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Athlete Engagement: A Qualitative Investigation of the US American Athlete

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To further validate the experiences of athlete engagement among New Zealand (Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007), Canadian (Lonsdale, Hodge & Jackson, 2009) and Filipino (Valbuena, Saunders, Rice & Aumond, 2014) athletes, qualitative interviews were done among 10 US American athletes. Results showed that US American athletes similarly experienced confidence, dedication, vigor and enthusiasm as athlete engagement dimensions. They further experienced character as a fifth dimension which is very similar to the experience of spirituality among Filipino athletes. Basic psychological needs were found to be antecedents to the experience of athlete engagement. Flow was found to be a consequence of athlete engagement.

Keywords: athlete engagement, character, US American athlete, sport

A topic that has attracted some research in sport psychology is that of burnout among athletes (Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007). In the field of organizational psychology, engagement has been believed to be the opposite of burnout and therefore a useful concept to be invoked in preventing burnout among employees (*ibid*). In the sporting context, athlete engagement has recently been similarly viewed as having an 'antagonistic' relationship to athlete burnout and therefore, potentially useful to prevent burnout among athletes. It may then be valuable to understand more about athlete engagement as a measure of sport participation that actually reflects the positive aspects of the athlete experience. This can be particularly useful when seeking to avoid the situations that lead to burnout especially among high performing athletes who operate within a highly demanding and competitive environment.

Athlete engagement as a developing tool in sport psychology serves as a central concept in this study. In an exploration of the interplay of socio-cultural factors with the development of sport expertise, athlete engagement provides a means to analyze the athletic experience in relation to the individual's sense of personal identity and their social context or national culture.

Athlete engagement (AE) has its origins in the industrial/organizational psychology concept of employee engagement. It comprises a continuum from complete engagement at one pole to complete disengagement at the other. Disengagement can be seen as equaling a state of 'burnout'. When organizations work at having their employees experience higher levels of engagement, burnout can be prevented. Effective engagement strategies used with workers may also allow them to 'bounce back' from a burnout state.

Seeing the potential of the concept for application to athletic careers, Lonsdale, Hodge and Raedeke (2007) interviewed 15 elite athletes from New Zealand in their initial exploratory study. The common themes that emerged from the descriptors provided by these athletes included confidence, dedication and vigor. The development and validation of the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire was reported in association with three studies on elite athletes from New Zealand and Canada. The questionnaire was extended to include items relating to enjoyment and excitement. These were found to be related within a fourth factor which the authors labeled as enthusiasm (Lonsdale, Hodge & Jackson, 2007). Following the development

of the four factors in Study 1, two subsequent studies supported the factorial validity of the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ) scores. Further, construct validity of the instrument was provided in a later study that examined AE in association with basic psychological needs and dispositional flow (Hodge, Lonsdale & Jackson, 2009). Basic needs were defined as competence, autonomy and relatedness. *Competence* in sport was about possessing a feeling of ability and having the opportunity to be effective. It had an alpha coefficient of .84. *Autonomy* was defined as ideas of volition, choice and self-directedness that had an alpha coefficient of .85. *Relatedness, w*ith an alpha coefficient of .91, was defined as "a sense of mutual caring and connectedness with others" (p.188). *Flow* was defined as "an intrinsically rewarding, state-like experience characterized by total involvement or immersion in an activity" (p. 187). Among these Canadian elite athletes, satisfaction of basic needs predicted AE and dispositional flow. Therefore, AE was found to partially mediate the relationship between the satisfaction of basic needs and the experience of flow. There was found a strong relationship between AE and the frequent occurrence of flow experiences.

Flow was explained by Hodge, Lonsdale and Jackson (2009) as arising from a challenge/skill balance, associated with competence, having clear goals and sense of control. When an athlete is in a flow state, the experience of challenge in the achievement of a goal in either training or competition is at par with the level of competence the athlete has that is necessary for that challenge to be overcome. The athlete possesses a sense of control over the current situation and that allows for the achievement of a goal. These definitions are very similar to how Loehr and Schwartz (2005) defined athlete engagement as 'the skillful management of energy'. In addition, Loehr and Schwartz described athletes as able to perform at their peak when they feel confident, relaxed and calm, energized with positive emotion, challenged, focused and alert, automatic and instinctive, and ready for fun and enjoyment. These feelings are similar to Lonsdale and colleagues' (2007) AE dimensions of confidence, dedication, vigor and enthusiasm. Loehr further emphasized that the development of toughness is needed in order for an athlete to acquire optimum performance, adding that "true toughness in sport requires balance" (p. 35) and to become tough, the athlete has to be engaged. Full engagement is the energy state that best facilitates performance (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005). This is true in the workplace, in sports, and in other areas of one's life.

More recent studies on AE have been with Norwegian, Greek, and Portuguese athletes. Similar to the research by Hodge, Lonsdale and Jackson (2009) with Canadian athletes, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs was also found to be antecedent to AE among Norwegian ice hockey athletes (Kristensen, 2013). The study on AE among Greek female athletes showed that their confidence (an AE dimension) and commitment and ego goal orientation predicted their physical self-worth (Evdoxia, Miltiadis & Evgenia, 2013). The study recommended that because sport was a context that impacted physical self-worth among Greek female athletes, interventions must be addressed to encourage the occurrence of positive physical self-worth.

