more structural support was needed (Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2015). Moreover, the athletes implied that additional government assistance was needed. Herold *et al.* (2021) provide recommendations to improve the situation concerning DCs. National and political institutions are encouraged to adhere to the EU Guidelines and establish customised strategies for athletes (EC, 2012). It is proposed that all stakeholders increase their awareness of DC athletes and that cooperative efforts concerning DCs be promoted among stakeholders to establish a beneficial and not detrimental environment.

2.2 Home Turf Impact

As this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of DC athletes who participated in the GSSE 2023 held on home turf, it is imperative to explore the literature on how this may affect athletes in their preparation and participation at these Games, considered to be the most important Games for such small nations as Malta. In such games, the nation stands a better chance in achieving podium positions than in games such as the Olympics and Commonwealth, games that may be of too high a level for small nations with a small population and poor sports culture and mentality.

Pettigrew and Reiche (2016) investigated the home advantage in various Olympic Games. Countries hosting the Olympics showed an increase of 4.4 gold medals and 7.4 total medals compared to their previous Olympics. Epting *et al.* (2011) state that a home audience is thought to heighten anticipation and increase the pressure on athletes to perform at their best. Although the general impression could be that a supportive audience offers emotional comfort and decreases pressure, Taylor *et al.* (2010) found that a supportive audience increases stress.

Fischer and Haucap (2020) found that the influence of home advantage should be considered trivial compared to psychological factors. On the other hand, McGuckin *et al.* (2015) concluded that athletes viewed supporters, mainly close relatives and friends, the minimal need for travel, and field familiarity as significant contributors to home advantage. Studies conclude that cortisol levels exhibit an increase before performing on a competitive stage with a home advantage (Allen & Jones, 2014; Fothergill *et al.*, 2017). Experiencing emotional distress and feeling overwhelmed while competing in front of a home audience may negatively impact athletic performance. Consequently, this can result in a reduction or even reversal of home advantage.

3. Methodology

This research study explores the lived experience of DC athletes in their preparation and participation at the GSSE 2023 held on home turf. This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were employed as this allowed for more in-depth discussions with the participants.

3.1 Participant Recruitment

The interviews were conducted with eight DC Maltese athletes who participated in the GSSE. All were over 18, enrolled in tertiary education, and included three males and five females. The interviewees were initially recruited through the UOM student-athlete scheme. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed. We did not specifically pursue athletes based on whether they had won medals. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with athletes from diverse sports backgrounds, offering various perspectives.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Following ethical clearance from the relevant University, all participants received an information letter and consent form. These documents informed participants of the aims and objectives of this study and what their involvement would entail. They were informed that the interviews would be entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw anytime. Furthermore, they were assured that the collected data would be deleted upon the study's publication.

The participants were informed that confidentiality and anonymity measures were taken for all aspects of their participation. The data collected from the audio recordings and transcriptions was pseudonymised to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and ensure their anonymity. Hence, their identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications. However, they were made aware that despite the use of fictitious names, there remained a chance of identification based on their statements due to the limited number of student-athletes participating in the games. The collected data was anonymised and securely stored on a password-protected computer with access restricted solely to the researchers. No specific details about the athlete, including age, sport, or course of study, were included.

3.3 Conducting the Interviews

A pilot study was conducted with a DC athlete. A pilot interview can identify areas for improvement or constraints in the interview design, facilitating necessary adjustments in the main study (Kvale, 2007). No adjustments to the questions were necessary. The pilot study helped the first author prepare, leading to a more confident and effective execution of the primary interviews.

The student-athletes who answered the call for participation were emailed the information sheet and consent form. Then, one-to-one meetings were scheduled at a convenient time and place. Conducting the interviews not long after the actual Games

was important as it ensured a vivid memory of these games held from May 28th to June 4th, 2023, in Malta. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes and were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Participants could respond in Maltese or English, with the majority choosing English. After each interview, the interaction was transcribed. Interview questions were formulated based on the personal experiences of the first author as a student-athlete and the second author as a sports psychologist supporting student-athletes, as well as insights gained from the existing literature. This approach aimed to ensure a thorough exploration of the research topic and a better understanding of the participants' experiences. Questions were asked of each participant about their perspectives on their lived experiences in preparation and during the GSSE. The first introductory section consisted of questions on the athlete's DC, preparation, and performance in the GSSE. The second section delved into the challenges faced and the strategies they employed to overcome these obstacles. The third section focused on insights and emotional experiences related to the GSSE, particularly on the impact of the competition on home soil. The final section concentrated on the support systems available for DC athletes in the GSSE and possible improvements.

