

Between Sport and Education. Pedagogical reflections about the *Dual Career of Athletes*

Tra Sport ed Educazione. Riflessioni pedagogiche sulla *Dual Career degli atleti*

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Abstract

The *Dual Career of Athletes* represents a chance for élite athletes involved in higher education too, from school to University, to be able to successfully combine excellence in sport with higher education, with the intent to prevent school and university drop-out, increasing the number of university graduates, as well as the rise of the European employability rate, things at the basis of the European 2020 Strategy. Under investigation are the institutions that organize and govern sport and education, because it seems useless to talk about a fruitful integration between sport and education where the skills developed in the first are not seen as value and resource in the second, and vice versa. Even if Italy has witnessed a rapid spread of research projects and guidelines about the *Dual Career of Athletes*, which have spread an increasing recognition of sport in school and university, pedagogy critically contributes in suggesting guidance as a tool of harmonious integration between sport and education that, first of all, concerns the subject's identity as athlete and as student.

La *Dual Career of Athletes* rappresenta una possibilità per gli atleti di élite che sono impegnati anche nei percorsi di formazione formale, dalla scuola all'università, di riuscire a conciliare con successo il percorso sportivo di eccellenza con quello formativo di tipo formalizzato, con l'intento di prevenire il *drop-out* scolastico ed universitario, l'aumento del numero di laureati, nonché l'innalzamento dei tassi di *employability* europei, obiettivi questi alla base della strategia Europa 2020. Sotto inchiesta, allora, sono le istituzioni che organizzano e regolano i percorsi sportivi e quelli d'istruzione, alla luce del fatto che sembrerebbe inutile parlare di una proficua integrazione tra sport e formazione laddove le competenze maturate nel primo non passino come un valore e una risorsa nella seconda, e viceversa. Seppur anche in Italia si sia assistito ad una rapida diffusione di progetti di ricerca e linee guida sulla doppia carriera che vanno in direzione di un sempre maggiore riconoscimento dello sport nei contesti d'istruzione, la pedagogia apporta un contributo critico su questa tematica, proponendo la diffusione di percorsi di orientamento che siano a sostegno di una integrazione armonica tra sport e formazione e che, innanzitutto, interessa la dimensione identitaria del soggetto, come atleta e come studente.

Keywords

Dual Career of Athletes, Sport, Drop-Out, Higher Education, Guidance

Dual Career degli Atleti, Sport, Drop-Out, Alta Formazione, Guida

The manuscript is the results of a joint work of the Authors to be attributed to the Author2 for the paragraphs 1 and 4, to the Author 1 for the paragraphs 2 and 3.

Il manoscritto è il risultato di un lavoro da riferirsi all'Autore 2 per i paragrafi 1 e 4, all'Autore 1 per i paragrafi 2 e 3.

1. Introduction

In recent decades many intervention strategies have been developed, which the most important international governmental organizations promote in favor of an organic development of sports and physical activities on a global scale. As regards high-level sport, the European Commission has long focused on its promotion in formal learning contexts; as the Lisbon European Treaty has established, for example, requiring member countries to increase the practice of physical activities and sports to promote a “healthy” European development (European Commission, 2009). The strong interest in sports and physical activities in formal learning contexts, mainly at school, was due to a twofold motivation: if, on the one hand, these are recognized as curricular activities in every respect and at the same level of the other study disciplines, on the other hand, the teaching practice (and more generally the common sense) yet poorly tend to recognize them of equal dignity to others, like a real educational device in the formal context (Bellantonio, 2016), thanks not only to the pervasive mind/body dichotomy that still widespread in the learning/teaching contexts, but also to the small number of hours that school dedicates specifically to these activities (EACEA, 2013). A rather widespread cultural perspective, in fact, which still inspires the formal training process, keeps considering the activities related to the body, movement and sport, as a minority compared to other domains of knowledge, the result of interpretive positions that, over time, have embraced the relationship between education and body (Cunti, 2015, 2016a; Galimberti, 1987; Isidori, Fraile, 2008; Sarsini, 2005), confining these activities on the sidelines of the educational programming.