The study of Portuguese athletes at elite, national and regional levels examined the validity of the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ) with this national group (Martins, Rosado, Ferreira & Biscaia, 2014) and reported a confirmatory factor analysis that demonstrated a good fit of the data to the theoretical model of athlete engagement and a multi-group analysis that provided evidence for cross validity.

Engagement in sport psychology literature

Although the literature on sport psychology has comparatively little reference to athlete engagement, practitioners in sport performance enhancement have long adapted a more general concept of engagement. Loehr and Schwartz (2005) coined the term *full engagement* to refer to a balance between work and rest, or energy expenditure and recovery. Athletes who were experiencing an imbalance in any one or more of the physical, emotional, mental or spiritual dimensions of engagement because they were overtraining or undertraining "had performance consequences that included persistent injuries and sickness, anxiety, negativity and anger, difficulty concentrating, and loss of passion" (p. 29), which are symptoms of burnout. They wrote training manuals for Greek athletes on "work-rest" ratios to maximize performance and cited Russian sports scientists who re-used this concept in order to enhance their Olympic successes. Loehr and Schwartz reported that with *full engagement*, they had been successful in helping athletes to manage their energy more skillfully by systematically increasing their capacities to compensate within an insufficient dimension and to build in regular recovery.

Performance enhancement

There have been a number of intervention techniques such as goal setting, arousal control, and cognitive restructuring that have been reported to have been effective in performance enhancement (Anshel, 2013; DeRenne& Morgan, 2013; Diaz-Ocejo, Kuitunnen & Mora-Merida 2013; and Wright & O'Halloran, 2013). Such interventions are believed to improve physical preparedness, technical skills and psychological readiness for optimum performance. However, there are many other dimensions, such as the contribution of spiritual, deeper, and more complex emotional experiences, associated with preparedness and psychological readiness that have been largely overlooked and therefore not fully addressed. In Loehr and Schwartz (2005)'s programs for *full engagement*, factors of the spiritual and emotional are addressed. In their concept of The Human Performance Pyramid, physical capacity is at the bottom, emotional and mental capacities are at the next two levels respectively, and spiritual capacity is at the peak of the pyramid. Loehr and Schwartz emphasize that sustained engagement includes development of all of these capacities. When these four capacities are present in the athlete, an improved performance in all facets of life occurs even outside of the sporting arena. They claim that when athletes are trained to engage and thereby able to manage their sporting lives, they are also able to manage their lives outside of sports (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005). The result is sustainable optimum performance, leading to efficient management of their total lives. The athlete's capacity to achieve and sustain optimum performance through athlete engagement is believed to be significantly influenced by their psychological state. Particularly, the way an athlete thinks and feels about him/herself as an athlete is believed to shape their quality of participation on and off the field.

Athlete engagement (AE) as a "persistent, positive, cognitive-affective experience in sport" (Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007, p. 451) defined through confidence, dedication and vigor, has been studied among different groups of athletes in different countries. In addition to the qualitative study done among New Zealand elite athletes, a more recent one was conducted among Filipino elite athletes (Valbuena, Saunders, Rice & Aumond, 2014). As they both consistently concluded that AE is characterized by confidence, dedication, vigor and enthusiasm, Filipino athletes reported a fifth characteristic that consistently emerged among all of the respondents. It was spirituality.

To further validate the concept of AE, qualitative interviews were done among US American athletes.

METHOD

Research Design

The research used a qualitative research methodology by employing the Scanlan Collaborative Interview Method (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Jackson, 2007) (Figure 1).