3.4 Data Analysis

A reflective thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis is a procedure for identifying, assessing, characterising, managing, and reporting themes derived from the collected data. It is versatile enough to deal with various qualitative research questions and is compatible with various qualitative data types, such as interview data (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

Braun *et al.* (2019) outline the six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The first phase of this approach is familiarisation. This involves researchers getting acquainted with the data, identifying valuable details and investigating noteworthy details. The authors completed the transcription process and familiarised themselves thoroughly with the transcripts. In the second phase the authors assigned labels to chunks of data called 'codes', which help organise the data into identifiable patterns. The third phase entailed constructing themes. These themes were chosen according to their relation to the research question, but some gave way to stronger ones in the analysis. The fourth phase involved thematic mapping. The purpose of thematic maps is to avoid theme overlaps and improve the connections between themes to convey the complete narrative of the data. The fifth stage consisted of revising and defining themes to ensure they were relevant to the complete dataset, clearly delineated, and in sync with the primary organising principle. Themes were given specific names and details, and the thematic maps were modified accordingly. The authors reflected and engaged in thoughtful processes with the data throughout this procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The final phase involved producing a report that evaluates how effectively each theme functions separately and collectively. To ensure an in-depth and concise analysis, the researchers reassessed the research questions, the findings from previous stages of the analysis, the codes, and the themes' definitions. The results were then correlated with existing literature.

3.5 Validity, Reliability and Reflexivity

To enhance the validity of this study, participants were recruited through the university's student-athlete scheme combined with snowball sampling. The study's validity was reinforced by including the experiences of DC athletes participating in the 2023 GSSE. The reliability of the study was further enhanced by conducting a pilot interview, which detected any issues the questions may have had. The athletes were all asked the same questions to ensure the study's reliability. However, as it was a semi-structured interview, it had the flexibility to explore other topics prompted by their responses.

Reflexivity was ensured throughout the study. At each stage, the first author discussed with the second to ensure all was conducted well. The participants were only provided with an information letter prior to the interview. The questions were intentionally not given to the participants before the interviews. This approach was taken to prevent the DC athletes from being influenced by the questions and from conducting research in advance, ensuring that their responses were authentic and based on personal experiences.

4. Results and Discussions

The data from the eight interviews revealed themes such as *Challenges and Adaptations of DC Athletes, Support Systems and Resources, and Training and Competition Experiences*. The athletes' names who participated in the interviews were anonymised using numerical codes.

4.1 Challenges and Adaptations of DC Athletes

The athletes' responses demonstrated various approaches to *balancing their academic and athletic endeavours* and highlighted diverse challenges. Athlete 1 followed a rigorous schedule that involved waking up at 3:30 a.m. for training, similar to the study by O'Neill *et al.* (2017). She initially had a full-time job, was studying for a Master's degree part-time, had a family to look after and was also training. Athlete 1 stated that introducing the 2020 Scheme (where athletes can work 20 hours instead of the usual 40-hour week and train the other 20 hours a week) substantially decreased stress by aligning work hours with training hours while retaining the same salary. Athlete 1's experience vindicates the EU Commission's (2012) emphasis on the need for flexibility in sports and education to preserve athletes' well-being.

Similarly, Athlete 4's input emphasised the benefits of specialised support networks for DC athletes, claiming: *"I do not know what I would have done without the SASP."* This interviewee's response underlines how invaluable such programs are, providing the necessary resources and flexibility to manage their scholastic and athletic pursuits. These benefits corroborate those of Stambulova *et al.* (2015), who proposed the development of support frameworks that help student-athletes attain their athletic and academic objectives while safeguarding their well-being.

The collective experiences of the athletes draw attention to the significance of effective time management, dependable support networks, and strategic planning to

manage the challenges of a DC. Athletes 1, 2, and 3 explained the significant logistical and psychological difficulties when balancing educational demands with rigorous training. Athlete 1 described the mental resilience necessary: *“There were moments when you wanted to give up.”* She referred to moments of pressure caused by training, academic, and personal responsibilities.

Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) report on the frequent clashes in student-athlete demands. Athletes must choose priorities according to each situation, especially during examination periods or when competitions are approaching. Athlete 8 found it challenging to focus on education when training schedules were so hectic: *“I ended up sleeping during lectures.”* Balancing a DC is a significant challenge (Stambulova *et al.*, 2015), and Athletes 5, 6, and 7 used flexible academic schedules to achieve their sports objectives. Athlete 5 competed internationally while pursuing a demanding degree by travelling to events over weekends.