According to a vision of *lifelong*, *life-wide* and *life-deep* learning, namely permanent, pervasive and profound learning, the European Commission has shown a keen interest in the theme of the *Dual Career of Athletes*, a chance for athletes engaged in formal training, from school to University, to be able to successfully combine the sports excellence path with that of formalized training type; from this perspective, knowledge and skills gained within the sports context do not exclusively concern that field, rather they represent a “toolbox” employable in all other realms of existence, at least in the light of the fact that any form of knowledge is constructed by means of a relationship of co-adaptation to the environment (Bateson, 1976/1949), in an explicit or latent way (Bruner, 1992/1991), by contributing significantly to a global, holistic and not limited subject’s education. So in the context of formal education the subject can only be considered in all his complexity and uniqueness, the result of the experience gained in the various learning contexts, even those sporting ones, unlike a didactic traditionalism that, yet today, tends to emphasize the too intellectual and verbal components, which contrasts sharply with a constructivist view of knowledge, and that has been widely recognized, from a scientific perspective, at pedagogical and educational level (Cunti, 2014). Teaching practices focused on the acquisition, retention and repetition of contents, at the expense of comprehensive and holistic phenomena (Cunti, 2008, 2014), do not favor a desirable decompartmentalisation of knowledge (Gardner, 1991a/ 1983/1989, 1991b; Morin, 1993/1991) as well as a knowledge of self as corporeality, as mind/body inseparable unit; so under investigation are the institutions and educational systems that organize and regulate sports and educational paths, in light of the fact that it seems pointless to mention a profitable integration between sport and education, where the skills acquired in the first are not seen as a value and as an asset in the latter, and vice versa.

2. The Reasons Behind the *Dual Career of Athletes* in Europe

On the political front, it was in 2012 that the European Commission published the guidelines on the dual careers for athletes, underlining mainly the legal recognition of the status of “student-athlete” (European Commission, 2012) as the first decisive step towards the legitimate approval of a category of students requiring special psycho-educational attention, especially in light of the fact that in Europe, even today, there is a political, legal and educational effective integration between the

educational system and that sports one (Bastianon, 2014). This problem, in addition to concerning the operational plan, is mainly related to that of a real sharing of intents, to the way education considers sport and the way the latter considers education (Cunti, 2010); therefore, it is about promoting a genuine recognition of the subject's education from both parties called into question.

Unlike some extra-European countries, like the United States for example, where sport is an integral part of formal training paths – it is enough to refer to the high percentage of athletes in the students' population (Shulman and Bowen, 2001) and to the consideration of current or former athletes' sports curricula as privileged criterion for admission to undergraduate courses (Bowen & Levin, 2003), in terms of formal education, as well as the organization of sports calendar that promote competition in times of the year that allow athletes to combine sport with the academic path (ibid.), in terms of sport – in Europe, to date, it is hard to recognize high-level sport within these contexts (Guidotti & Capranica, 2013). In fact, the integration of these areas of education as an integral and inseparable part of the athlete's growth path, being him a subject, concerns both contexts; if, in the sports context, formal training is not seen as something positive but as an activity that distracts the young from concentrating on his tasks, in that of education, training activities are often considered minus and does not allow students/athletes attending school or university as they would. Furthermore, as pointed out in some research contributions (Simons *et al.*, 2007), there are frequent prejudices that teachers and students have towards athletes who are engaged in formal training, who have little confidence in their ability to efficiently mix the two careers, contributing significantly to a drop-out and increasing social stigma related to the fact that those who carry out high-level sport paths – as well as artistic or music ones, for example – are not able to develop properly in other domains of knowledge, as if the increase in the degree of skill and knowledge held on one of the two sides matches with a certain decrease in the other; more specifically in sports context, in other words, students who are simultaneously also athletes are downgraded to a lower level than those focusing exclusively on a cultural education, understood in the traditional sense.