Participants

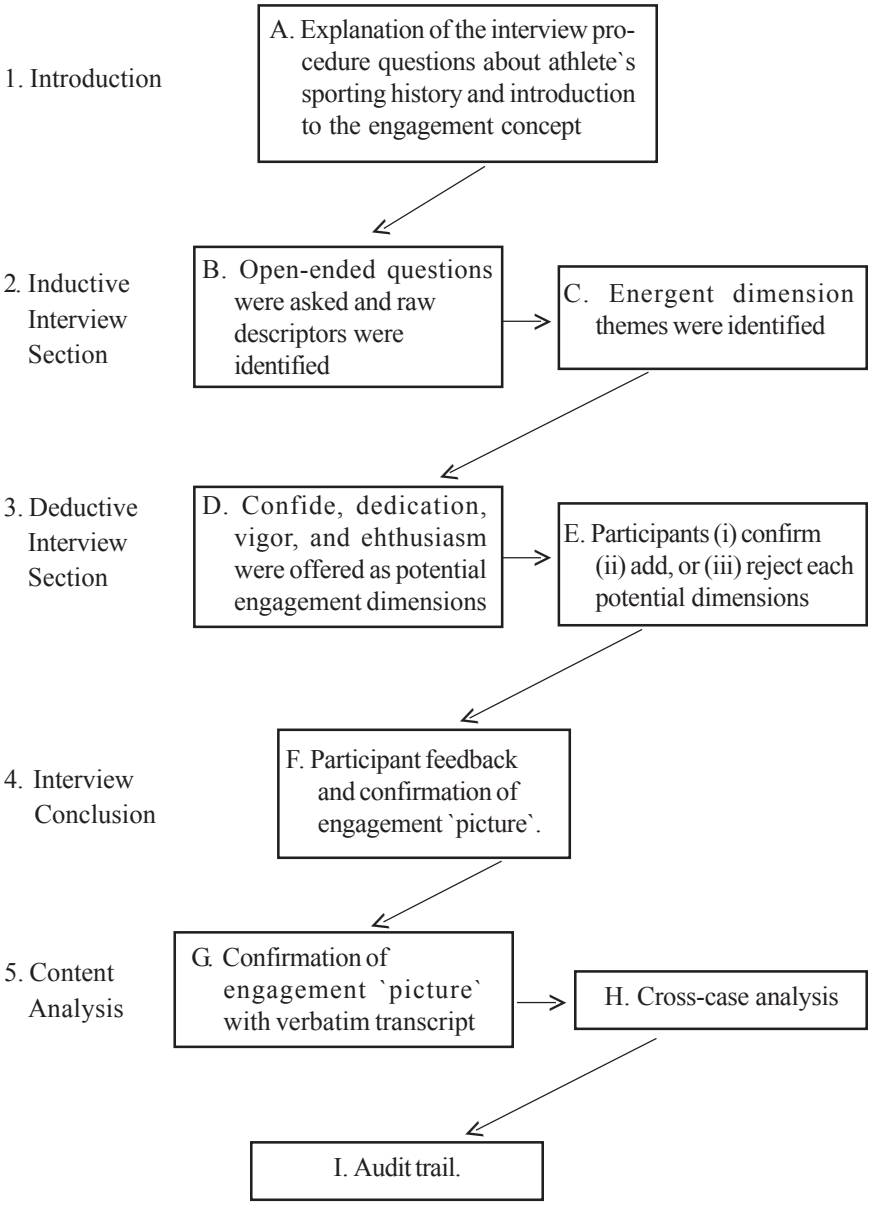
The Facebook account "athlete engagement" was used as a medium to both search for and contact participants. Names of US American elite athletes were searched in Facebook and, following a friend request they were messaged in order to invite them to an interview. Once elite athletes had responded, they were interviewed in a mutually agreed setting face-to-face in coffee shops or at football fields. In four cases, where meeting face-to-face proved difficult, athletes were interviewed via skype.com.

Procedure in the Interview

The interview procedure followed Lonsdale and others' (2007) use of the Scanlan Collaborative Interview Method (SCIM) (Figure 1) with the exception of the final "Member check within 10 days from the interview". This was due to the constant movement of the athletes making it difficult to track their schedule. The same 12 open-ended questions used in the New Zealand study were introduced at stage 2(B). Four stages comprised the interview process. Each stage has one or two sections. The fifth stage is the final step of the SCIM, that of the content analysis.

The first stage was an introduction to the interview process which consisted of an explanation of the procedure, questions about the demographic profile of the athletes (age, gender, educational attainment, the sport they were playing, the different levels and kinds of competition in which they had played their sport, and the number of days in a week and hours in a day they trained), followed by an introduction to the engagement concept (1A).

Figure 1. The Scarland Collaborative Interview Method was adopted as used in the Lonsdale, Hodge, & Jackson (2007) study.



The definition of AE was presented to the interviewee on an index card as "a positive, fulfilling, sport related state of mind. Rather than a specific momentary feeling, engagement refers to a more persistent period of time" (Lonsdale, et al., 2007). This provided the direction of the topic of discussion. The interviewees were allowed to ask questions in regard to the definition to make sure that they understood the general concept of engagement (2B). The researcher was careful not to especially present any of the engagement dimensions at this stage. The interviewee was asked to think back over their career and remember a time they felt particularly engaged in their sport. Subsequent questions served as prompt and guide for the flow of the inductive interview. For example, the following open-ended questions were asked within the inductive interview section (2B in Figure 1):

1. Tell me about that experience, what was that like?
2. Can you recall any of the feelings associated with that experience?
3. Can you recall any emotions surrounding that experience?
4. Can you recall any consistent thoughts you had during that experience?
5. How did you feel about training?
6. How did you feel about competition?
7. How did you feel about your involvement in your sport overall?
8. How did you feel mentally?
9. How did you feel physically?
10. Were there any thoughts, feelings or emotions that you had during this experience?
11. How long did this experience last?

After all the questions were answered, emergent dimension themes were organized with the interviewee (2C). For example, one interviewee told engagement stories about being devoted to the sport, feeling good about herself, feeling happy, being focused, her relationship with family and friends, and her relationship with God. These were written down on paper and shown her as her engagement dimensions. The interviewee confirmed or rejected their inclusion after reflecting on the list.

Interviews then moved on to a deductive level (3D) where confidence, dedication, vigor and enthusiasm and their definitions, were presented to the

interviewee on index cards as possible engagement dimensions, explaining these were dimensions that emerged among New Zealand and Canadian athletes. The interviewee was then asked if these dimensions were the same as or different from the themes that had emerged from their own list in the previous inductive process and asked to confirm if they were already contained in the picture they had drawn of their own engagement experience, add any of these dimensions to their own engagement picture, or reject the dimension if they did not believe it was part of the picture of their own engagement (3E). Finally, before the interview concluded (4F), the interviewee's engagement picture from the inductive to the deductive interview stages was reviewed, allowing the interviewee to give any feedback and make necessary adjustments or revisions to the way they had described their own engagement picture.

