

Chapter 23

The Student Athlete

By Colm Flynn



Colm Flynn is a guidance counsellor and secondary school teacher. His literary work includes a dissertation on the role of the guidance counsellor in supporting student athletes. Colm holds a keen interest in the athlete creating a blend between their education, sporting life and other important elements in their personal development. Here he advises how to balance the demands of study and sport.

In combining school and study, with your sport you will inevitably encounter challenging scenarios. You may be entering a crucial year of study, such as your Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate, and this coincides with an important competitive sporting year. You want to navigate both successfully. Sometimes your competition or training schedules mean that you will miss significant days of school, study or school assignments. You will need to catch up during, or after, your competition or training. Having a solid friend in each class that will share notes, or explain homework, is a great advantage. A common, but very effective, tool that all student-athletes should create and follow is a study and training schedule. Planning and scheduling are key. Be realistic, factor in the times you train and plan to work your homework and study around them.

It is possible that you may pick up an injury, be deselected from a team or panel, or experience worry about how well you are playing. This can result in low mood or self-doubt and impact on your studies. If demands become too much at certain times, it is important to notify teachers, your year head or your guidance counsellor about the extra challenges you may be facing.

Due to the individual nature of scenarios and circumstances involving different sports or school structures, there's no blueprint or 'right way' to overcome the challenges and difficulties that balancing study and sport presents. However, the common theme in helping and guiding students, lies in their own personal development. It is simply the further development of disciplines, habits and rituals that drive performance, which hold the key to both excelling in and balancing education and sport.

Competencies You Need to Develop

A wealth of research focuses on combining a sporting career with education. This simultaneous endeavour of educational and sporting achievement is referred to as a 'dual career' in sport psychology literature (Stambulova et. al, 2015). Recognising its prevalence, the European Parliament's (2016) policy department outlines key recommendations in relation to the standards of dual career programmes and services in their publication of EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes. The challenges and scenarios you are likely to face are recognised on a global level. While it may often feel that nobody realises the commitment it takes to combine education and sport, remember, many great athletes who have achieved at the top of their game have been through the same struggles.

An interesting European study, which surveyed 4,196 'dual career' athletes across various countries and fields of sport, may give you an insight into how the top performers manage it. When asked what they believed to be the most important attributes which helped them overcome different scenarios and challenging times in their careers, they outlined a range of different competencies that they felt were crucial. Below are the top 10 competencies the athletes felt were most important. These competencies, or principles, are applicable to all performance domains.

Adapted from the Gold in Education and Elite Sport Handbook for Dual Career Support Providers (2016).

Top 10 Competence Profile for Perceived Importance in Rank Order

1. **Perseverance** during challenging times and in the face of setbacks.
2. Understanding the importance of **rest and recuperation**.
3. Ability to **cope with stress** in sport and study.
4. **Dedication** to succeed in both sport and study.
5. Belief in your own ability to **overcome the challenges** in sport and study.
6. Willingness to make **sacrifices** and choices to succeed in sport and study.
7. Ability to **use your time efficiently**.
8. Ability to **collaborate** with support staff in study and sport (e.g. coach, teachers)
9. **Self-discipline** to manage the demands of your study and sport combination (e.g. work independently without the supervision of others)
10. **Assertiveness**- being self-assured and acting with confidence

LIST THE COMPETENCIES YOU FEEL YOU HAVE WELL DEVELOPED & EXAMPLES OF WHY YOU FEEL SO .

LIST THE COMPETENCIES YOU FEEL YOU NEED TO DEVELOP IN THE MONTHS & YEARS AHEAD .

Ultimately being a student athlete and competing in sport requires a large degree of self-focus. Challenging scenarios will often present themselves, be it your performance in school or sport, or relationships with your parents, friends or coaches. Know that your success lies with your ability to be aware of, and develop, the appropriate competencies needed to navigate the challenges of a dual career. It's also important to remember that the disciplines and skills developed through sport will complement your application to your study. Dedication, self-discipline, assertiveness, organisational and time management skills (see Chapter 21) and work ethic are all skills that are transferable to your studies if you so choose.

Future Study Plans

Selecting the best study plan and making the best choices in order to integrate both your sport and study is hugely important. Remember, sport is something you do as opposed to who you are. It is important you keep all things in context. It can be very challenging to strike a balance between your sporting career and studies.

An important time for recognising this need for balance is when you start to consider your future career path. As you progress through secondary school your curiosity will heighten around what options are available to you after you finish school and how your sport can complement those plans. Whether you hope to pursue a sports-related career, or something away from the sporting arena, the important questions remain the same.

- What institutes offer the post leaving cert course, apprenticeship or college course you are interested in?
- Does the location and offerings of these institutes impact the possible balance between study and training or competition you wish to strike?

Diligent research is your friend here. In addition to meeting your guidance counsellor in school, ensure you use available websites, prospectus and open days to gather all the information you need. As well as researching your course of study, which is paramount, perhaps you can consider the sporting facilities that the various institutes offer and the level at which they play, or regard, your sport.

Consideration may also need to be given to the possibility of scholarships being offered by different institutes. Again, research is crucial here. It is important not to choose a certain course of study, or a particular college, based on their scholarships. Applicant success in your sport is usually low and spaces are held for elite athletes only. However, the majority of third-level institutes offer sports scholarships to incoming students every year. Some colleges also offer additional CAO points to successful scholarship applicants. Other important questions may need consideration:

- What sports scholarship options do the various institutes offer?
- What does the scholarship application involve?