A helpful strategy that emerged in all the interviews is time management. Athlete 1 stated: *“time management and lots of planning were crucial”*. Prioritisation and effective time management support student-athletes when dealing with various DC scenarios (Linnér *et al.*, 2019; Stambulova *et al.*, 2015; Wylleman *et al.*, 2017; 2020). Athlete 3 spoke about mindful planning: *“I was so prepared that I managed to enjoy all the experiences of the GSSE”*. Such athletes were able to enjoy the competition without neglecting their academic obligations.

All the interviewees commented on their *well-being and the lifestyle sacrifices* they had to make. Similar to Guidotti *et al.*'s (2013) study, Athlete 1 explained the extent to which social activities were neglected: *“That is the part that I had to exclude from my life. I had zero social life. My life revolves around my children... I did not have time to interact with my friends”*. She often found herself alone because she feared disrupting her training schedule. Her everyday struggle of balancing intense training schedules with family commitments left little time for rest. For Athlete 6, travelling frequently for competitions and training, disrupted social interactions. Linnér *et al.* (2021) observed that some athletes sacrificed sleep to increase their training and academic hours, putting their social lives on hold.

Athletes faced the challenges of competing while managing injuries and the psychological burden of preparing for the GSSE. Athlete 1 recalled a technique change that resulted in a severe injury. Due to the low number of competitors in an event, physical demands are placed on athletes who must perform even when injured: *“just completing the race in that pain was an achievement.”* Athletes 4 and 6 had to compete in weight categories higher than usual due to team requirements. Athlete 6 spoke about the psychological toll of weight management and the intense pressure from external expectations to succeed. *“Leading up to the games, I was put under quite a lot of pressure... to perform, to get a gold.”* This pressure to produce a peak performance imposed a substantial psychological burden, which persisted even after the games: *“I did not sort of enjoy the hype as much as most other athletes... I was and still am very dismissive of any of the praise.”* This suggests a continued struggle with the games' aftermath, particularly in dealing with injuries and the potential changes in the coaching staff. This corresponds with Sorkkila *et*

al. (2017), who point out that the high expectations concerning DC athletes might even result in physical and mental exhaustion.

With regards to mental health, Athlete 1 reflected on the psychological toll that came with transitioning away from a structured support scheme, indicating a decline in motivation and an increase in stress: *“I was longing for all the pressure of the 2020 scheme to end.”* Athlete 3 used sports to escape academic pressures, but preparing for competitions was stressful. Her mental struggle to earn a place in several track competitions brought along the intense pressure of qualifying and the necessity of self-confidence in order to cope.

Several cultural and local challenges were mentioned. Athlete 2 drew attention to local representation and preparation concerns, which affected athletes' authenticity and competitive preparation. He stated: *“In my sport, having only three local players representing Malta in the national team... But yes, we had people who had nothing to do with Malta in the team”*. This scenario raises questions about national representation and impacts the team members' relationships and athletes' morale. Athlete 2 expressed his frustration: *“The preparation was the same as usual ... everyone is expected to do everything by themselves.”* Athlete 2 stated that one of the primary barriers to success is the absence of support.

Athlete 3 highlighted the difficulties caused by inflexible academic schedules that do not consider the needs of athletes. Due to the clash of an exam with a competition, Athlete 3 could not concentrate during the exam since she had to catch a flight immediately after. Bjørndal and Ronglan (2017) found that time pressures increase when clubs and educational institutions fail to cooperate. Athletes pursuing a DC must devote time and effort to overcoming challenges (De Brandt *et al.*, 2018).

Athlete 4 discusses the financial and logistical challenges of participating in a sport with limited competition in the country. He regularly flew overseas for competitions, which comes at a great expense and interferes with work commitments. The athlete experiences pressure from this cycle of work and training, making sacrifices necessary to keep a competitive edge in sports where local infrastructure is limited. Similarly, Azzopardi (2020) draws attention to systemic problems in this setting. The study identifies specific improvements in Malta's sports infrastructure; however, it also points out the absence of a local sports culture, which makes it harder to succeed in sports.

4.2 Support Systems and Resources

Athlete 1 reflected on the strong support she had received throughout her journey, particularly from her coach and the National Olympic Committee (NOC). She acknowledged that the opportunities provided, which included training camps and *financial support*, had a significant influence on her performance, and she was very grateful for them. She was thankful for the substantial benefits from the 2020 scheme, which provided comprehensive care, including travel and medical support and training. Despite obstacles like injuries, she valued the extensive support network surrounding her, from coaching to competition logistics.