Following the conclusion of the interview process, the final stage of the SCIM comprised the content analysis: comparing the interviewee's final agreed engagement picture with the verbatim statements made earlier in their interview to make sure that it was indeed consistent and validated by the data provided (5G). At this stage the Lonsdale et. al's procedure involved an additional "member check within 10 days of interview" (Lonsdale et al., 2007, p. 456). This however did not prove possible with this sample because of difficulties in follow-up with all the athletes on account of their competition schedules. Finally, all interviewees' engagement pictures were examined and common engagement themes were identified across the whole sample (5I). An external audit was done by an independent expert in the field who was asked to review the raw descriptors and the engagement themes that were used to describe them (5I). He confirmed the evidence for the dimensions of confidence, dedication, vigor and enthusiasm as experienced by the athletes and spirituality as an added dimension, and suggested re-classifying relationship with coach, social support, assurance of fair play, personal responsibility and natural talent as antecedents, being in the zone as a consequence and character as a moderator of AE (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average interview time among 10 US American international athletes was 30 to 45 minutes. The participants described every experience they believed was an engagement experience using examples and descriptors.

They described engagement experiences based on sporting events that were recent, one to two years earlier from the time of the interview. Most of these events were positively and negatively unforgettable ones in both training and competition. They also highlighted events that highly impacted them as optimal performers.

The interviewees consisted of triathletes, badminton, soccer and basketball players (Table 1). They ranged in age from 24 to 56 years old. Five were males and 5 were females. Some of them finished college through athletic scholarships while the others spent for themselves. Others only finished high school. Unlike the Filipino interviewees (Valbuena, et al., 2014) the American interviewees did not have problems on finances and were not breadwinners in their family. All they were preoccupied about were their trainings and competitions.

Most of them indicated that they experienced *confidence*, *dedication*, *vigor* and *enthusiasm* as engagement dimensions, adding others such as *motivation, relationship with trainer/coach, personal responsibility*, *social support*, *natural talent* and *a feeling of rush/being in the zone.*

Table 1. Participant Profile.

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Educational Attainment	Sport
A	26	Female	High School	Badminton
B	29	Female	University	Soccer
C	56	Male	University	Triathlon
D	29	Female	University	Soccer
E	24	Female	University	Basketball
F	34	Male	University	Triathlon
G	25	Female	High School	Badminton
H	35	Male	University	Triathlon
I	32	Male	University	Badminton
J	40	Male	University	Triathlon

Confidence

All of the interviewees indicated confidence as a dimension with some relating that their confidence level was influenced by how they performed at a previous game. Others mentioned that the kinds of goals they had defined their confidence. For example, an athlete explained that with smaller goals, his confidence level would not necessarily be as high as when his goals were bigger. In triathlon, if his goal was just to finish the race, the confidence he needed for such a goal was not as much as when his goal was to finish first in the race. Hence, he had to train at a degree that was commensurate to the demanded level of confidence he must possess.

Two athletes' emotional distress affected their confidence. One athlete related how she was highly confident when she started playing badminton and early in her career, but that this shot down after repeated bickering from her partner and her partner's mother. The bickering on and off the court affected her feeling about herself to the point of thinking of suicide twice that year. With the tremendous support of her parents, she sought therapy and worked very hard to pull herself back on her feet. When she went back to playing, she still played with the same partner because despite her partner's displeasing behavior, they still kept winning their games. However, this time, she had a better perspective of her partner's behavior and knew how to manage her on and off the court. Her better coping mechanism towards her partner contributed to her being able to sustain the level of confidence she needed for her to continue having optimum performance.

One athlete hit a plateau when she was playing for the under 21 national team. She started feeling low about herself because she was gradually losing confidence in her skills. Her decreased confidence resulted in poor esteem, consequently producing low performance in her sport. She was at a point that she knew she needed to do something but she did not know what and how. It was only when she met a trainer who helped her hugely in defining what she needed to work on that she finally accomplished a certain level of peak in her sporting performance that made her a very successful athlete. At the time of the interview, it had been 10 years since she started working with this trainer who had made her realize that confidence is a big factor in her engagement. She felt that on days when she had 100% confidence, she was more engaged and thus performed best. It was the opposite on days when it was not 100%.

Further, two athletes emphasized that preparation facilitated confidence. One built confidence as one trained. In this light, confidence has a very close-knit relationship with dedication. As one increases one's dedication to training, one gains more confidence. Similarly, one athlete reiterated that the more races he joined, the more confident he became.

A few athletes talked about physical health dictating their level of confidence. One athlete said that when she had an injury, her confidence sporadically decreased and it took a while for it to gain a level of status quo. Another athlete said that when he would be sick, his confidence fluctuated. Still another athlete mentioned that when he felt physically strong, his confidence was high. Inversely, another emphasized that her confidence dictated her physical condition. She said that she might not be very fast, but if she felt very confident at a game, her confidence could shape her mind to do well, eventually making her body perform better.