For these reasons, the European Commission has just questioned on the needs and opportunities for those who hardly mix high-level sports activity and study, and that, in some cases, end up favoring the sports career at the expense of the educational one, proving to be unable to reconcile the too much time for practicing sport with the too little time for studying; it follows that, if some people decide to engage themselves almost entirely in the excellence sports career, thus increasing significantly the phenomenon of school and university *drop-out* (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003) and exacerbating the issue of end-of-sporting-career professional retraining (Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2012), others tend to continue their training path, thus abandoning the sports one (Amara, Aquilina, Henry, 2004; Aquilina, 2013). However, the phenomenon of sport drop-out has some peculiarities, which concern some specific factors of the sports practiced, such as their typology, the characteristics of competitions, the economic and material resources around them, elements that influence significantly the adaptive management of the subject to the dual career path (López de Subijana *et al.*, 2014); at this point, it is very likely that such conditions may push the subject to dropping out his educational career (Álvarez & López, 2012, Selva, Pallarès & González, 2013), as well as the sports one, which requires a particular attention to educational and sports systems so to try to stem the emerging criticalities. As observed by some experts (Guidotti & Capranica, 2013), although Europe is aiming at reducing the phenomenon of school, university and sport drop-out, still today among the national policies on promoting dual career paths there are considerable discrepancies; if some countries tend to have direct and centralized control over the double career paths, others leave the subject the burden/honor to best and autonomously mix the planning and integration of study and training sessions (Aquilina & Henry, 2010), with the risk of becoming a sort of organizational *burn-out*.

Therefore, it is very important to deal with this issue with a multi-perspective approach, with the awareness that, as detected from some research data, the factors that determine a positive adaptation of the subject to professional path and dual career path refer to both *internal factors*, such as personal resources, Self-Esteem, motivation and Self-Efficacy, both to *external*

factors, such as social support obtained within the family, at school and in sports environments (2007 Alfermann & Stambulova; Guidotti *et al.*, 2014; Lenténé & Perényi, 2015); this concerns very closely the way in which students/athletes deal with the problems and the way in which the contexts of experience support it, which, in the first instance requires an education to the development of these strategies in sports that puts the subject, in his entirety, at the center of the educational process (Bellantonio, 2014). From this perspective, a sharing of attempts from social systems called into question – among which there are family, school, university and sports governing bodies – is necessary so to renew a rather stigmatized view of the athlete; in such sense, it emerges that the programs of double career need, from the one hand, a cooperation between the world of education and that of sport, in order to achieve a common objective – the education of the athlete as a subject – and, from the other hand, an involvement of the families of the athletes in the goals and purpose of these programs. The idea underlying this perspective is that to consider the subject according to a lifespan approach; in other words, the sports career is not understood as an existential trajectory extirpated from the others fields of the existence, but rather as a process that becomes part in that integral of total development. The many processes of growth, structuring and re-configuration of identities also include the kind of sport, made up of existential transitions that go hand in hand with the more typically transition processes towards adulthood (Hauser, Bowlds, 1990), during which subjects change some salient aspects of their identity, as well as social bonds and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1986/1979, Elder, 1985).

From what we have claimed, it is possible to fully understand the urgent need for drawing up European Guidelines to guide Member States towards greater awareness on this issue, in order to implement those joint action strategies that can generate organizational prerequisites useful for spreading dual career paths for athletes (European Commission, 2012). For these reasons, the European Guidelines emphasize, first and foremost, the role played by the various institutional bodies in promoting effective double-career programs, and identify areas of intervention on which to work to achieve the objectives; in that sense, therefore, the European Commission declares its commitment to supporting cooperation between the governing bodies involved, both through monitoring and evaluating the processes in place and through economic incentives for athletes mobility programs.

Ultimately, it is through a networking that athletes can be given the chance to combine sports career with study/work without unreasonable efforts and in a flexible way, so as not to compromise the goals of the sports and educational career; it is in connection to what we have reported that the concept of dual career in sports becomes part of the broader framework for achieving the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, such as the prevention of school and university *drop-out*, the increasing number of graduates, and the rise in European *employability* rates.

