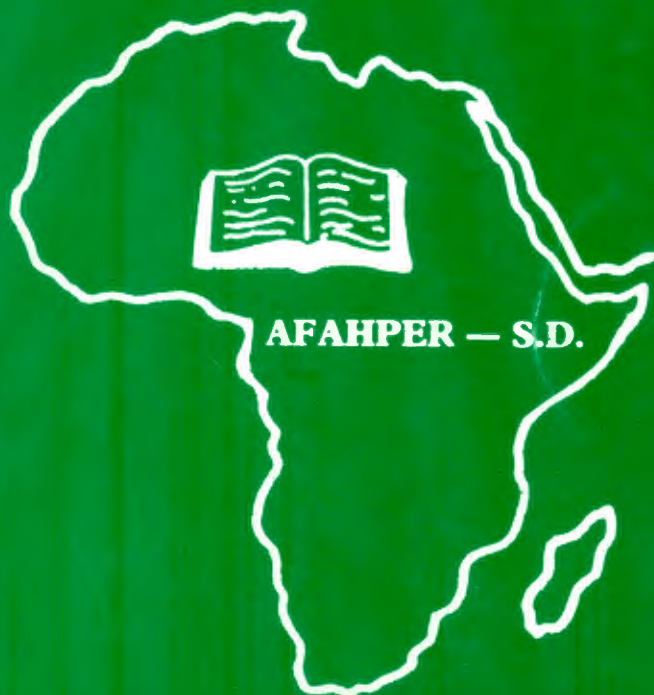


# THE MAKING OF AN AFRICAN ATHLETE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH



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## Counselling the Athlete in a University Setting

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The rudiments of sports skills by the athlete during the early years of schooling can be developed further and improved upon during the university education period. The university setting can offer the athlete opportunity to excel in sport participation and in academics. Apart from the cognitive development of the athlete during university education, there is the possibility of exposure of the athlete to better equipment, good training facilities and services that can enhance the athlete's performance in sports. The university athlete needs to sustain high performance in sports and maintain adequate academic performance as well. The athlete needs to know how to utilise the resources available, to make him or her a top athlete, a successful and adjusted student. Ability to manage time adequately can ensure not only his/her active and adequate participation in sports but also his/her effective academic planning, in order to ensure success in both areas. Through counselling, the university athlete can develop awareness of what job opportunities his/her participation in sports can offer. The athlete can be assisted to recognise those social-psychological factors that can enhance performance and how his/her needs and special interest can be met. The athlete can also be assisted to learn about sports in spite of competing academic and other university demands.*

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**Key Words:** Athlete, University, Time Management, Career Options

### **INTRODUCTION**

The university athlete is at critical stage in life in terms of peak performance both in athletics and in his or her studies. Developmentally one would expect the athlete at this stage of university education to have acquired the necessary physical ability to enable him or her perform at his or her best. Academically, the athlete is also at the highest educational level with all its demands in terms of mental ability essential for his or her academic success at this level of education. The university athlete because of his or her maturity is expected to put up a better performance at his level of education compared to secondary school years. He or she has matured not only physically, there are also better facilities and equipment at this level to enhance his or her performance.

## **EARLY SPORT SKILLS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PERFORMANCE**

Scalan (1984) noted that most of the 6 to 16 year old children participating in competitive youth sport activities do not experience competitive stress but other athlete do. Competitive stress has been defined as the negative emotional reaction a child feels when his or her self esteem is threatened. The younger athlete is sometimes limited in performance compared to an older athlete up to a certain stage and this is why some competitions are grouped according to the ages of participants. Competitions among peers may reduce fear about poor performance usually evident when competition is among participants with marked different abilities and age.

Scalan (1984) further observed that children who manifest chronic perceptions of (competitive trait anxiety, low self esteem) inadequacy and perceptions of a more event specific kind (low team and personal performance) exhibit more stress when facing an upcoming competition than do children who feel more capable. Some behaviours of significant others such as parental pressure to the child are also associated with pre-competition stress. Many children also seem to interpret a win as a major standard for success while a loss becomes a threatening event.

