

## Finding Balance Within Excellence

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### Abstract

Essential physical and mental requirements have been recognized as necessary for excellence in sport. However, minimal research has examined the lives of high performance athletes as a whole and their perception of balance or imbalance in their life. The present study, therefore, set out to explore elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and modified self-report diaries (Krampe, 1994) were conducted with 10 elite athletes (5 currently competing and 5 retired athletes). Inductive analysis of interview transcripts revealed that half of these athletes (2 current and 3 retired) defined balance primarily as having a vision or goal and striving towards it, while the other half (3 current and 2 retired) defined balance as respecting different parts of their lives. Balance in these athletes' lives was perceived to fluctuate in cycles in accordance with their needs and wants for particular times in their lives. Athletes identified six prerequisites for attaining balance: (1) make a conscious decision to have balance; (2) have strong self discipline; (3) enjoy what you are doing; (4) have a supportive network; (5) have leisure time; and (6) be in the moment.

### Introduction

Much of the psychologically based research with high performance athletes has focused on the mental factors associated with excellence (Botterill, Patrick & Sawatzky, 1996; Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993; Orlick, 1996; Orlick & Partington, 1988). Researchers have also examined time demands and practice requirements for expert performance in the domains of music, arts, sports and sciences (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). However, few studies have adopted a holistic approach when examining the lives of elite athletes and their perceptions of balance or imbalance in their lives.

Orlick (1998) has advocated the importance of maintaining a sense of balance and perspective in sport and life when pursuing ongoing excellence. Through his work with thousands of athletes, he has come to recognize the role that balance can play in high-level performers' careers. Orlick (1998) has defined balance as "finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life, and living those loves - every day. Balance is respecting your needs for achievement and relaxation, work and play, giving and receiving, intimacy and personal space" (p.xiii).

To our knowledge, there is no empirical research that has investigated elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives. Do elite athletes feel that they have or do not have balance in their lives? How do they define balance? How do they view the quality of their lives? Given the scarcity of research on elite performers perspectives' on balance in life, much can be gained by exploring this uncharted domain. In the present research ten elite athletes were engaged in in-depth interviews to explore their perceptions of balance. More specifically, the following areas were examined: (a) the athletes' definitions of balance; (b) their perceptions of balance in their lives; (c) their views on prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance in their lives; (d) their perceptions of excellence; (e) their views on quality of life; and (f) recommendations for other athletes striving for balance during their competitive years.

The business literature has addressed the issue of balance primarily with respect to time management. Since Drucker (1966) first popularized the concept of time management, supporting studies have shown that employees who are good at managing their time are generally more successful than those who are poor at doing so (Evans & Bartolome, 1981; Kotter, 1982; MacKenzie, 1990). According to Lakein's (1991) description of time management, individuals must first determine their needs, then rank them in terms of importance, while wasting no time on unimportant tasks. Specific actions involved setting primary work-related goals and prioritizing the tasks necessary to accomplish them (Lee & Kanungo, 1984; Macan, 1994). Time management efficiency was directed at better on-site work achievement and not necessarily individuals' lives as a whole.

Research examining demanding occupations has indicated that many people involved in this type of work had an overload of time demands placed upon them. Many upper management positions require individuals to work more than 60 hours over a six day work week and irregular hours, with endless requests placed on their time (Evans & Bartolome, 1981; Gullotta & Donohue, 1981, Kotter, 1982). As additional demands placed on their time increases, the possibility of the individual experiencing burnout becomes even greater (Boswell O'Brien, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

The harmful effects from overload on the individual also appeared to transfer into other aspects of their life. Aldous (1969) found that occupations with irregular hours, as well as those taking a spouse away from home for days or weeks at a time placed a strain on the family unit. The majority of the individuals' time was spent on the business aspect of their lives; leaving little time for non-job related activities. At many upper management levels, executives contributed more in terms of finances than time involvement to their family (Gullotta & Donohue, 1981).