3. Dual Career of Athletes Projects in Italy: Research and Intervention Dimensions

As discussed in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), youth, education, vocational training and sport are listed among the areas of intervention in which Europe needs to urgently take measures, in order to coordinate and complete the actions taken by Member States (Bastianon, 2014); in line with this and with reference to the guidelines issued in 2012, there are many research and intervention projects that, also in Italy, are concerned with the theme of the Dual Career of Athletes.

In the field of the research, there are no significant studies in Italy that deepen the theme of the Dual Career of Athletes at school; starting from this assumption, the University of Rome “Foro Italico” has been trying to develop a pedagogical model useful for the implementation of effective educational interventions at school through a systemic approach (Migliorati, Maulini, Isidori, 2016), which will be followed by an assessment of the degree of validity through evi-

dence-based methodologies. However, even though there are still no *ad hoc* conventions among sports organizations, training and education systems and the world of work, a decisive turning point has to be considered the establishment of the Sports High Schools, as well as Law 107/2015, the so-called “Buona Scuola”, which also opened the possibility of launching protocols between school institutions and sports associations, for the development of effective double career paths for athletes in Upper Secondary School; in sports schools, in fact, in addition to a substantial increase in the hours spent in physical education, some traditional disciplines are replaced by other more relevant to physical education and sports activities, thus promoting the inclusion of students/athletes (Salisci, 2016).

In the field of University, the European Parliament has implemented, for the three-year period 2015-2017, the research project called “Developing an Innovative European Sport Tutorship Model for the Dual Career of Athletes” (ESTPORT, 2017) in the field of the Erasmus+ Project of which Italy is part too, in order to promote and support the practice of sports through the development of dual careers for athletes according to a pedagogical guidance tutorship. The project involves the *University Católica San Antonio of Murcia* (Spain), the *University of Thessaly* (Greece), the *University of Malta* (Republic of Malta), *Trinity University of Leeds* (United Kingdom), *Europa Community Ltd.* (United Kingdom) and, for what concerns Italy, the University of Rome “*Foro Italico*”. With the primary aim of designing guidance strategies for students/athletes based on evidence-based research methodology, it was decided to draw up and validate a questionnaire on the perceptions that high-level students/athletes have about their double career path, in order to obtain a valid questionnaire useful for dealing with the criticalities expressed by many professional athletes or potential athletes, just in conciliating double career paths (Sánchez-Pato *et al.*, 2016).

In the field of school, in accordance with art. n.1, paragraph n.7 of Law 107 of 2015, the M.D 935/2015 on “high-level Student-Athlete didactic Experimentation” was issued, which provided for an experimental innovative school educational program for high-level students/athletes attending upper Secondary Schools (MIUR, 2015); the program promoted by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research), in collaboration with the CONI (Italian National Olympic Committee), the A Series League of FIGC (Italian Football Federation) and the CIP (Italian Paralympic Committee), involves currently more than 400 students in 17 Italian regions and represents a first important step towards the actual recognition of student/athlete *status* in the school, and with which traditional didactics have to start dealing.

As for the contribution from the management and high-level sports dissemination bodies in Italy, the CONI’ Sport School has been the territorial partner of the European project GEES (Gold in Education and Elite Sport), which involved about ten thousand athletes by supporting them in career paths; more specifically, the goal of the project was to define the skills needed for the development of a successful double career, in order to provide responses to the needs of students/athletes, even by actors actively involved in the sports field. The project is an opportunity to provide students/athletes with the best training support for a successful double career (De Brandt, Wylleman, Defruyt, Taelman, 2016), which confirmed the need for a holistic approach to issues related to the *Dual Career of Athletes* (Wylleman, Reints & De Knop, 2013), taking into account both the psychological processes involved (MacNamara & Collins, 2010) and the natural existential drives aiming at a change and that see the subject as the active protagonist of his wide-ranging life choices and plans.