Some application processes can be detailed, so make sure you ask for help from your parents, coach or guidance counsellor to ensure you have a strong application complete before the deadline.

Plan B

There are numerous stories of athletes getting injured, being dropped from teams and squads or simply falling out of love with their sport. What do these athletes do now if all they have ever known is being an athlete and identifying solely with that role? Other options or future decisions can become limited. As a guidance counsellor, I urge students to always consider their Plan B.

I've seen the other side as well; athletes that progress to the highest level of their sport, but also work hard and plan out their education and future. This is the ideal scenario and usually results in a life where they work in a job they enjoy and get to play the sport they love.

I have also seen students make future decisions based entirely on their sporting goals. They repeat a Leaving Cert year or choose a certain college solely based on playing for a specific team. Don't be the athlete that forgets about their education. When performance and competition has ended, these athletes can be left on their own without a plan. Be wise, have a future focus.

Ultimately, you don't want to run the risk of neglecting your future career development or career decisions. While you actively engage, and thrive in your athletic role, don't relinquish the adequate exploration of alternative skills or interests. Whether it is work shadowing on certain jobs you think you might like, signing up to some online workshops of interest or simply reading material that is outside the sporting domain. You just don't know what interest or passion can be uncovered that could

work hand in hand with your sporting career or even offer you an alternative avenue from your sporting life.

As your sporting career progresses, tough decisions will inevitably have to be made. The awareness and development of your skills and competencies will ensure that you can create the balance needed between your sport and education. Occasionally tough decisions will have to be made. The need for education must overcome the passion for sport.

Know your Plan B.

Colm Flynn



Liam Silke is a highly decorated Galway and Corofin Gaelic Footballer. With his spring and summer months largely taken up by inter-county commitments and the autumn and winter months being given to club and college football, the demands on his time and energy have been unrelenting. His sporting achievements include: 4 All-Ireland Senior Club Titles, 7 Galway Club Senior Titles, 1 Connacht Inter-County Title, 1 Division 2 National League Title, 1 U21 Inter-County All-Ireland Title, 1 Sigerson Cup with UCD as well as Club Footballer of the Year 2017/18. These have been achieved against the backdrop of an academic career that has included an Academic Scholarship in NUIG from 2012-2016 where he graduated with a Science Degree majoring in Pharmacology. Liam is currently studying Medicine in UCD, 2017-2021. Below he gives an insight into how he has learned to balance and indeed excel in both sport and study.

Combining sport and study can be testing and time consuming but I feel there is a considerable overlap of the characteristics required to excel in both. Self-belief, determination, planning and the ability to apply yourself to the task at hand, are some of the fundamentals.

The main roadblock for most people is, time. 168 hours in a week, 56 of which should be spent sleeping, a few hours a day commuting and eating, there isn't that many hours left to achieve your goals.

Over the years I have found that prioritising time at different periods of your life is the best way to manage this. When you have exams, for example the leaving cert is coming up, study is where your focus must be and where you must put most of your effort. This is a period you may have to sacrifice a gym or training session because you will reap more from putting your effort into study at that point in time. Similarly, when you have an important game coming up, this is the time to focus on the sport side of things. It sounds simple, but a lot of people have tunnel vision where sport is all that matters and believe you cannot miss any training session. I've felt like this on many occasions, but I have had to prioritise what it is most important at the time in question and communicate it clearly and promptly to my coaches and educators.

As with most things in life, there is an element of balance needed. After a gruelling day in the library or working hard all day in school, sport is a channel to blow off some steam and is the perfect respite from the books. I feel when I get the balance correct it actually compliments my study.

Unfortunately, prioritising hasn't always been possible throughout my sporting and academic life. Occasionally it has been a complicated juggling act. In May 2015, I was set to make my championship debut for the Galway senior football team in New York. This was to be one of my

biggest days yet as a footballer. The problem was I was in the middle of my 3rd year science exams which accounted for 30% of my degree. Both were very important to me and I couldn't pick one over the other. I had a 2 hour written exam on a Friday morning and departed straight from the exam for the airport. The team had flown over on Thursday and got some sightseeing in, which I missed. I brought my laptop with me as I still had more exams to do when I returned to Ireland. I simply had to study while in New York and was fortunate that I had developed the ability to shift focus quickly which proved invaluable. We played the game on Sunday and I scored my first championship point as we ran out comfortable winners. We flew back on the Monday, arriving in Shannon airport early Tuesday morning. I had to deal with considerable jet lag while studying for another important exam the following day. This was a price I had to pay but was more than willing to do so, as I had genuine ambition in both my study and sporting domains.

Similar scenarios have unfolded with two all-Ireland club quarter finals in London with Corofin while Christmas exams have been ongoing and last year we played London with Galway in the Connacht championship before my summer exams. These can be very stressful times but as already mentioned: self-belief, determination, preparation, planning and being able to apply yourself and shift focus quickly is how I have managed to deal with it.

Liam Silke

Chapter 23 Summary Points

- *The need for education must be balanced with the passion for sport.*
- *Further development of disciplines, habits and rituals that drive performance, hold the key to both excelling in, and balancing, education and sport.*
- *Planning and scheduling are key.*
- *The life of a student athlete requires a large degree of self-focus.*
- *Be diligent and informed when considering your future career path.*