Although the business literature presents a picture of possible consequences of occupations with excessive time demands, the questions of interest to this study remain unaddressed. How did these overworked individuals perceive the balance in their life? How did they try to achieve balance in their life, or did they disregard balance all together? More important for the current study is the question of how elite athletes respond to these questions.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included 10 elite athletes, more specifically, 5

currently competing and 5 retired athletes. The sample consisted of 4 females and 6 males between 23 to 38 years of age at the time of the interview. Collectively, the athletes had won 11 Olympic medals (6 gold, 4 silver and 1 bronze) and 14 world championships. All of the athletes were medallists at the Olympic or World Championship level with the exception of two individuals.

The currently competing athletes represented the sports of ice hockey, track and field, cycling, canoeing, and rowing. The retired athletes represented the sports of swimming, canoeing, bobsled, sailing/rowing, and biathlon. Furthermore, the athletes were citizens of the following three countries: Canada, the United States and Switzerland.

Individual interviews were arranged through personal contacts. The investigator informed each participant of the nature and purpose of the research, emphasizing that all information would be kept confidential and anonymous. After obtaining the participants' consent to take part in the interview, arrangements were made to send them diary forms. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience.

## **Data Collection**

### **Diary Forms**

In order to increase our understanding of the amount of time the participants invested in their sport, three diary forms were sent to and completed by each athlete prior to conducting the interviews. The diary forms asked participants to describe a typical day (Diary form 1) and a typical year (Diary form 2) during their most successful competitive years. The third diary form asked participants to record estimates of the amount of training they did over the span of their sporting career. Diary form 1 and diary form 3 were adapted from Krampe's (1994)

work with expert pianists and diary form 2 was adapted from a study conducted with Canadian National team coaches (Zitzelsberger & Orlick, 1998). This form asked participants to record their sport-related activities during their most competitive year.

### **Interviews**

The interview guide was developed based on input from elite athletes in a pilot study and the second author who has extensive experience in interviewing methodology. Each participant was asked to respond to the set of questions from the interview guide which included an inquiry into: (a) the athletes' definition of balance; (b) their perceptions of balance in their lives; (c) prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance in their lives; (d) their perceptions of excellence; (e) their views on quality of life; and (e) recommendations for other athletes striving for balance during their competitive years.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Every participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript in order to confirm that the information accurately reflected their perceptions. In each case, they confirmed that what was recorded and transcribed was an accurate account of their personal views and experiences. This process ensured the credibility of the data prior to analysis.

Once the transcripts were returned they were analyzed inductively. The objective of the analysis was to allow concepts and themes to emerge from the participants' answers in order to build an overall framework of their perceptions of balance. The inductive analysis was initiated by organizing the participants' responses into relevant segments of text or meaning units with the connection to the whole being maintained

(Tesch, 1990). More specifically, a meaning unit is a “segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information” (Tesch, 1990, p.116). Common meaning units were compiled together into flexible categories that were inductively organized into common themes. This process, adapted from Glaser and Strauss’ (1967), involved comparing and contrasting the data until no more general themes arose from the data. This provided a framework to present the elite athletes’ perceptions of balance.

A member check was conducted to further validate interpretations of the participants’ perceptions. Member checking is a process by which the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions are tested with the participants from whom the data was originally collected. This involved faxing each participant a final summary interpretation of their interview. Similar to the check done with the interview transcript, they confirmed that what they received provided an accurate interpretation of their personal views and experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to member checking as the most important technique for establishing credibility of the data.

## Results and Discussion

The interviews were analyzed using inductive content analysis methods. Specific themes are presented and discussed in conjunction with direct quotes from the interviews in order to present the participants’ perspectives in their own words. The main areas that are discussed include: (a) definition of balance; (b) perceptions of personal balance at an elite level; (c) prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance at an elite level; (d) perceptions of excellence; (e) quality of life; (f) factors affecting balance; and (g) recommendations for achieving balance during competitive years.

## Definitions of Balance

In the present research, an attempt was made to avoid imposing a pre-established definition of balance onto the participants. It was felt that this open-ended approach would help to draw out their personal definitions and perspectives on balance in their lives. Through the interviews, it became very apparent that the issue of balance was of great concern to every athlete. Every athlete had interesting insights regarding their own balance and their definition of balance. The following quotes illustrate specific definitions of balance.