The younger athlete has the opportunity of skill development and improvement during the early years and through early practice there is also the opportunity to recognise weakness in ability while at the same time monitoring ones progress, thus making athletic skills easier in later years. Early exposure to athletic skills can make the athlete better prepared to handle other emotions related to sport.

## **THE UNIVERSITY SETTING AND SPORTS**

The university athlete has the opportunity to improve his or her performance because of many factors. Firstly he/she is likely to be under the supervision of an experienced coach who can provide him or her with instructions to achieve maximum athletic success. The facilities also available, in terms of equipment and the sports ground are more than likely to be better or superior to those available at the primary or secondary level of education. The university athlete is also likely to be better exposed to many competitions with the opportunity to improve his/her performance from time to time.

Apart from the physical maturity evident at the university level of education, the university athlete is expected to exhibit greater discipline not only in his/her education but also in preparation for and participation in athletic competitions. It is also at this stage that he/she can compete more often with athletes from other nations which can lead to more interactions with fellow athletes in other countries.

The athlete also needs to be aware of the demands of a university education, which include regular attendance at lectures, completing assignments on schedule, developing

adequate study habits and participating in other relevant activities to enable him or her become a well-rounded and integrated person. He or she needs to be aware of the importance of a university education available to him or her and strive to achieve his or her objectives.

## **CATEGORIES OF UNIVERSITY ATHLETES**

The university athletes for convenience may be grouped into two broad areas.

a) Those athletes enrolled in various programmes in the university but with athletic ability  
and

b) Those athletes enrolled in a Department, such as Physical and Health education or any other department, such as physiology, physiotherapy and so on.

The first group of athletes although may be under the supervision of a coach, sometimes may not be exposed to other theoretical and practical aspects of sports and practice which athletes in the second group are likely to enjoy. Athletes who are also students in a department such as Physical and Health Education and other related departments are in addition exposed to the academic content of how to evaluate physical conditions, how to maintain physical fitness for participation and so on. Thus, while general instructions may be helpful to athletes in a particular sport, individual instructions will assist each athlete to meet his or her special needs.

## **SPORT PARTICIPATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

It is possible and desirable for the university athlete to achieve high athletic and academic performance. The university athlete can achieve this through a) time management and academic planning and b) periodic practice to avoid fatigue.

### **Time Management and Academic Planning**

The university academic work is highly demanding such that a student who is not even involved in athletics may discover that he/she has got not enough time to do what he/she wants to do. Consequently, the athlete has to be organised so that he or she can combine the academic demands with the demands in sport participation.

Haynes (1991) remarked that everyone has 24 hours each day and very few people feel they have just enough time. As there is nothing one can do to change the amount of time available, one needs to choose how to spend the time. In a university environment, the university athlete may be enrolled in various courses with several requirements. The university athlete is equally faced with how to maintain his/her athletic performance.

Sometimes, there could be conflict as to which to accord priority. It is possible to strike a balance between one's academic programme and athletic involvement. To do this, the university athlete must put in place the principles of management which like other management problems is subject to the principles of analysis and planning. To apply this principle according to Haynes (1991), the individual must:

- a) know how to use his/her time,
- b) know the problems the individual encounters in using time wisely and what causes them.

If the university athlete begins from this premise he/she can plan and control his/her use of time to improve his effectiveness and efficiency in his academic and athletic programmes. The athlete in knowing how to use his/her time may need to determine how he/she presently uses his/her time with particular attention to the portion of his/her time over which he/she have control . The university athlete must then make the effective use of that portion of time under his/her control and handle the remaining time in the most efficient way.

In a typical university setting, lectures may have been time-tabled. This is part of the time the University athlete has no control over. A structured sequence of what could be done during the free time where the athlete has control over is recommended. The sequence of activities with appropriate time each activity will be done will help the athlete to know what to do, when to do it and how to do it.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PERIODIC ATHLETIC PRACTICE**

The university athlete must be able to structure his practice in such a way to keep him or her in top form and in good physical condition. Similarly, the practice should be such to avoid fatigue which may lead to inability to concentrate in other activities such as during lectures. An athlete who is suffering from fatigue may not be very attentive during lecture hours or may experience inadequate concentration when reading.