As one stated that he was more confident at an older age than when he was younger, another said that when someone younger came to join her team, she started losing confidence. He specified that he was less confident when he was yet beginning to learn a skill; she described being put on the bench when a younger player joined the team. Finally, one athlete emphasized confidence as a dimension, however, it did not possess as much value in the engagement experience as dedication and enthusiasm.

All of the athletes recognized confidence as an engagement dimension that was important in their sporting performances but its degree varied from one athlete to another depending on the nature of their experiences.

Dedication

All of the athletes are highly dedicated to their sport. One athlete never had problems dedicating himself to his sport; his dedication increased through time because he recognized the benefits of training. He said that training and competition, or being active for that matter, developed his well-being apart from gaining more chances at winning his games and achieving optimal performance. Sport had already become his lifestyle so it was not difficult for him to be highly dedicated. Similarly, one athlete worked out hard so that she could compete well. She felt guilty if she skipped a day of practice and invested time and effort into her sport because she believed that one can only be an athlete if one is dedicated. She said that her dedication was highest at training. She knew she had to work tremendously hard at training

because she wanted to be a better athlete. Training and competition were her life. She had to compete and win. To do that, she said she had to be highly dedicated. She always got busy working out in the gym.

Similar to confidence, dedication was commensurate with the athletes' goals. They said that the bigger the goals, the more dedicated an athlete becomes in order to achieve one's goals. Athletes who dream about becoming great did more training, became very strict on their diet and nutrition, and made sure they trained with proper equipment. One of these athletes researched on ways to improve his skills and he made sure he hung out and conversed with fellow athletes so that he could learn from them.

Interestingly, one athlete said that talent was not enough to get one to the top. Dedication called the shots; it does the job. She said that many people have talent but they lack the discipline to sufficiently dedicate themselves to their sport. It was either they delivered mediocre results or under perform in their games. She said that her dedication is seen through bringing a ball always wherever she went. When she realized she loved the game, she was always playing with the boys out in the field. She had passion that was why she was extremely dedicated. Hence, she was highly engaged. She developed habits and awareness she wished she already had when she was younger. She could have been already a really good athlete at high school or college. She emphasized learning to be a professional round-the-clock, from sleeping at night to waking up in the morning. She believed that over-all, what one took into one's body was what came out of it—results. Her sport was her top priority, ahead of her boyfriend, family and everything else. Another athlete said that training was hard, but it had to be hard for an athlete to become better.

As one athlete believed that along with enthusiasm, dedication was most important in her engagement experience, another athlete outlines dedication as equally valuable with confidence and enthusiasm in her engagement experience. One other athlete emphasized that self-discipline was subsumed in dedication. An absence of discipline makes dedication meaningless.

Dedication was obviously very evident in the engagement experiences of the athletes.

Vigor

The experience of vigor among the athletes varied from one another. Most of them however recognized the utmost value of mental energy over and above physical and emotional energy. They looked at mental energy as mental toughness or ability to concentrate/focus especially when one was competing. One athlete said that he had high mental energy because he was able to concentrate very well when playing and was capable of blocking off other thoughts. The athlete who hit a plateau when she was in the under 21 national team, realized, with the help of her trainer, that she needed to work on her mental energy so that she could develop mental toughness, and since then, she constantly performed well with an energized mental state. Her mastery at recovering and sustaining a certain kind of mental energy was validated at her World Cup tournament. After a game that left her physically drained—she felt her legs were extremely tired—she began to feel less confident about their championship game. Her weak physical energy influenced a weak mental energy. Having learned the mechanisms at assessing herself on what she would need to work on when feelings like that happened, she immediately found ways at shifting her mental gears so she could appropriately prepare herself for the next game. She succeeded and, despite having lost in the championship to Japan, she said that it was the best performance she ever had in the entire tournament, if not, in her entire career.

Still another athlete mentioned that her mental energy could dictate her entire body to do well. One more athlete talked about mental energy as possessing more than half of the entire athletic ability of an individual. He explained that when physical energy is depleted, when the body becomes tired, when muscles are burning, one has to remain mentally strong to get through the game. With high levels of mental energy, one continues to be driven and can endure pain.

When he was at training and competition, he felt so good about himself. When he was able to train, he felt really positive about his day. Conversely, he was in a bad state when the opposite happened. Another athlete constantly thought about soccer so that while her friends were hanging out, she was on training, and she said she did not care. She constantly played because it made her feel good. Yet another athlete described her sporting experience as an addiction. She said sport was like a drug; it would keep one high that when one stops having it, one ceases to feel being on a high. She said that her sport is like a job—it was the only thing she was doing.

One athlete's description of his experience of emotional energy was unique. He said that he looked at emotional energy as an incentive. Emotional energy becomes important if one wants to prove something to oneself. For example, emotional energy can be a motivating factor to endure pain (e.g., if one is running for breast cancer, one runs for emotional satisfaction). He said that emotional satisfaction can feed into mental toughness but not at all times and not necessarily. This athlete's description of emotional energy as an incentive actually demonstrates a strong motivating factor among athletes. It makes the engagement experience more substantive. All athletes train and compete for specific goals to achieve. They are then assumed to possess an emotional attachment to these goals and when they are met, high emotional energy is created. When they are unmet, low emotional energy is evident. Hence, emotional energy is definitely an important characteristic of vigor.