### Current Athletes’ Definitions of Balance

Balance is being content with yourself and not being reliant on one aspect of your life. If your sport goes down and that is all you have then you are not balanced and at the same time if a relationship is all you have and it goes down hill and you are a waste product afterwards then you are not balanced. You have to have personal goals, friendships, relationships, career objectives and other interests to have balance. Not being too dependent on one thing. (C2)

*Balance is feeling that all areas in your life are in order. That you are not worrying about other things because you are so focused on something else. I think balance is like a circle where you have these periods where you are focused on one thing and you can't do anything else but then you have these periods where you are “normal” and can do other things. (C5)*

*I picture balance as a huge trampoline with a puddle of water in the middle of it. Around the trampolines' edge are all the areas of my life. Balance is finding an inner harmony where all areas of my life are all in synch or where the water is close to the middle where I can handle it. Inner harmony means lis-*

*tening to yourself, not everyone else and focusing on one thing at a time. (C1)*

### **Retired Athletes' Definitions of Balance**

*Balance is having a meaningful goal or vision where to go. You are able to suffer a bit for that mission because you know you want to pursue this mission. What I am seeking brings out meaning. That brings balance automatically because you are pursuing something that has a lot of meaning and you can really push yourself because you want to and you know how to. (R3)*

*Balance is being able to set goals, make a plan and go through with it. Balance means being able to use logic, heart and having fun with it at the same time in order to make the right decisions. (R1)*

*Balance in life means not feeling like you are being pulled in any one direction. It means contentment and lack of stress. It means having to think about what you are doing. I think a lot of people that don't have balance just live their lives not thinking about it. I know I always thought about it. I saw it like a triangle of sport, school and social life where each side was important but I had to keep them separate enough to not have them override too much. (R5)*

Two main themes emerged from these ten athletes' definitions of balance. For half of these athletes (2 current athletes and 3 retired athletes), balance was defined primarily as having a vision or goal and going after it because this gave meaning to their life. The other half (3 current athletes and 2 retired athletes), defined balance primarily as respecting the different parts of their life.

The athletes who defined balance primarily as pursuing a meaningful vision or

goal emphasized that it was a “planned focus.” These athletes were focused on a certain path in their life and felt that they were balanced when they made the best decisions with those goals in mind. This included respecting their body's need for proper recovery in order to push themselves to the limit.

The athletes who defined balance primarily as respecting the different parts of their lives accentuated the importance of not being too reliant on one aspect of their life. More specifically, they emphasized that balance centered on the need to have multiple areas of their life in order. These athletes felt that to be balanced they should fully respect the different aspects of their lives outside of their sport. Moreover, these athletes believed that when their life was more “well-rounded,” they had better results in their respective sports. This definition also coincides with Orlick's (1998) vision of balance as “finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life, and living those loves” (p.xiii).

One theme that every athlete alluded to with respect to balance in their life was the importance of knowing and respecting themselves. They felt that if they knew themselves and respected what they knew, then they could achieve a higher level of balance. Specifically, this meant paying attention to their personal needs, trusting their beliefs and instincts, and not blindly accepting what others were advising them to do. As one athlete expressed it, “You have to find out what works best for you. You have to choose what information will work for you. Not someone else” (R3). Another athlete expressed it as follows:

*I realized that I could be my best when I didn't force myself to do something I*

*really didn't want to do. I have figured out what I enjoy, what my constraints are and how to deal with the things I can't change. I never force myself to do things, even if others say it worked for them. I know what works best for me. (C3)*

One common requirement for all these elite athletes was the time commitment necessary to achieve their elite status in their respective sports. Every athlete's diary form revealed an average of 4 to 8 hours a day, 6 times a week spent engaged in their sport during their competitive season. One athlete commented, "Balance is having the training component but also quality rest and relaxation with your friends, family and yourself without feeling stressed." (C4). This currently competing athlete was a world champion and was successfully pursuing a graduate degree in the "off-season". These athletes clearly accepted the time required to excel in their sport and knew that it clearly exceeded the amount of time spent in other important areas of their lives, such as family and friends, or leisure time.

## **Perceptions of Personal Balance**

### **Current Athletes' Perceptions**

During the interview each athlete was asked the following question; "Can you step outside of yourself for a moment and tell me, if other people were looking at your life, how do you think they would see it in terms of balance?" Every currently competing athlete stated that if other people were looking at their lives with respect to balance, they would probably view it as unbalanced.