The activities reported in this contribution, though not being able to report the quality of the actions expressed in terms of dual careers, at least in the light of the fact that some of the research and actions are still being tested, represent a significant insight into what happens in Italy and show the fact that, still today, it is necessary to keep promoting a change in the cultural direction on the political, social, educational-training and sports field according to a systemic perspective; the pedagogical challenge is then to change the stated intentions into authentic operative planning, where it seems that a reform of thought about the contribution that training can make to the subject’s wellbeing in his entirety, and along his evolutionary and emancipation path, is necessary.

4. Between Sport and Education: Pedagogical Considerations “On the Margins”

Even though the actions of the political, educational, training and sports systems in the field of dual career are to be considered as a first decisive step towards a genuine recognition of sport in the context of education, and not only, it seems appropriate to make some pedagogical considerations on the margins that can improve these practices, and that help them somehow reflect on what is being done and can still be hopefully done in this area.

A fundamental reflection from which to start refers to the fact that, very often, sports context is preferred as an area of life and interest, sometimes exclusively, to the expense of other contexts of experience, such as school/university and vice versa, and this may have very strong influences on the process of structuring and consolidating students/athletes in the adolescent phase and in their transition to adulthood; to that effect, in fact, recognizing oneself and being socially recognized first as adolescents/young adults, rather than as athletes, seems to be the main educational point from which to start, and that concerns the identity construction. While it is true that, during adolescence, the identity of student is the one recognized to a greater extent at social level (Pietropolli-Charmet, 1991), as is the case of identity of worker during adulthood, then, in order not to feed on further criticalities, it is useful to support the entire athlete's path of growth at educational level, and to make it easier for adults to transit into adulthood; in this sense, the athlete who is approaching this step of his cycle of life – in having to make choices that could cause him to leave his sports activities, for example seeking a job, as well as dropping out the formal training path, giving up his career as a sportsman – could find himself faced with a real *identity crisis* (Erikson 2000/1968), since he hasn't had the chance to experience, in a joint and articulated way, rather diversified forms of his existence that can cause him to re-think himself constantly. Consider, in this regard, the young promising athletes who are involved in early specialization sport, where the phase of the so-called refinement, which is the most delicate in terms of performance, tends just to match with the phase of transition to full adolescence, a situation that goes hand in hand with the more typical transition phases of this age; it follows that, being him not able to handle the complexity of these developmental tasks, it reminds the subject to have a defeatist attitude with respect to what he is and what he will be, making choices which can privilege some of them rather than others.

It is well understood that, at this point, the issue should not concern the specific moment of transition – the moment in which a subject wonders about what it is like to be not athlete anymore and what skills have been developed over time, in addition to the sport-related ones – but it covers the subject's whole path of growth; in this sense, if an individual is “educated” somehow to be an athlete and also a student, without a dimension prevailing over the other, then the existential transitions in sport can become beautiful moments of experimentation of Self. A “positive” viewpoint change, in this sense, allows the subject expressing himself with greater degrees of freedom, making diversified experiences and guiding towards the future. For this reason, the guidance function of education becomes an essential quality at the foundations of training in the sports field (Cunti, 2016b); as emphasized by some research contributions (Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978), in fact, the reason that pushes subjects to abandon sports activity in the late adolescent period is related to the desire to start engaging in other activities, among which the search for a job position is prevalent; the same longevity in sports practice could be then fostered by the proactive function that the orientation could play in the sports field, thus limiting the phenomenon of drop-out.

Ultimately, the perspective at which to aim is a *guidance towards education* and a *education towards guidance* in order to implement effective programs of the *Dual Career of Athletes*, which requires a radical change in the approach that has historically marked the sport-education duo in Italy, and not only. From lifelong learning perspective, hostilities still deeply rooted in the harmonious integration between sport and formal education/formation require a radical process of change in the functions and relationships between formal educational/formative systems and sports, in a systemic perspective, where guidance represents a quality of education to be put in the foreground.

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