As one athlete said her experience of vigor was subsumed in all other engagement dimensions, another athlete specifically described vigor as influential to one's well-being as a whole. He said that vigor resulted from consistent workouts; he also viewed vigor as a consequence of engagement or long-term conditioning of the athletic physique. He said he experienced vigor as an engagement dimension but not as much as his vigor after engagement, explaining that vigor, as a consequence, is influenced by the amount of consistency and quality of engagement.

One other athlete described how her vigor was unfavorably influenced by the constant bickering she received from her partner. She felt low and had thoughts of suicide. When she bounced back from that depressive mode, she began to master shutting off her partner's displeasing and hurtful remarks of her. She became immune, unaffected, hence already able to keep her vigor at a regular high which to her was primary to her being an athlete. She learned to recognize that despite the displeasure she experienced from her partner and her partner's mother, they still always won as she focused on the positive aspect of that partnership.

Enthusiasm

The same athlete related that her enthusiasm level was initially affected by her non-enthusiastic partner. Apart from the bickering behavior, her partner always had a long, straight face and seldom smiled and laughed. There were times that when they made a score, she would gesture a "high five" but her partner almost always ignored her. In the beginning of their

partnership, when this happened, she would feel bad and it negatively affected her game performance. Later on, she would just laugh about it. As the years passed, she understood the causes of her partner's behavior, and adjusted and learned where her partner's soft side was. She believed that, in so many ways, she was able to begin to teach her how to nurture enthusiasm in oneself. She believed, like another athlete, that one has to enjoy what one is doing. A third athlete emphasized that if an athlete finds no enthusiasm in one's sport, there then is no point at playing. She additionally pointed out that playing her sport helped her a great deal in so many ways that was why she was enthusiastic. Because of her high enthusiasm towards her sport, she did not like it when she had to take a break after having competed at a tournament. However, she knew she needed to recover, hence the two-week break, so she had to embrace it and found herself feeling hungrier about playing again. She felt more enthusiastic looking forward to it.

Several of the athletes experienced enthusiasm depending on the outcome of a game. When they win, they feel more enthusiastic, otherwise their enthusiasm decreased or disappeared. They felt a sense of excitement when they were able to achieve their goals, either on winning or being able to achieve target performance. One said that she felt very enthusiastic when she knew she was playing well, when she won, and when she beat her opponent in terms of performance level. At one time when she was placed on the bench, her enthusiasm dropped. She did not feel that she was contributing anything to the team except cheering her team on. When she was placed back in court, her enthusiasm immediately increased. Another athlete specified that enthusiasm came from the drive to do better, that, for goal-oriented individuals, they felt more enthusiastic to work harder on really getting better.

Most of them reiterated that a cheering crowd, being around people and playing with others predicted their high levels of enthusiasm. This experience also contributed to their being able to feel energized during a game, consequently making them perform at their best.

Uniquely, one athlete mentioned that he was very competitive. Being in sports satisfied this need for competition, but it also gave him opportunities to meet people and be with others. Being around people was also something about sports that made him feel good about his experience over-all.

Enthusiasm was generally experienced as a valuable dimension in their engagement experience. It made the athletes experience sports as play and fun.

Other Dimensions of Athlete Engagement

Some of the athletes added other factors they considered were engagement dimensions, namely *motivation*, *relationship with trainer/coach*, *personal responsibility, social support, natural talent* and *a feeling of rush/being in the zone.*

One athlete described motivation as that factor that actually makes athletes "go out there" and perform. Especially for goal-oriented individuals, the goals would never come into reality if they do not possess the motivation to be in action. He said that motivation was a crucial part at being able to experience engagement.

Two athletes added *relationship with trainer/coach* as an engagement dimension. Because of one athlete's work experience with a trainer which had given her 10 long years of successful deliveries in her games, she obviously believed that her engagement in her sport would not have been that substantial without her trainer. Another athlete's story about being put on the bench was reflective of how her coach influenced the way she felt engaged in her sport. She did not feel good about her coach when she was "benched", feeling like her coach no longer believed in her capabilities anymore to be able to contribute successfully to her team. Therefore, her thoughts and feelings toward her coach, she said, made an important impact on the way she felt engaged in her sport.

Personal responsibility was introduced by one athlete as an engagement dimension. When she blamed others for the outcome of her actions, her positive experience with her sport did not happen in full swing. There were bits of good experiences but it was only when she learned to take responsibility for her actions that she felt that she improved a lot better as an athlete and as an individual making her experience with her sport totally positive in all ways. She improved easily and felt more joy and more satisfaction and contentment with the results.

Four athletes gave *social support* as a dimension of engagement. They showed how their family and other loved ones were a valued presence in their engagement experiences. One related how the support she got from

her coach and teammates significantly impacted her sporting performance. Another said that her parents fully supported her in her games because they believed it was a good way to keep her out of vice and bad habits. One other athlete described social support in the context of "enhancing the ego." He said that when people looked up to him, put him on high regard because he performed well at a game, cheered him on or congratulated him when he won, it fattened his ego, hence giving him a really good feeling about himself as an athlete.

