

Positive and negative aspects of «Sport + Studies Programmes » organized at secondary school level, perceived by athletes and their classmates

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Literature

In many sports, top level athletes have experienced years of hard practice. Training must be intensive and abide to high quality criteria. Today, promising teenagers are enrolled in sport programmes. However, the success of sport careers is so hazardous that it is necessary to guarantee the best school preparation to youths following their way to top level sport. Brettschneider, Heim and Klimek (1998) clearly underlined constraints experienced by young athletes due to the double load coming from training and school requirements. They drew the attention to the need to improve the coordination between school and sport leaders.

Combining school and sports programmes is particularly complex. A wide range of structures exists all around the world. In some countries, the best young athletes are gathered in training centres where they combine sports and school preparations. The main critique is that they lack opportunities to have contacts with the social environment. Rather than cut young athletes off from the real life, other programmes propose a school preparation in a natural environment with adapted schedules. In these cases, athletes are mainstreamed with non-athletes classmates (Chevalet, 2001; Gouvernement du Québec, 2002; Van Aelst, 2000).

The criteria for success in these “Sport + Studies Programmes” are : (1) availability of a boarding school with specific educators and tutors; (2) schedule adaptation; (3) medical and scientific staff; (4) facilities and equipment; (5) open minded school staff.

The training officers consider usually that “Sports + Studies Programmes” are successful. In Wallonia, the best example of their “products” is indisputably that of Justine Henin, # 4 at the WTA ranking (January, 2003). She followed a programme launched in 1992.

Nevertheless, examples like that are not so frequent. Usual questions raised about these programmes could be summarized as followed:

- (1) What is their effectiveness in developing of the young athletes performance’s level?
- (2) Is their school achievement really pursued and observed?
- (3) Do the young athletes experience difficulties with many aspects of their life (family, social relationships, physical and mental health, ...)?
- (4) What are the reactions and attitudes of their classmates in relation to their particular status?

Few researches were conducted to answer these questions. Deveen (1971, 1974) underlined school problems encountered by top athletes but, paradoxically, he also pointed out that most of them succeeded in their studies. Nevertheless, Pigeassou (1985) showed that the ratio of athletes achieving a secondary school degree was lower than that of non athlete pupils.

Cloes, Schelings, Ledent and Piéron (2002) compared motivational characteristics and social interactions of athletes and their classmates. They pointed out that integrating athletes in a traditional school seemed to produce “ripple” effects on all pupils. Schedules’ modifications and disturbances due to athletes’ absence or behaviour were counterbalanced by creating new dynamics perceived as a developmental element for the school. Young athletes were rather satisfied by their sport performance’s improvement and their positive attitude towards school increased through the school year. Boarding school brought some difficulties to the young athletes: family relationship was missing as well as friends and former clubmates; lack of leisure was also evidenced. On the opposite, challenge and group spirit

between athletes and their classmates were positive aspects and supporting the organisation of these programmes.

Methods

This study was part of a research project analysing several aspects of the experience lived by pupils involved in special programmes offering opportunities to good athletes to increase their amount of practice. Within these programmes, athletes followed a schedule allowing them to train regularly during the day without any cut in school hours. They have at least 28 hours of school preparation per week and at least 14 hours of training sessions. In most of cases, programmes were developed in boarding schools and supervisors took care of the pupils in each school. They were appointed by the Ministry of Sport. The coordination between schools, federations and the Ministry of Sport was the key of that organization. To stay within the programme, athletes had to achieve the school requirements.

Fifty-two athletes and 283 classmates from four secondary schools located in Wallonia (French speaking part of Belgium) filled in a questionnaire in November 1999 and in May 2000 (the beginning and the end of the school year). Distribution of subjects is presented in Table 1. All students were 12 to 18-year-old. Principals were interviewed in February 2001 to comment on the results. Athletes practised tennis in Mons, volleyball in Jambes (Namur), soccer, judo, badminton and rugby in two schools in Liège. The tennis school was involved in the programme since 1992 while the other began the experience later. Athletes attended the programme for the first year.

Table 1 – Subjects' distribution

School	City	Sports	Athletes' gender	Athletes	Classmates
1	Mons	Tennis	Boys – girls	4	106
2	Jambes (Namur)	Volley-ball	Girls	5	29
3	Liège	Soccer – Judo – Rugby	Boys > Girls	36	129
4	Liège	Soccer – Judo – Rugby	Boys > Girls	7	19

According to the period of the year and the student's status, the questionnaires differed slightly (Cloes et al., 2002). Common questions were integrated to compare groups. Two open questions were designed to identify positive and negative aspects perceived by youths concerning the "Sport + Studies Programmes" existing in their school: *'List three positive (negative) aspects of the Top Sport programme organised in your school'*. They were included in each questionnaire. Answers were classified into categories by identifying key words (Tables 2 and 3). Interanalyst reliability reached 83.2%. Fifty questionnaires were analysed by two researchers. They classified in the same category 79 items out of 95 extracted from the pupils' answers to the questions dealing with positive and negative aspects of their "Sport + Studies Programme".