*I think others would be appalled at the amount of training we do. They would think I was unbalanced, but in a good way. Unbalanced has such negative connotations to it, I like to say more committed or focused. People say to me, "Is there some*

*magic pill I can take to make me get up and exercise early in the morning?" I just do it because it is fun and I like it. Exercise is good so why not take it to the extreme! How many researchers and professionals who are doing really well at something put most of their time into it? Is that deviant? You have to be almost obsessed with it. To me, I see that I have this opportunity to be the best in the world, why wouldn't I take that opportunity? It is almost like this carrot dangling there in front of me. I am in the system that gives me the tools to do it. I have this coach and amazing teammates and there is nothing else I could imagine doing. I feel pretty lucky. (C5)*

A general theme that emerged from the interviews was the changing context of balance. "You have periods when you are focused on one thing and other periods when you can focus on other things." (C5). Part of balance is being flexible and adapting appropriately for the training or competitive period you are going through. Regardless of whether an athlete had defined balance as a "planned focus" or "respecting the different areas of their life," the level of balance in their life seemed to shift in accordance with their priorities at that time.

*I think my life is seasonally unbalanced. During the main competitive season, it is unbalanced. It puts a strain on my relationship. In the winter, I think it is balanced. I know I have to make a big effort to try to keep my relationship and not be totally dependent on my racing. Other people looking at my life would not think my life was balanced because my sport is a complete passion for me. (C2)*

This "shift" in balance in their lives was viewed as doing the appropriate thing at the right time, which may include investing more time in their sport for a certain period

of time at the expense of other important aspects of their lives. There also appeared to be an inherent view that to achieve and maintain balance you must be committed to work towards that goal. Athletes must be ready to work to achieve their desired level of balance and to take advantage of the “shifts” associated with this process.

### **Retired Athletes’ Perceptions**

During their most competitive sporting years, three retired elite athletes felt that their life was balanced while two felt that it wasn’t. Here is an illustration of imbalance:

*I was totally out of balance. I was excessive and very intense. Trained too hard and over-trained. I am an incredibly driven person, I like to work hard, and it gives me a good feeling. At that point I thought I was balanced if I ate well and had a good night’s sleep and was well prepared for practice. (R4)*

The following two quotes represent the retired athletes who felt their life was balanced during their competitive years.

*I think my senior year in college I had the most personal balance because of the way my social life, sport and school were going. It was the year I did the best in school for some reason and I swam really well. Looking back to that year, all three of the things that I think are important meshed well together but I was able to keep them separate enough to have them not override too much. (R5)*

*The focus is just so different now. I had things in balance for what I wanted to achieve then, but I had one thing- my sport. My life was very simple and straightforward then. I don’t think a lot of teenagers and people in their early twenties are really*

*committed and would put that much energy into one aspect of their life or achieving at that level. Now I have so many more demands and responsibilities that it is much harder to balance. I think that balance goes full cycle. When I was competing it was simple. Now things are very complicated and then they will get simple again, that’s the way life goes and that’s the way life is supposed to go. As you get older, life gets simple again because you have fewer responsibilities and fewer things to be involved in. You are more centered on what you want to do and that’s the way my life used to be when I was competing. (R2)*

### **Prerequisites to Achieve Balance**

The participants were asked if there were any prerequisites they had to respect in order to experience balance in their lives. All 10 participants identified the following six main prerequisites: (1) make a conscious decision to have balance; (2) have strong self-discipline; (3) enjoy what you are doing; (4) have a supportive network; (5) have leisure time; and (6) be in the moment.

### **Conscious Decision**

Every athlete felt that in order to experience the balance they wanted in their life, they had to make a conscious decision to pursue that objective. When they were discussing this prerequisite for balance, three of the five athletes who had previously defined balance as “respecting the different areas of their life,” made reference to their teammates. They talked about their teammates who did not have balance because their sport was their only focus: “Sport was their only priority.”

Five athletes mentioned coaches and the value of finding more balance in their pursuit.