One athlete explained that having *natural talent* makes one become more engaged in one's sport compared to another who does not possess it. Skills are developed; talents are inborn. When two athletes have skills that are quite at par with each other, but only one has natural talent in that sport, the talented one is most likely to feel more engaged than the other. He believed that the talented one will do better and become more successful or succeed quicker in one's sport, therefore one with talent tends to experience more engagement.

Most of the athletes added *a feeling of rush* or *being in the zone* as an engagement dimension. One said that when he felt engaged, he forgot everything else and was just there in the moment of playing. He felt as if in a trance—his body was lifted off the ground and made him feel as if he was on some high. He specifically described his swimming strokes—when he was engaged, all he could feel were his muscles at work and the chemicals produced by his body that kept him performing. He felt as if he was experiencing some sort of compartmentalization of his entire self. When engaged, he was in a compartment of just his game and all other compartments of his life outside of his game were shut off. He was just in it. Another athlete described it in similar ways—she was in the zone and all she thought about was her next move. She blocked off everything else and did not think of any other except her game. She said she was just concentrated in the moment. Still another athlete said that when he was either swimming or riding a bike, it was a completely different kind of world he was in compared with his other daily activities.

Antecedents of US American Athlete Engagement

Similar to New Zealand elite athletes, US American elite athletes experienced confidence, dedication, and vigor as engagement dimensions. Like Canadian and Filipino athletes, American athletes also experienced enthusiasm as a fourth engagement dimension. *Relationship with trainer/*

coach, *personal responsibility, social support,* and *natural talent* were believed to be antecedents of athlete engagement.

In the study by Hodge, Lonsdale and Jackson (2009), basic needs predicted the occurrence of Athlete Engagement. One basic need was connectedness. Similar to the Filipino elite athletes (Valbuena, et al., 2014), *relationship with trainer/coach* and *social support* are indicators of connectedness. The US American elite athletes described these variables as contributory towards the occurrence of engagement in their sport. Another basic need was autonomy. A feeling of autonomy is having choices or preferences and having an ability of self-directedness. *Personal responsibility* seems to fall in the category of autonomy. The athlete defined personal responsibility as taking accountability of one's actions, hence emphasizing individual choices and abilities of decision-making, further possessing the capacity to direct one's life towards one's set goal. This experience may be termed in another way as autonomy. Still another basic need was competence, defined as having a feeling of ability and experiencing opportunity for becoming effective. *Natural talent* is subsumed in this need. When one has natural talent, one may believe that one has more ability than the other and therefore has more opportunity to become an effective athlete. This athletic experience may pave the way for the kind and degree of engagement one would have.

Motivation was mentioned by one athlete as an engagement dimension. From the story of that athlete, motivation was not an engagement dimension nor was it an antecedent to engagement. It was believed to be subsumed in the categories of vigor and enthusiasm. High levels of vigor and enthusiasm drive an individual towards a goal. This "drive" is what is referred to as motivation. It also feeds into the dedication dimension. When one is motivated, one may become more dedicated.

"A feeling of rush/being in the zone"

Even when there were only a few athletes who concretely described "a feeling of rush" or "being in the zone" as an engagement dimension, all of their stories apparently, in many folds, talked about being in a different zone apart and outside the usual. They described this as kind of being in a trance, a certain kind of altered state of consciousness that only made them feel every bit of how their mind and body were reacting and responding to their game, and nothing else. Mentally, they talked about how everything else was blocked, how they were a hundred percent focused and

concentrated in their game that everything else outside of it did not matter. Physically, they described only feeling the movement of their body, concentrated on their steps, runs and strokes, and the muscles that were responsible for those moves. When they felt their body tired, they focused on it and the specific parts that needed immediate recovery in between games in a tournament so that they could rely on their physical abilities to help them deliver favorable results.

One athlete's story made it more interesting to look closer into this "feeling of rush or being in the zone" experience. Her trainer followed the concept of the five pillars for optimum performance, namely the physical, tactical, technical, and psychological pillars and character. Using this framework, she developed habits and awareness of her sport that allowed her to experience unity and wholeness on being an athlete.

The concept of the pillars is similar to Loehr and Schwartz's (2001) High Performance Pyramid. Both concepts have the physical components. Tactical and technical may fall under the mental component, psychological on both mental and emotional components, and character on the spiritual component. Spirituality is defined as having deep values and a sense of purpose (2001). This is obviously what is referred to as character. The athlete said that with the concept of the pillars, she was able to develop habits and awareness that were necessary for becoming a successful professional athlete. These habits and awareness are similar to rituals illustrated in The High Performance Pyramid. Rituals in each level that promote one athlete to the next level in the pyramid, facilitates oscillation (2001)—the "rhythmic expenditure and recovery of energy" (p. 123) and a crucial element for higher levels of engagement to occur. Loehr and Schwartz further explained that, when an athlete, for example, does vigorous exercise, one can, as a result, experience emotional well-being, paving the way for peak mental performance. For one to experience well-being, one has to possess spiritual capacity or what was referred to by one athlete as character.