Table 2 – Categories of positive aspects

Categories	Examples
Sport preparation	"We can have more training sessions", "Our improvement is really better", "They can continue to play"
Social life	"My family can have a normal life", "There is a good climate between us", "We meet top athletes and have many friends"
Enjoyment	"School days are less difficult", " We do what we like", "They have fun"
School benefits	"It's possible to continue to study without dropping out for competition", "They can study and work hard in their sport", "It's perfect to complete your studies when you want to compete at a high level"
Organization	"The training conditions are better than elsewhere", "The training schedule is favourable"
Indirect school benefit	"It's easier for us", "Teachers are less demanding with them"
Athletes' personality	"We become more responsible", "It's very good for the character"
Athletes' future	"It's important for the future", "They will earn money", "It's important for their career"
Fitness and health	"One stay in good health", "They are in a good shape", "They are fit"
Various benefits	« Athletes bring something to the school »; « One can be close to well known athletes »; « It's a good thing for the sport in our country »
Miscellaneous	"It's good"

Table 3 - Categories of negative aspects

Categories	Examples
Workload	We are often completely tired”, “The tiredness is always there”
Following school programme	“It’s difficult to study”, “I can’t prepare all my homework and lessons”, “They often miss courses”
Social consequences	« It’s impossible to participate to other activities with our classmates”, I never meet my friends”, “We never see them outside the school”
Organization	« We can’t eat what we want », «Our training sessions are played immediately after the lunch”
Constraints	« No freedom », «Practice sessions continue too late »
Health problems	“There are a lot of injuries”
Cost	“That’s expensive”
Uncertain future	“If they got an injury, their career will stop immediately”
Athletes' personality	“Some of them risk to be disappointed”
Miscellaneous	“It’s problematic”

Results and discussion

Athletes reported a mean of 2.9 items for positive aspects and 2.5 for negative ones. Classmates were less productive in their answers with, respectively 1.8 and .5 items. They were less concerned by the project. It is noteworthy that there were more positive items than negative ones. That could mean that students were globally satisfied about the “Sport + Studies Programmes”.

Figure 1 provides data concerning positive aspects. Athletes underlined particularly (1) the advantages of the “Sport + Studies Programme” related to the sport preparation (40.4 Vs 12.0 %; $z = 7.746$; $p < .001$), and (2) the gains provided in their social life (13.2 Vs 6.2 %; $z = 2.635$; $p = .008$). Classmates pointed out (1) the school gains related to the opportunity to combine school and sport (21.4 Vs 9.9 %; $z = 3.056$; $p = .002$) and (2) the athletes’ future, a category dealing with the opportunity to start a sport career (13.8 Vs 3.3 %; $z = 3.417$; $p < .001$). Athletes paid more attention to positive aspects linked with the sport practice. That seems logical as they gave more importance to sport than classmates (Cloes et al., 2002). The latter seemed more aware of the opportunities provided to athletes to qualify. They also could be influenced by the dream of outstanding careers.