*Our head coach has always told us that if you are only training then it is not good for your mental health. It won't improve your paddling and it won't improve you as a person, that is a real key thing. In the past, I have always been over consumed with training because it is such a big part of my life, I'd always be thinking about it and I'd weigh myself down. Now I make sure I have enough time off when I need it and go relax and do things like normal people do. It is what I want too, not just him telling us. I find I need that, to get away from it and take a break. (C4)*

*We were in this city the other week and I talked to some athletes who were on another National team. They have to be at their training center now so they can't go to school because they have to train full time for the World Championships next year. Their training center is this compound 40 miles out of town and they aren't allowed to have guests stay over. They (guests) have to be out by 10 p.m. even if they are married. By the time they get to the Olympics they are burnt out, they don't want to see another one. They ended up being 4th at the Olympics and they were World Champions the year before, so they were the favourite to win but they were self-destructive. I asked them why they went to that awful camp and they said if the coach invites you and you don't go, then it is very hard to make the team again. Whereas our coach is very good at finding people across the country who are strong and do well and he sends out letters and makes himself available to people. If they want to tryout for the team they can contact him. He talks with everyone to see what is best for them. This non-militant style helped us win the Olympic medal I am sure.” (C5)*

### **Self-discipline**

Although advice from others may have been well received, it was evident that these athletes were very self-directed individuals who liked to direct their own path. Every athlete said that self-discipline was a key factor in allowing them to achieve their goals.

*Self-discipline is important, spending your time wisely. As an athlete, I think people probably don't understand your schedule. It looks as though you have all day to do 2 hours of training. When you really have two hours of maintenance, two hours of sponsorship, you have to have proper rest time, therapy and time for sports massage. Time management is really important. You do have a lot more flexibility in your schedule but you have to be more disciplined because you have all day. It is super easy to procrastinate and leave everything until the end of the day and then your productivity goes way down. It's discipline to do things when they are supposed to be done and spend an appropriate amount of time on them instead of just starting one thing and then starting something else and not really finishing any of them when they should get done. (C2)*

### **Enjoyment**

Competing at an elite level required much effort and discipline, yet all athletes loved overcoming the challenges of extending themselves. Every athlete emphasized that they had to enjoy what they were doing in order to give and receive as much as they did in their sport. It was obvious that being an elite athlete was a ‘complete passion’ generating a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

*You can't get that much sense of pride or enjoyment from the potential jobs that I was looking at from cycling. There was absolutely no way I could get that sort of reward*

*from another job. Basically I was going to switch jobs for money and that is not a priority in my life. So, it didn't make any sense. My sport is a complete passion for me. (C2)*

*I always thought I would grow up with my friends, play hockey until it was over, then go to university and get a real job. I just took everything one day at a time. This amazing job just kind of fell into my lap. I just loved the sport. (C3)*

Every athlete in this study strongly emphasized the enjoyment they experienced in their sport. This might be seen as a contradiction to Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer's (1993) theory regarding deliberate practice. These authors stated that deliberate practice is effortful and not inherently motivating or enjoyable. That was not the message conveyed from these ten athletes. They all spoke passionately about the enjoyment they attained from their involvement in sport. In response to a question about how they dealt with challenges in their life, one athlete said, "You have to focus on what is good and ignore the other things. You have to shift your attention towards what you like."

### **Supportive Network**

All athletes discussed the importance of having an understanding and supportive network of people around them as an essential component of personal balance. It is interesting to note that four of the ten athletes had a partner who was also competing at an elite level. These four athletes said it helped having someone close to them who was living the same experiences. These "coupled" athletes emphasized the necessity of working at their relationships and made a point of focusing their discussions on issues outside of their sport when they were together.

The following quotes reflect the athletes' comments about seeking the support of significant others whom they could trust completely:

*My family was always really supportive, helpful and generous. I couldn't have asked for more from them. I never perceived any pressure on me to do something different. My boyfriend was also totally supportive and understanding because he too was pursuing a sporting career. It helped having people around you who really knew what you were going through. (R2)*

*You need a network of trusted people around you. A network that really protects you, because if you are facing difficult situations then you can be harmed by so many of them (media and other competitors). I had a network of coaches and my wife surrounding me. (R3)*

Two athletes chose not to pursue a personal relationship during their most competitive years. They felt content with their choices and stated that when they were able to devote the necessary amount of time to a serious relationship, they would, as reflected in the following quote:

*I have always had good relationships around me. The one thing I did consciously decide to do in the last four years of my career was not to seek a relationship. I dated a lot but I didn't want the time commitments and emotional commitment of a relationship to interfere with anything. That wasn't a big deal for me. (R5)*

Eight of the ten athletes made reference to their relationships when they discussed the balance in their lives. These athletes felt that having a relationship during their competitive years improved their bal-

ance even though their relationships required a time commitment.