Although athletes are responsible for balancing their DCs, a committed and supportive team helps them succeed (EC, 2016). Athlete 1 attested that the NOC had

given her all the support she needed. Contrastingly, Athlete 2 pointed out the significant difference in funding and the demoralising aspect of having insufficient financial support compared to foreign athletes: "*We get no funding... It is demoralising when you start hearing about the funds the foreign players will get.*" She argued that local athletes had to deal with financial struggles and that there had to be a more balanced allocation of resources.

Athlete 3 provided a mixed review regarding *institutional support*, having faced problems with academic scheduling. The NOC played a vital role in resolving scheduling conflicts, underscoring the importance of organisational advocacy in supporting athletes' academic pursuits. This corroborates with Bjørndal *et al.*'s study (2018), who report that effective cooperation protocols and efficient communication among stakeholders are essential in reducing the risk of injuries and promoting holistic development among athletes.

Athlete 3's experience underlines the role of supportive coaching staff in helping athletes overcome the difficulties of balancing a DC. Her coach fostered understanding and adaptability, acknowledging the importance of her academic pursuits alongside her athletic aspirations. He was flexible, allowing customised training plans. Defruyt *et al.* (2019) claim that such a high level of DC support from coaches provides numerous benefits to athletes and supports them in successfully balancing their careers.

However, Athlete 4 expressed concern regarding the federation's insufficient support.

"Unfortunately, we ended up without a coach. There was no support, especially from our federation. The federation just decided that it was not going to find another coach. The games were over, so a new coach was useless for them."

This scenario draws attention to a lack of support and the value of the relationship between the coach and the athlete. As Lubker *et al.* (2012) noted, this is essential to the development of athletes. Athlete 4 reported that on certain occasions, they found out a week beforehand that a training camp was not sponsored. She argued that although she was once congratulated on her dedication, there was no demonstration of support through actions, only words. She stated: "*I do not feel that the federation supported me.*" Athlete 5 voiced concerns over the lack of financial support:

"So, financially, it was always on us. I mean, financially, we had to carry all the burdens, pay for training camps if we wanted to, and pay for tournaments if we wanted to. So we received no help whatsoever."

Rossi and Hallmann (2022) claim that a lack of funding can lead to a downward spiral. Athletes may find it challenging to maintain a successful balance in their DCs due to distractions that arise from financial instability.

Athlete 6 lamented the systemic failures in post-injury support, underlining the deficiency in medical treatment and the absence of official outreach even though promises of help were made. She felt abandoned by the system that was supposed to help

her, and she had to seek private medical care and begin her treatment. This corroborates with Geranosova and Ronkainen (2015), who state that parents eventually bear the expense when sports organisations fail to offer financial assistance or resources. This lack of support affected not only her physical recovery but also took a toll on her mental well-being and future in the sport. Borg *et al.*'s (2021) findings indicate that a strong support system can boost the effectiveness of injury rehabilitation. Athlete 6 revealed that not only was she not provided a coach, thus constraining her to live abroad to train, but she was also not even provided sufficient funds.

The scheme under which Athlete 7 was integrated, known as the flexi training scheme, maintains an ideal balance between work and athletic endeavours. Athlete 7 could schedule training sessions around work commitments since he worked full-time and studied part-time. He was granted a weekly ten-hour training allowance. This flexibility allows for competitive strategy preparation while handling work obligations. He also claimed that: "*80% to 90% of the competitions abroad are funded... There can always be more; however, it is not too bad*".

Athlete 1 reported that her university and workplace provided *educational flexibility and support*, enabling her to balance work and sports without excessive pressure. The university granted deadline extensions and acknowledged the particular needs of her situation. Fleischman *et al.* (2021) found that such educational support improves the general well-being of student-athletes and can indirectly enhance their athletic performance. Athletes 4 and 8 expressed gratitude for the support they received from the SASP. Athlete 4 said, "*I do not know what I would have done without it.*" She also discussed the value of flexibility, especially when competitions clash with academic deadlines. Athlete 8 acknowledged the disparities in the support provided by the various departments at the University, pointing out that while some departments failed to have any impact, those that were mindful of the needs of student-athletes, such as the Institute for Physical Education and Sport (IPES), had a positive impact on their motivation. Similarly, Athlete 6 reported that the SASP was effective during her enrolment in a sport-related course, but she had felt unsupported in an earlier course which was not sport-related. Despite the stated goals of the SASP, which are to help athletes manage academic and sports timetables and achieve their goals (UOM, 2018), Athlete 4 also reported that some institutes failed to provide the necessary support. Athlete 3 and Athlete 5 also encountered difficulties when their faculties initially refused to support their sports commitments.