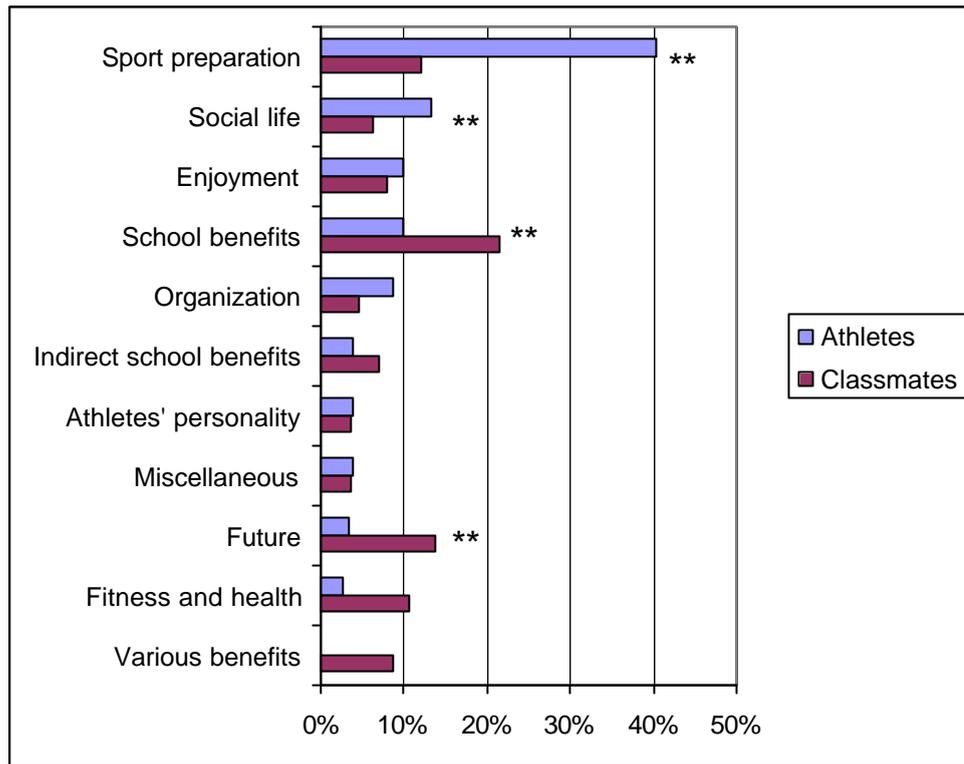


Figure 1 – Comparison of athletes and classmates positive opinions about the “Sport + Studies Programme”

Athletes’ opinion did not change during the year. Nevertheless, at the end of the year, classmates considered that enjoyment and sport preparation were benefits for athletes ($2.3 \leq z \leq 3$; $p \leq .022$). The two main categories identified at the beginning of the year were significantly less mentioned ($1.9 \leq z \leq 2.3$; $p \leq .055$). Classmates could become aware of the sport world realities.

At the beginning of the year, among negative aspects, athletes reported mainly their workload (36.9 %) and the problems met to follow successfully the school programme (34.6 %) (Figure 2). That category ranked first in the negative opinions of classmates (44.3 %). However, they seemed not very aware of the tiredness of young athletes (8.6 %; $z = 7.797$; $p < .001$). They gave also more importance to some constraints endured by athletes (less freedom, less free time) (11.5 Vs 3.1 %; $z = 2.69$; $p = .007$). Athletes and classmates did not assess the problems in the same way. Teachers and educators should account for differences in classes. Lack of communication could lead to conflict by misunderstanding. Brettschneider et al. (1998) showed that subjective athletes’ perception of the working load increased during secondary school years and that sports activities were the main factor of that evolution. This

reinforces the need to develop and improve the partnership between schools' and sports' leaders.

Few changes were observed between the beginning and the end of the school year. Both groups tended to report more social drawbacks as lack of contact within classes.

Principals showed clearly that they were aware of athletes' opinions. The following extracts of the interviews illustrate clearly that they are aware of what happens in their schools.

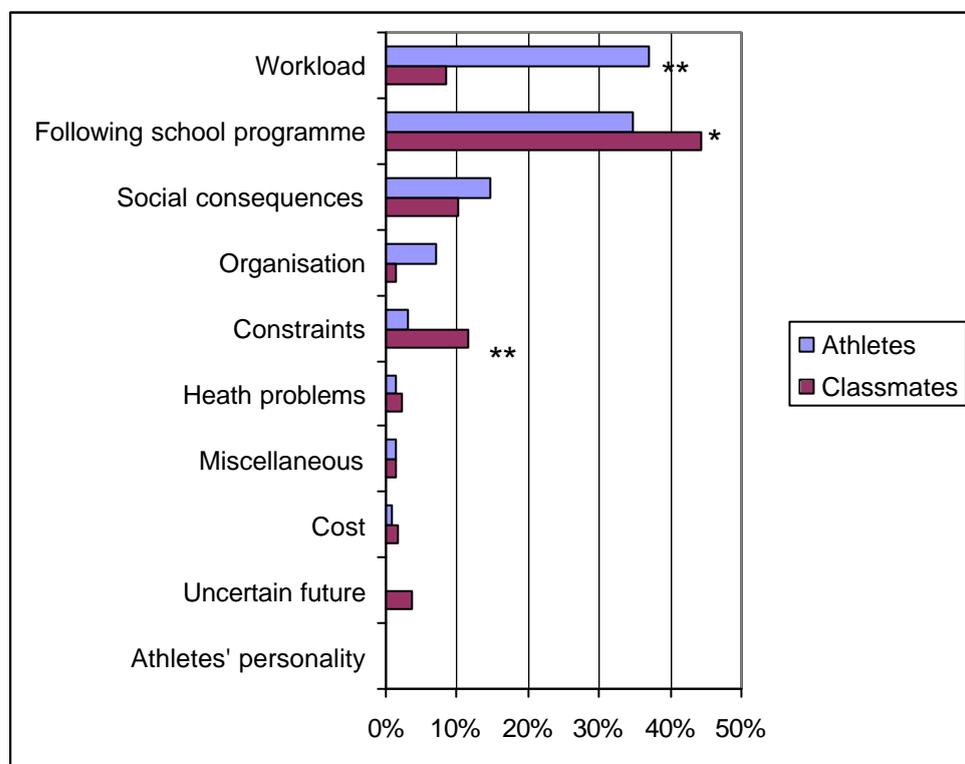


Figure 2 – Comparison of athletes and classmates negative opinions about the “Sport + Studies Programme”