One athlete shared a story surrounding the birth of his first child. The impact of this event on his feelings and performance was expressed in the following quote:

*My daughter was born three weeks early on the first week of the World Championships. She was born 3 hours from the World Championships location. I knew that it would be possible to go there by car. I left home on the Sunday evening to the training camp and Monday morning my wife called to say the baby was coming. I talked to the doctor and he said if I wanted to be with her for the birth I should really hurry up. I took a car and drove back. I told the coach I would be back for training tomorrow or the day after. I made it in time and was there with my wife when my daughter came to earth and that was an experience that you should not miss as a man. Your wife can't miss it but as a couple you should do that together. I think the birth of the child was an experience that made me forget that all the competitions were there, it was a much more important thing. I stayed there with the baby in our arms until late in the night and then drove back. I had slept for 3 hours and then began the training runs. A lot of things were happening in myself, really unexplainable. I had the best race. I had a focus on my baby the whole week and then it slowly came back to sport but was not too strong of a focus on it, but I had an incredible competition. The focus was just there again. It was so easy, the feeling was so clear, the perception was there and I knew if I could stay there for the whole competition, then it would be hard for others to have the same results. And we did just that and won the World Championships. It was not the result but the feeling of the race that all the things came together. It was*

*like an incredible mission. I believe the birth set things in perspective. I knew that when it was over, when I went home, there was a little baby and my wife waiting for me. They will be there whether I am successful or if I am not. (R3)*

This athlete later stated that the birth of their child was one of the most joyful experiences he had experienced in his life. He felt that it reinforced his belief in the importance of not only having a supportive network, but also nurturing that connection with his family.

### **Leisure**

During the interview, the athletes were asked if they did anything outside of their sport for a lift. Every athlete stressed the importance of joyful time away from their sport. Although they invested countless hours in training and competing, they also engaged in enjoyable activities outside of their sport. One athlete responded:

*I make sure I still go out with my friends or boyfriend and just relax. They are really good at not talking about paddling when we are together. They need a break too because they are so into school or work. My parents are really good too because they don't always ask how my workouts are going which is good because I like to just leave it at the club. (C4)*

It is interesting to note that one activity every athlete engaged in during their competitive years was reading. As one athlete put it, “reading is portable and you can do it for a long time or two minutes. You can step into another world with it” (R4). They talked of always wanting to learn new things from the books they read and were eager to draw out lessons.

*If you want to compete well, you are forced to do something new because other*

*people will find out too. If you want to stay there at the top you always have to be ahead, so you have learn and try out new things. You are a researcher yourself; you are a life researcher. (R3)*

When discussing leisure, six athletes mentioned their experiences with nature, which brought a sense of balance to their lives. One athlete said; “I like to walk through the woods, just alone, no other things except nature. That is where you experience life. I really like just taking it in” (R1). Nature was a source of relaxation, energy and inspiration. All ten of the athletes said they enjoyed just relaxing on a beach in their time off.

### **Being in the Moment**

Every athlete emphasized the importance of living their life “in the moment”. They talked about the necessity of being totally involved in what they are doing, which meant being there both physically and mentally whether they were engaged in their sport or something outside of their sport. They all mentioned working at keeping their sport life separate from the rest of their life:

*I have this huge filing cabinet in my head in which, if I am at practice, I file issues from my school or social life away until later. The same goes for away from my sport. I don't carry issues over into the other parts of my life. I have to be totally involved in what I am doing. I try to be “there” with the highest possible intensity. (C1)*

### **Perceptions of Excellence**

The athletes were asked if they felt it was possible to excel in their sport and in their life. All of them said they felt it was possible. Excellence in sport was referred to as a measurable concept that was achieved if they had attained their sport-specific goals, such as making a final at a World Champi-

onship, winning an Olympic medal or improving their personal best. Excellence in life was perceived to be a more nebulous concept without clearly measurable or visible criteria. The athletes generally spoke of excellence in life with reference to personal development and making a positive contribution in other people's lives. They expressed the possibility of attaining excellence in life and excellence in sport through commitment to the things that were important to them.