Family and community support are crucial for DC athletes. Condello *et al.* (2019) and Li and Sum (2017) demonstrate that parents can be critical DC supporters. Athletes 1 and 4 expressed their appreciation of their families' efforts. This support was particularly valuable for balancing their career schedules and commitments. Athletes 2 and 3 stated that a supportive home environment was essential for sustaining motivation and balance during intense training and competition. Athletes 5 and 6 recounted their experiences of their families' support during competitions, from early morning drives to emotional support after competitions. Athletes 7 and 8 demonstrate that family understand their demanding lifestyles better. Parents remain actively involved in the athletes' lives,

supporting them as benefactors even after they retire from competitions (Li & Sum, 2017; Harwood & Knight, 2015; Elliott *et al.*, 2018).

Psychological support and coping strategies were required for DC athletes' mental well-being and performance. Harrison *et al.* (2020) and Linnér *et al.* (2021) describe the value of student-athletes learning about coping mechanisms. Athletes 3 and 8 used visualisation and positive self-talk to counteract negative self-perceptions, while Athlete 1 used a checklist for planning. Athlete 2 sought reassurance through regular self-talk and meditation, whereas Athlete 6 used negative self-talk as a motivator. Athlete 4 used smartphone apps to obtain positive affirmations. Athletes also used psychological support. The interaction between Athlete 1 and her dissertation tutor, also a sports psychologist for student-athletes, is a perfect illustration of the integrated support that is especially helpful for athletes:

“It was very crucial. It came two-in-one. If she had not been my tutor, I would still have sought help from her. Something that I always did before. She is my go-to person. During the GSSEs, I made an appointment with her to help me cope. I had meetings with her because of my dissertation. However, we dedicated the time, some for the dissertation and some for the psychological help, because of my injury and the pressure. At this point, she was the right person for me in everything.”

Athlete 8 emphasised the need for reliable and easily attainable psychological support. The presence of sports psychologists at the games was not entirely visible and accessible as only five of the eight athletes were aware of their availability. Despite the assumption made by Baugh *et al.* (2014) that athletes underuse psychological help, those athletes who were aware of these services did make use of them. Although research by Lopez and Levy (2013) and Wahto *et al.* (2016) suggests that some student-athletes might refrain from seeking support due to time constraints, social prejudice, and self-criticism, athletes in this study sought support.

4.3 Training and Competition Experiences

The interviewees all felt the *impact of competing on their home turf*. Athlete 3 claimed that the presence of family, friends, and the cheering crowd drastically increased her motivation. This observation corresponds to Calleja *et al.* (2022), who concluded that supportive behaviour enhanced performance. Athlete 8 acknowledged the substantial support from the Maltese community and the incredible atmosphere they created. Furthermore, thanks to home advantage, as in Pettigrew and Reiche (2016), host nations often see an increase in medals won. The number of Maltese athletes in the GSSE who won medals further validates this belief.

Fischer and Haucap (2020) claim that psychological factors significantly impact home advantage, demonstrating how increased scrutiny and expectations may aggravate performance anxiety. Athlete 3 admitted feeling pressure to perform during the GSSE due to the Federation's expectations. Additionally, Athlete 2 spoke about the unique atmosphere and overwhelming pressure from *competing in the GSSE* held in Malta. This

is consistent with Fothergill *et al.* (2017), who found elevated cortisol levels among athletes before home competitions.

Around 2020, the NOC called us to a meeting and explained that the GSSE was coming up. They constantly referred to the Games as being in Malta and wanted the best results. So, there was always this nagging about how they wanted the result (Athlete 2). Athlete 4, too, opened up about their battle with performance anxiety: "*The pressure was horrible. I am disappointed how I performed. I know I could have done much better. My anxiety got the better of me*". This aligns with the results of Epting *et al.*'s (2011) study.

For Athlete 1, competing in the GSSE gave them a mental boost, and they felt honoured to represent their country, making their participation an extraordinarily gratifying experience. Athlete 7 felt joy in the unity and companionship of living and competing with the contingent. Athlete 3's analysis of the audience's influence was profoundly suggestive: "*I tell myself that I do not think I will ever experience that feeling*." This response records the unique emotional boost a supporting home audience generated and how unforgettable it was.