There is no doubt that there is a link between physical activity and psychological well being. However a vigorous physical activity engaged over a long period without adequate time of rest may not be productive especially if followed closely by an academic activity that may entail concentration such as reading.

## **HANDLING ISSUES OF LECTURERS DURING ATHLETIC COMPETITION**

Once a while, the university athlete may be in a situation where he/she misses lectures because of athletic competitions. In some institutions of higher learning, lectures may be re-scheduled by the university to enable athletes participate in sports, especially when such athletes are representing the university.

Since re-scheduling of lectures may not occur all the time, the athlete may want to make individual arrangement especially when he or she or very few athletes are participating in any competition that will entail missing lectures. The Faculty Tutor or representatives and the respective lecturers handling such courses including relevant university administrators should be aware of such an athlete who is likely to miss lectures.

Even when lectures are officially re-scheduled to accommodate university athletes who will be away from the university because of competitions, such athletes need to know that they will not be able to study effectively while away on sports engagement compared to their counterparts who remain behind. The university athlete thus on his/her return to his academic programme after competition will need to settle down as soon as possible to resume his or her studies and to make up for any time lost during absence from the university during competition. The university athlete thus needs to be conscientious in his/her studies, develop the habits of completing assignments on schedule so that any absence from the university will not have any adverse effect on his or her academic programme.

#### **THE ROLE OF COUNSELLING IN THE ADJUSTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY ATHLETE**

Counselling as a psychological service has a significant role to play in assisting the university athlete to cope and adjust to different situations while enrolled as a student and as an athlete. It is therefore important for the university athlete to utilise the services available to him in a Counselling Centre or seek assistance in other units within the university that can cater for his or her interest if no Counselling Centre exists in his or her institution.

#### **Meeting Special Needs of the Athlete**

The university athlete is first a student whose needs must be met just like any other student. As an athlete he or she needs to cope and adjust to an additional activity (i.e. athletics) which may be equally important to him or her. He/she should seek assistance for any concern in his/her academic programme and he/she needs to be aware that physical exercise which will be part of practice has its own importance in his/her adjustment.

Researchers in the fields of psychosomatic and behavioral medicine have established that the mind can affect the body (Pelletier, 1977). It is also becoming apparent that the body if approximately utilised can effect the mind in constructive ways (Folkins & Sime, 1981). The university athlete thus needs to be aware that the exercise he/she engages can also have positive effect on his/her psychological state in a number of diverse settings. Also, there seem to be clinical agreement that some physical and psychological changes take place when an individual exercises at 75 to 80% of his/her maximum cardiac output for thirty minutes, four to five times a week (Berger, 1984). Some research according to Folkins and Sime (1981), Pollock, Wilmore and Fox 1978) suggest that these physical

and psychological changes include improved mood, self esteem, work performance, increased cardiovascular endurance, improvement of muscle tone, digestion, fat loss and blood volume. Running for instance had been cited as an effective way to reduce anxiety and depression. Seeman (1978) for instance noted significant decrease in anxiety following vigorous exercise. Buffone (1984), however, observed that no studies to date have conclusively reported significant reductions in trait anxiety as a result of physical exercise.

The university athlete also needs to know the potential misuse of exercise therapy. The precise diagnosis of a particular psychological problem and an individual prescribed exercise may be important in promoting well-being. Correct information on training and supervision can also prevent disabling injuries to the athlete.

### **Developing Appropriate Habits to Practice and Improve Performance**

It is important for the athlete to be able to regulate his/her participation in sports. The athletes approach his/her performance can also be regularised like other behaviours we carry out daily. The athlete must know not only how but also when to train. He/she has to assume some responsibility for participation in sport and accept responsibility for his/her performance. For the athlete to develop appropriate habits to practice and improve performance he/she must be committed, in addition to self regulation. Kirschenbaum and Wittrock (1984) described self-regulation as developing plans for pursuing a goal and then monitoring one's behavior to find out what happens to it during the process of change ("self-monitoring"). The individual can then compare the observed behaviours with the set goal until the desired goal is achieved.