*I do think it is possible. You have to be aware of what it takes to get where you want to go. Our coach encourages us to do lots of things. He is quite proud of how educated his team is. My rowing partner is in medical school, and another is doing her MBA. I remember before our Olympic final, our coach told us that he really cared about us all as people and really enjoyed working with us. He said, “If you go out and have your own best race, I will be really proud of you.” The whole cloud of pressure lifted and everyone sat up and went “Ah, this is great, let's go race. We are so ready for this and we're going to do great.” I think rowers are older and everyone is really well educated. Again, we have different projects outside of rowing but when it comes down to it, you really have to focus on your race or on your thesis defence and it might be necessary to put the other interests aside temporarily. But that is okay. (C5)*

*I don't think my sport involvement was the most important thing in the world. It is not going to contribute to world peace or the cure for cancer. But if you are good person, a valuable contributor to your family or society then you are developing as a whole person.” (R2)*

### Quality of Life

When asked to share the time they had experienced the highest quality of life, the five athletes currently competing felt that they were experiencing it at the present time. They had a general sense of fulfilment and were able to focus on one meaningful thing in their life, their sport. The following quote, illustrates this view:

*When I am focused on just doing one thing, I feel very fulfilled. When you are at the World Championships and it is the week before you are going to compete, you are starting to taper, you feel very strong, excited and ready. You feel like everything you have done is worthwhile. You feel very powerful and it is pure quality. (C1)*

When asked whether their quality of life had changed over the years they all referred to transitions in their life when speaking of changes in their quality of life. For one athlete, an important change occurred when she moved to the highest competitive level:

*In 1995, my quality of life was down because I was down about myself. It was my first year senior. I was like a little fish in a big pond because all of a sudden you are with the best in the world and the speed of racing is a lot faster. It was a mental thing to get over. As a junior, I was used to being out front so I wasn't used to being stuck in the wash or to be behind. It always takes about 3 years for the transition to get into the senior ranks. Now I am where I want to be and feeling that sense of accomplishment really feels good. (C4)*

Three of the retired athletes felt that they had experienced the highest quality of life during their competitive years. The other two felt that it was an ongoing process. Similar to the currently competing athletes,

those retired from their sport reported shifts in their quality of life as they faced transitions. They felt that transitions became smoother by applying the lessons they had already learned through sport.

*Regardless of whether you're successful in sport or tend to be a high achiever...and some are only high achievers in sport...there are some people who don't carry the lessons over into their next life. (R2)*

### Factors Affecting Balanced Excellence

With the extensive amounts of training and stress that high performance athletes endure over their sporting career, preventing burnout through adequate recovery is very important. Eight of the athletes in this study addressed the issue of improving performance through more balance. Powerful lessons regarding burnout are expressed in the following quotations:

*After winning at the Olympics, I had no energy. I was near burnout and I knew when I went on, it was always stepping between burnout and recovery. I knew I could not go on like that. That is where balance comes in for me. High competitive life demands a lot of balance. You have to look for your balance after the competitions by stepping out for one or two days. Then you can step back and go on with that kind of focus. You need a lot of energy so you must have quality recovery. (R3)*

*This past year has been my best yet. I really think that my silver at Worlds was accomplished because I have learned how to be tuned into how I am feeling on the water. I took the time off when I was tired. I now know how to judge fatigue versus being a wimp. I have learned how to prevent over-training and burnout. That was hard for me to do in the past because I would train through everything making it worse. Now I*

*can really recover well but I have to pay attention to how my body feels. (C4)*

One of the athletes who experienced burnout during her most competitive years expressed her situation as follows:

I was obsessed. I would train to the point where I would taste blood in my mouth. I would be exhausted and keep training. It was bad. It got worse and worse. After that I said to myself that I would listen to my instincts and stop when my body told me to. (R4)

The way to prevent burnout was to listen to their body and take time for proper rest, regeneration and recovery. One NHL player used injury as an opportunity for rest:

*There aren't too many days in a season (in the NHL) when you feel just absolutely fantastic. It's a physical game. You take all the injuries in stride and you realize that with the rehab they do now, with the doctors they have at that level, with 99% of the injuries you can come back and play. The way I like to look at it is, when I get injured, I think of it as a rest. The season is so long, it takes so much out of your body, and it is so hard on you. I pretty much convince myself, "Okay it's a rest and take some time off." Some guys don't look at it like that but it's better than sitting in the stands or sitting in the corner and being pissed off all the time. (C3)*

Almost all of these athletes mentioned the value of getting adequate sleep and eating well when trying to consistently perform at a high level. Two other factors mentioned that made the balancing act more difficult included extensive travel and media demands.

### Recommendations for Others

One of the main purposes of this study was to gain a clearer understanding of the issue of balance in elite athletes' lives. The findings may be of value for developing athletes who are seeking to lead a more balanced pursuit during and after their athletic career. To assist in this objective, participants were asked if they had any recommendations for other athletes to help them reach the elite level and still maintain some sense of balance in their life. Their advice is reflected in the following interview excerpts:

- *If you love your sport, then do it! Go crazy with it but remember that you've got lots of other things to explore too, keep plugging away at education. It is almost like starting a new relationship that you are so engrossed in it you forget everything else. That is okay for a while but if you take it to the extreme, you could lose your job, friends, everything. Especially with sport, very bad things can happen if you train too much. Besides failing school, you can get injured and seriously hurt yourself. You have to know how to listen to your body so you know when to take a break. (C5)*
- *Don't look at friendships, relationships and family as a burden to your sport. You may not realize how important those things are until your sport falls apart, which it will do at some point. Sport is great when it is going well but it can also be extremely depressing when it comes down. That is when you realize that you need balance and other people in your life; sport isn't everything. (C2)*
- *Take summers off, stay away from the game (e.g. after a long hockey season). Otherwise, come September, you won't*

*even want to play. You have to remember to have fun. (C3)*

- *The results of your races aren't nearly as important as the way your sport makes you feel. Never let go of that feeling. And keep a balance with the rest of your life, sport, school and social. (R1)*
- *It's more difficult to have balance in your life than to not have balance, but it is more important. Make sure you stay connected with your family and friends and don't go off and stay in your own world. If you don't have those other supports and you build your career or life on a very narrow base of focus, then you might make it to the top, but if anything happens on the way it could crash. If you have that strong base of support, other parts of your life, so that you're developing as a person, then you're going to have the ability to cope with the challenges and the setbacks that we are bound to face and all need to be able to cope with. (R2)*

## **Lessons**

The use of a qualitative approach to investigate elite athletes' perceptions of balance provided an opportunity to explore and describe this phenomenon from the view of some of the world's best athletes. Important insights and lessons were shared by each athlete. Half of the athletes viewed balance primarily as having a meaningful goal, pursuing it, and making wise decisions with that goal in mind. They had a singular passion or goal but clearly wanted to make sure they were resting enough or balanced enough to pursue that goal successfully. They felt this pursuit was life enhancing and it provided

great challenge and joy. The other half of the athletes viewed balance as enjoying and respecting different major parts of their life (e.g. sport, family, and leisure time) and not being too reliant on one component for a sense of worth. Their sport was the primary passion, but they also found challenge, joy and balance in other domains of their life.

For all athletes there was an ebb and flow of personal balance during different periods and seasons in their life. This shift occurred in accordance with their priorities at that time. All athletes stressed the importance of rest and recovery time away from their sport in order to perform consistently at a high level. They also highlighted the value of being true to themselves, knowing themselves and trusting their beliefs and instincts, in order to achieve their desired level of performance and balance in their lives.

In conclusion, it is hoped that as a result of this preliminary inquiry towards better understanding balance in elite performers' lives, future studies will follow, exploring the perceptions of balance from many more performers in different domains, and perhaps including the views of spouses, children, parents, mental trainers, coaches and teachers.

It would also be valuable to encourage performers, coaches, mental trainers, and parents to discuss their own issues of balance. The goal would be to jointly construct the best possible environment in which a person could pursue and attain their desired level of excellence in any domain while maintaining an overall sense of worth and balance in their lives.

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