The athletes' responses describe diverse experiences in their *preparation and training* for the GSSE. Athlete 2's habit of wearing the national team kit during practice reveals a psychological component of preparation: simulating the environment to develop mental readiness. This athlete spoke about the significance of effective preparation, criticising the short-term approaches often adopted. Athletes 3 and 6 both shed light on the fact that the preparation required approximately four years. Athlete 3's analysis of the GSSE preparation provides insight into how institutional planning maximises successful results. This aligns with the study of Spiteri and Muscat (2020), who observed that developing a reliable sports event requires the correct infrastructural and management structures and a holistic plan that considers the athletes' development challenges and individual aspirations.

For Athlete 8, competition preparation draws attention to specific difficulties experienced by athletes from a small island with little sporting culture: "*we were not the happiest with the GSSE preparations*". Facilities-related problems and delayed starts to team training were common occurrences, suggesting inadequate preparation and support systems. Athlete 7 pointed out: "*The sporting facility where we usually trained had been opened only two or three weeks before the GSSE*." Better strategic planning and prioritisation were necessary. Stambulova *et al.* (2015) raise similar issues.

The results of this study draw attention to the critical need for stronger support networks that not only address the practical aspects of balancing DCs but also safeguard the mental well-being of athletes, enabling them to perform well under competition pressure and fully capitalise on their home advantage.

5. Recommendations

Athletes' emotional, social, and psychological needs should be catered for, while their physical and academic demands should be considered. The holistic support of athletes should include flexible academic timetables that align with training and competition

demands. Changes to current policies should be made as they sometimes fail to meet student-athletes requirements. Improving financial, educational, and psychological support boosts the athletes' long-term professional development, mental health, and performance. Stakeholders should examine and modify the existing frameworks to achieve standardised support. An athlete-centred strategy acknowledges and actively deals with DC athletes' challenges. This transition towards a more integrated and consistent approach to support would facilitate long-term success in their athletic and academic pursuits.

The study's focus is limited to Malta, which may constrain the findings' generalisability to other countries. Future studies could consider increasing the sample size and broadening the participant pool to include athletes from different countries and competitive levels. Incorporating quantitative data in a study may provide a more comprehensive understanding. Also, longitudinal research methods would enable researchers to monitor changes and advancements in the experiences of DC athletes over the years.

6. Conclusion

The interviews' analysis provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges associated with balancing academics and sports careers. The results provide valuable knowledge on the sacrifices and support such athletes require to maintain their DC and the effect of competing on home soil. Most participants drastically changed their daily schedules to accommodate early morning training sessions and to meet their academic obligations. The introduction of supportive measures was pivotal, significantly reducing stress by aligning working hours with training schedules. The findings revealed that family support and specialised support networks are necessary to overcome the demands of DCs. Furthermore, the strain of balancing dual responsibilities inevitably led to substantial lifestyle sacrifices.

The results further reveal the systemic and cultural challenges athletes must overcome. To ensure that DC athletes do not have to compromise on either side, educational and athletic preparation should adopt a more integrated approach. Emphasising institutional support and flexibility in educational programmes is imperative. Athletes who enjoyed substantial support during the games, including time for preparation, medical care, and financial aid, reported strong performances and improved overall well-being.

Athletes use various coping mechanisms to handle the psychological pressures of competing at a high level in sports while fulfilling their academic obligations. The availability of psychological support varied. The study thus presented evidence that while the support networks for athletes pursuing a DC are robust, there are still notable inconsistencies. While some athletes flourished under pressure and felt inspired by the supportive audience, others felt overwhelmed by heightened expectations. Community and family provided further motivation for some, but the pressure to perform well in front of home fans increased anxiety for others. Athletes expressed pride in representing

their homeland. Competing in the games gave them life lessons that improved their ability to handle stressful situations.

This study contributes to the sports field by investigating an area under-explored in the existing literature: the lived experiences of DC athletes within the specific context of the GSSE and small nations. It also reveals athletes' challenges when international competitions are hosted on home turf. The results of this study should interest policymakers, educational institutions, and sports organisations as they seek to develop environments that support both academic success and athletic excellence. Ultimately, the study fills a knowledge gap in the academic field and advocates for increased structural support of DC athletes, ensuring that those pursuing such a career can do so serenely.

Conflict of Interest Statement

This research received no specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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