Four important principles in facilitating self regulated behavior according to Carver and Scheier (1981, 1982) and Karoly (1982) suggest that:

1. Self-monitoring is necessary for self regulation as self-regulated behavior change occurred when self-monitoring was present but not when it was absent.
2. Differences between individuals in certain salient dispositional styles influence self-regulated performance i.e. personality and situations and the interactions between them, determine most of our behavior while the degree of self maturation, the level of self-regulatory skills and self reinforcement style affect self-regulation.
3. Differential expectancies and self monitoring interact with task mastery in self regulation. For instance, for any difficult task, having positive expectations about success may be beneficial as negative expectations and subsequent failures can have negative effect on self regulation.

Emotional states can influence self-regulated performance somewhat independently of effects attributable to cognition in determining behavior.

The implications of those principles for the university athlete suggest that to develop appropriate habits, to practice and to improve his/her athletic performance, he/she must be able to observe his/her performance in a systematic and continuous fashion. He/she must also develop positive rather than negative expectations when faced with a difficult athletic task. The athlete in addition must be able to concentrate on errors when his/her task become routine and should employ cognitive distractors to reduce negative effect when confronted with a difficult task.

The university athlete, inspite of competing academic demands, must develop the habit and find time to practice and participate in sports. He/she can show commitment and employ self-regulation strategies to improve performance in athletics.

### **Other factors that can affect athletic performance**

#### **a) Anxiety and Arousal**

It has been observed that anxiety and arousal can affect athletic performance as many athletes have reported that their performance has been adversely affected by being too anxious or aroused, (Silve and Weinberg 1984). It is thus imperative for the university athlete to know how to cope with high levels of anxiety or arousal during competition. Silva and Wenberg (1984) further noted that while most people believe that a little arousal helps in preparing athletes for competition, there also seem to be a consensus that too much arousal can be detrimental to performance. This consensus seems to agree with the inverted U hypothesis which states that the performance improves with increasing levels of arousal to some optimal point, whereupon further increases in arousal will produce a decrement in performance. Consequently, the university athlete must be assited to manage his/her anxiety effectively to ensure adequate performance. Silva and Weinberg (1984) noted that tasks requiring a great deal of precision, co-ordination and control, such as golf, archery, free-throw shooting and bowling would probably best be performed at low levels of arousal. In contrast, tasks that require more speed or strength such as weight lifting, tackling in football or throwing a shot put would most likely be performed best at relatively high levels of arousal.

Also, some athletes according to Silva and Winberg (1984) have been observed to perform very well when highly aroused or under intense pressure, whereas others tend to tighten up or "choke" under pressure. The implication of this for the university athlete is that he/she must be assisted or encouraged to reach his or her own optimal level of arousal to enhance performance in addition to employing appropriate mental preparation strategies to cope with high level of anxiety and to influence positively, levels of performance. Some of the mental preparation strategies (psyching-up procedures) used by athletes to enhance performance according to Shelton and Mahoney (1978) and Weinberg, Gould and Jackson (1980) include:

- a) attention focus - concentrating on the task and eliminating all irrelevant information,
- b) self-efficacy statements - telling one self, one can do it,



- c) relaxation - muscle relaxation,
- d) imaginery - picturing one-self in a perfect balance and
- e) preparatory arousal - trying to get "psyched-up" and aroused.

### Self Efficacy Statements

The athlete can engage in self-efficacy statement to build self confidence and belief in personal competence for the athletic task to be performed. The athlete can build his/her confidence by setting realistic goals of performance through graduated improvement of task. Mahoney (1979) has suggested other strategies for augmenting the self efficacy expectations (i.e. the strength of one's conviction that one can successfully execute a behavior required to produce a certain outcome) of athletes, which include:

- a) Response induction aids - devices that may reduce the perceived discrepancy between the athlete's current and desired performance;
- b) Modelling - having the athlete observe another practice saying statements to him/herself prior to performance;
- c) Self-efficacy statements - having an athlete practice saying statements to him/herself prior to performance;
- d) Imagery - having the athlete imagine him/herself performing the desired response.
- e) Verbal persuasion - reassuring and encouraging the athlete that he/she is capable of performing the desired response.
- f) Performance accomplishments - structuring the environment to create successful experience. Avoid focusing solely on outcome of event without considering the process or level of performance exhibited.