For school leaders, “Sport + Studies Programmes” are important for talented youth because they are the only way to allow personal improvement without losing re-orientation opportunities when the talent is not high enough: “...*The main thing, it’s to allow talented young people to improve themselves, whatever talent they have. It’s time to school to pay attention to other talents than Latin, mathematics, chemistry, physics,... Nevertheless, we can’t close the doors before eighteen. Then, if one teenager is talented, school must allow*

him/her to improve him/herself without closing doors for later graduation...” (Liège’s co-ordinator, 2001-02-16).

The emphasis given by athletes to sport preparation was shared by the school leaders: *“...It must be highly motivating (to participate to the programme) because they (athletes) meet team-mates and they are the most talented players of each club. They were used to play with their small club faraway and they are now together with athletes of similar level and become a kind of elite. Only the best are selected. It must bring something to them...”* (Jambes’ director, 2001-02-23).

Concerning the importance of the category “Enjoyment” in two schools, school leaders tended to qualify the pupils’ opinion: *“I don’t know if the pupils (athletes) can really enjoy the programme. They seem glad to be here but in terms of enjoyment...? They are glad about their selection and consider that they are members of an elite...”* (Mons’ director, 2001-02-22).

All interviewed persons mentioned the difficulties encountered by athletes to combine school and sports requirements but they did not seem ready to accept any decreasing the first ones. “Sport + Studies Programmes” do not benefit always to athletes even their life is better organized.

“...At the beginning, many (athletes) consider that school is difficult because they moved from another school to ours. It’s the same when you got another job. It needs adaptation. It’s true that school requirements are important, mainly for the oldest. But, if they want that kind of life which doesn’t sacrifice studies, if they want that their diploma would be a real diploma, it’s require fine management, rigor and maturity. The one who is gone beyond, it’s the one who has too much postponed. You must always foresee. You must use each moment, you must steal a march on. School problems exist because we don’t decrease the requirements. Moreover, if we look the achievement’s level of the last year, few of them (athletes) felt or dropped out. Most of them achieved without problem. Definitively, they achieve rather well...” (Liège’ co-ordinator, 2001-02-16)

“School requirements are rather high considering available time. People think that our school looks for elite level concerning work and school achievement. In the region, the school is considered as the most difficult, the hardest.” (Mons’ director, 2001-02-22)

Sport + Studies Programmes” do not solve completely the problem of many young athletes in choosing their way. Those who do not face school difficulties can continue or intensify their practice. Those who need to work hard to achieve have no chance to meet the requirements and must drop out school or sport. Less academic skilled pupils can choose less difficult school programmes and benefit of the sport preparation: *“..We accept only very good pupils. At the beginning, I had a file with school marks of each of them (athletes), even if they come from different schools of the country. It’s evident that a pupil reaching only 60% (the minimum to pass is 50%), it would be difficult for her to do both activities because it is evident that they are many training sessions which take time to study time, during the evening. Here, the fact that they are intelligent and work well is a facilitating factor. They need perhaps less time to learn. They are able to manage better their time because they achieve well. Before, they didn’t need to manage their time like that. They have learned quickly. It’s the same with the parents’ control of the homework. Here, they need to work alone...”* (Jambes’ director, 2001-02-23)

Some adjustments should be made to the actual programmes in helping pupils to be successful at school: modification of the schedule of courses and examinations, distance courses, lengthening of the school year... These practical solutions should rely on new administrative rules and involve government authorities to include these strategies within a national sport policy. It would have many implications because it means changes in human and financial aspects of the society. However, we think that it would be the best way to find a functional organization.

Conclusion

“Sport + Studies Programmes” could be considered as a positive experience. However, improvements should yet be found to help students in managing the heavy training load. Results showed also that classmates were not aware of the problems perceived by athletes. Practical implications could be drawn from this study to help schools principals in developing new strategies.

In Wallonia, it could be interesting to adapt the legal framework to facilitate the organization of “Sport + Studies Programmes”. Using modified schedules or distance courses should help athletes to increase the amount of training and competitive activities.

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