While most of the athletes described this dimension as "a feeling of rush or being in the zone," four athletes clearly talked about well-being. From their stories, for athletes who had developed spiritual capacity or character, their engagement experience seemed to be greater and longer. In other words, for athletes to have achieved spiritual capacity and have developed character, their moral fibre is tightest and their sense of integrity is strongest. These values, other than being foundation elements of well-

being, also contribute greatest to sustained confidence, dedication, vigor, and enthusiasm. As have been seen from the stories of athletes, those with these values have experienced greater and longer athlete engagement. Therefore, spirituality or character is not only an engagement dimension but also qualitatively feeds into the other dimensions that makes the whole engagement experience more substantial and worthwhile.

Flow as a Consequence of Athlete Engagement

The experience of the US American athletes of character seemed to be the defining criteria of an immensely positive and pleasurable athlete engagement. In The High Performance Pyramid, spirituality or character is at the peak of human performance, meaning that when an athlete achieves this peak, optimum performance is most possible. For most athletes, optimum performance especially in competitions was experienced as a feeling of rush or being in the zone or becoming extremely absorbed in playing the game that apparently takes the name of a construct that has gained much attention in the past decade and is very closely similar to the athlete's sporting experiences. This is *flow*. Pates, Karageorghis, Fryer and Maynard (2003) cited Csikszentmihalyi saying that "during flow, one is totally absorbed in a task leading to optimal physical and mental functioning" (p. 415). The athletes' stories about blocking off everything else and just all concentrated into the game, feeling their muscles and nerves in their bodies while at play, describing themselves as being in a certain kind of world apart from the usual or being like in a trance, fit perfectly with Pates and colleagues' further explanation of flow as an 'altered state of awareness where one feels deeply involved in the activity and where mind and body operate in harmony'. In this research study of Pates et al. of music as a variable that facilitates the experience of flow among netball players, the participants reported these statements as expressions of flow states: a) "…I had my rhythm and it was really fun", b) "I thought of nothing…I had complete concentration", c) "…I stopped thinking about what was around me…I had complete concentration and focus…made me high and kept me in the zone", and d) "…I felt positive and energized". These are greatly similar to the stories told by the US American athletes. Additionally, Swann, Keegan, Piggott and Crust (2012) found, in their review of research done on flow, that there had been a few studies that illustrated a link between flow and mindfulness, a meditational practice that surfaced in the last decade in Western sport psychology research. They further found that literature on flow unanimously defined

flow as that "exclusion of other things" experience. It has been illustrated that US American athletes often experienced these states referred to earlier as trance.

In one research project on flow, it was described as "a psychological state in which the challenges of a situation and one's personal skills are at an equally high level" (Fournier, Gaudreau, Demontrand-Behr, Visioli, Forest & Jackson, 2007, p. 898). The experience of flow makes people take a certain state of grace. This state is characterized by an effortless and pleasurable experience of engagement. Athletes who are experiencing flow feel a very deep involvement in their sport feeling united with the sport and having a sensation of total control. All of the 10 athletes clearly described this experience of flow surrounding their athlete engagements. They demonstrated an innate pleasure in their engagement. The flow concept calls this *autotelic experience* of intense enjoyment, which is possible in athletes who are performing the sport for its own sake (2007). Further, these athletes had a clear goal about becoming good and winning, and possessed a strong feeling of certainty about what they were going to do.

Fournier and colleagues (2007) cited studies to additionally illustrate the experience of flow. The studies have found that flow was significantly related to perceived ability, anxiety, self-determination, self-concept, and basic psychological skills. These too were clearly demonstrated by the athletes in their engagement stories. Just as how Kawabata, Mallett and Jackson (2008) described the flow experience, these athletes experienced a certain state of mind where they feel efficient cognitively, very involved, intensely motivated and having a high level of enjoyment in their sport. Most importantly, the experience of flow by the athletes led to their personal growth as evident in the stories they told about how they have grown in their sport.

Hodge, Lonsdale, and Jackson (2009) determined that there are positive relationships between athlete engagement and flow at both global and dimensional levels. A strong positive correlation was found between AE and flow at the global level. Moderate to strong correlations were found between their dimensions, and strongest correlations were found between positive-related dimensions such as enthusiasm (AE) and autotelic experience (flow). The other eight flow dimensions were challenge-skill balance, merging of action and awareness, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, total concentration, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, and transformation of time. Hodge and colleagues illustrated that these

associations showed that positive thoughts and feelings associated with one's sport experience becomes the core link between athlete engagement and flow. They could see that AE may be used as a solid foundation for increased frequency of flow experiences. Consequentially, they expressed that from an applied viewpoint, when AE and flow experiences are increased, it will most possibly encourage a growth of positive self-perceptions towards one's sport involvement.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, similar to the experiences of New Zealand, Canadian and Filipino elite athletes, the universal core dimensions of athlete engagement for US American elite athletes were *confidence*, *dedication*, *vigor* and *enthusiasm.* As basic psychological needs of *connectedness*, *autonomy* and *competence* were found as antecedents to the experience of athlete engagement, *flow* was found to be a consequence of athlete engagement. *Character* emerged as a very similar experience to flow. It was also described as very similar to the Filipino experience of *spirituality* in another study. Thus far, even when the basic factors of athlete engagement and those that surround it are the same among elite athletes coming from different countries, the way they experience them is dictated by the culture they are in.

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