The athlete also needs to be aware of various techniques that can promote relaxation, since increased levels of anxiety may undermine performance. Some of the popular relaxation techniques include;

1. Jacobson's (1938) Progressive Relaxation - which teaches subjects to progressively tense and relax major muscles groups of the body and sensitising them back to proprioceptive feedback from these muscles.
2. Biofeed techniques which may be employed through a visual or audio signal equipment relaying back the physiological state of the subject depending on his/her state of tension.

### **Imaginery:**

Some studies have also investigated the effectiveness of imagery of physical performance, Silva and Weinberg (1984) noted that many athletes have reported that just prior to performance, they try to mentally picture themselves going through the actual movement in their mind and that many athletes and coaches feel that the way a player thinks is the way a player performs. Consequently, the athlete must be able to conceptualise the appropriate imagery to enhance performance. Some, individuals, however, have problems in visualising a task. Weinberg (1984) has summarised some basic guidelines for using imagery as part of an athlete's training regime as follows;

- i) Choose a place where there are no distractions so you can concentrate.
- ii) Try to use all sense modalities when imagining. If you imagine hitting a tennis serve, try to see yourself, feel the movement and hear the ball hitting the racket.
- iii) Focus on performing the skill perfectly; although occasionally you might see yourself making an error, recover and cope with failure.
- iv) Make sure imagery is included systematically into your workout regimen.
- v) Use imagery to go over and learn different strategies that you might use throughout the game
- vi) Before using imagery try to relax using one of the methods described; this should put you in a state of relaxed concentration.
- vii) Practice controlling your image until you get it to do what you want it to do.
- viii) Try imagine as vividly as possible and practice getting a clear image.

### **Preparatory Arousal:**

This entails getting "psyched-up" or "charged-up or aroused just before performance. Preparatory arousal has been found helpful in some cases especially for strength tasks which require speed or endurance.

## **CAREER COUNSELLING AND THE UNIVERSITY ATHLETE**

The athlete has the advantage of pursuing a career in his/her academic programme and may also opt to pursue a career in athletic or sports in future with additional training. His/her athletic skills may serve as incentive or motivation to pursue occupations in athletics and sports with appropriate and additional qualifications. The athlete for

instance, can pursue occupations concerned with application of the theoretical or practical aspects of athletics and sports which may include coaching other athletes or giving instructions in other sporting activities if exposed to further training in physical and health education. The athlete may himself/herself become any of the following;

- a) Coach to professional athletes - instructing players in techniques of different games.
- b) Athletic Trainer - evaluating the physical conditions of athletes, prescribing routine and corrective exercises and engaging in other activities to promote the performance and enhance the safety and welfare of athletes.
- c) Scout for professional sports - negotiating for and selecting athletes after evaluation of skills and securing contracts for athletes.
- d) Instructor - teaching individuals or groups calisthenics, gymnastics, body movements or various skills in sports or teaching sport activity to individual or groups at private or public recreational facilities.

The athlete who is also a degree or diploma holder in physical and health education, can seek career opportunities in community and corporate physical fitness, in private or governmental agencies relating to sports, commercial and professional sport enterprises, sport medicine or sport journalism to mention a few. The extent of training and the type of training may also determine the career opportunities available to such a student. With exposure to relevant programmes in physical and health education, the athlete can also opt for sport science and he or she has employment opportunities in places of employment relating to community fitness, public and private recreation and preventive medicine, military settings where fitness is required and teaching physical education at various levels of education.

## CONCLUSION

Participation in athletics while in the university can be a rewarding experience to each athlete. In a university setting, the athlete is likely to be exposed to better facilities and equipment that can enhance his/her performance in sports. The athlete needs to harness all resources available to him or her to maintain high academic performance and sustain essential athletic performance.

Recognition of the importance of physical exercises (as an essential component in athletic competition) by the athlete, as a means not only to improve performance, but also to improve the mental health of the individual, can serve as a motivating factor to succeed both in the academic programme and in sports. The university athlete can also venture into careers in athletics and sports.

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