

# “Football Did Not Make Me a World Champion, But It Did Help My Wellbeing”: A Qualitative Study of Study-Sport Balance Based On Fung Ka Ki

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## **ABSTRACT**

Managing the balance of academic and athletic responsibilities at university is a serious challenge for student athletes. This phenomenological case study illuminates how one individual successfully managed his study-sport balance at university, and how such experiences shaped his life. Through two semi-structured interviews, the participant Fung Ka Ki, a former student athlete turned international footballer, made sense of his lived experiences at university and achievements post-university. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed for the qualitative analysis. Two themes were derived: 1) Deploying athletic wisdom to inform life coping strategies, 2) Wellbeing through intellect and body developing together as a system. The findings provide insights into how mental and physical discipline may complement each other to create deep existential wellbeing. The study contributes to the on-going debate on whether high performance athletes should further their studies at university, and indicates ways sports and wellbeing practitioners may support student athletes more effectively.

**Keywords:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; qualitative research; sport; student athlete; wellbeing

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper presents a qualitative case study of Fung Ka Ki (FKK), a public figure in Hong Kong (HK), known for being its first professional footballer with a Master's degree. Single case studies have been applied successfully to a wide range of disciplines, including education, social work,

sport, and psychology (Kazdin, 2011). This study aimed to explore in detail how a former student athlete, who excelled in both academic and athletic domains, makes sense of his lived experiences as an elite university student athlete. In particular, it addressed two under-researched areas: 1) How the student athlete copes with balancing academic study with elite level competing in sport, and 2) How this lived experience may influence the quality of post-university life.

On the issue of study-sport balance, recent findings based on nearly 7,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students from British institutions showed that “too busy with studies” was the biggest barrier to gym and sports participation – over three-quarters of the sample experienced this barrier (UKactive Research Institute, 2020). Thus, academic demands may be considered a significant source of demotivation for students to be physically active. Nevertheless, committed student athletes, because of their dual roles, must remain active in their sports despite demanding curricular schedules. Qualitative studies have highlighted some challenges of combining study and athletics at university. Adler and Adler (1985) conducted a participant-observation study on 38 players from an American university’s basketball team over a 4-year period. They reported that although student athletes entered the university with an optimistic attitude, the intense sporting demands and expectations were debasing of their academic personas (within the first two semesters, many players claimed that they were detached from their academic work). McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis’ (2004) action research with 10 student athletes from a British university found that participants experienced confusion and frustration with priorities. For example, some expressed feeling clueless whether the priority should be competing or graduating, and that being a student athlete prevented the normal life that other students enjoyed. The latter finding was supported by Rothschild-Checroune et al.’s (2012) phenomenological study of 12 first year student athletes from a Canadian university. Their participants felt they did not have enough time for the chores of daily living after fulfilling their academic and athletic responsibilities. Based on 27 student athletes from four American universities, Martin et al.’s (2010) phenomenological study showed how traveling for competitions affected study schedules. Their findings revealed that although the concept of team study sessions (students from the same team using the time in between team practices to study together) was introduced in some universities, most of the student athletes experienced such sessions as unproductive, as they were often distracted by their teammates’ tendencies to joke and play around.

Despite the documented difficulties of study-sport balance, relatively little research has paid attention to how successful student athletes cope and excel at university (Cosh & Tully, 2015). On the other hand, it is argued that student athletes lack the coping skills to manage their challenging, divided lives (Papanikolaou, et al., 2003). Through thematic analysis, Cosh and Tully’s (2015) study of 20 student athletes at an Australian university attempted to explore both their participants’ stressors and their coping strategies. Their findings showed a number of stressors faced by student athletes, such as schedule clashes, fatigue from sport and study, and unreasonable expectations from the coach. This study highlighted that when facing such stressors, the students described having very few problem-focused coping strategies. Most of them relied on emotional support from other people, and some reported using avoidance strategies (e.g., settling for lower grades, skipping classes, and switching to part-time study). Cosh and Tully’s (2015) findings converge with

previous research indicating that student athletes would rather step away from their studies, than maintain a balance between their sport and studies while at university (Fortes et al., 2010). They are also consistent with Papanikolaou et al. (2003) that university student athletes generally lacked effective coping strategies for engaging simultaneously with sport and academia. These findings are unsettling for at least two reasons. First, avoidance is generally considered an unhealthy way to cope with stress – it may lead to mental health problems and burnout (Azizi, 2011; Ben-Zur, 2009). Second, both sports performance and emotional wellbeing may be compromised by poor coping (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Hence, research which enquires into student athletes' lived experiences of coping with their dual roles at university may illuminate the foundations of future remedial work.

FKK was recruited to provide a detailed case study for this purpose. As a student, he completed a Master of Science in Business Management at the University of Warwick (UoW), and subsequently received a full tuition scholarship to study at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). As an athlete, he represented the HK national football team in both Under-23 and senior levels. He was instrumental to HKU's football club becoming champions of the Jackie Chan Challenge Cup (an annual inter-collegiate tournament in HK), and he was awarded Sportsman of the Year by the University Sports Federation of Hong Kong (USFHK). These suggest that he managed a successful balance between academic studies and sports participation. It is relevant that Hanton et al.'s (2008) quantitative study of 217 athletes (national level or above) found that older and more experienced athletes tended to cope better with sports-related stressors, and were less likely to use avoidance strategies. FKK competed at national level as a mature student. These provide further justification of his potential to illuminate the phenomenon under enquiry.

On the question of the impact of being a successful student athlete on post-university life, Gallup (2016) compared life outcomes between former university student athletes ( $N = 1,670$ ) and their non-athlete counterparts ( $N = 22,813$ ) from the same intuitions. Results showed that former athletes were more likely to 1) be thriving socially (54% versus 45%), and physically (41% versus 33%), 2) have a sense of purpose (56% versus 48%), and 3) be employed at their desired level (82% versus 78%). More recently, focusing on 3,702 alumni from the same university, Stracciolini et al. (2018) found that those who were student athletes (44% of the sample) showed superior later-life health outcomes. For example, they were: 1) more likely to consider themselves in either good or great health (91% versus 85%) and exercise at least three times per week (62% versus 50%), and 2) less likely to smoke (14% versus 25%). While the long-term benefits of having been a student athlete at university are evident in the quantitative comparisons reviewed above, former student athletes' own understandings of the impacts on their post-university life are less well researched. According to Holmberg and colleagues (2015), understanding lived experiences, more so than statistical information, can provide valuable insights on people's motivation and decision-making in relation to their own health. FKK's decision to continue playing football at both intercollegiate and professional level, where many decide to quit (Hassan et al., 2017), presents a special opportunity to reflect on their impact on later life and career.

## METHOD

### *Background of the participant*

After graduating from high school, FKK started both his career as a professional footballer and his post-secondary education studying a diploma in Tourism Management at the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE). He played for the HK national football team in the Asian Games. After completing the diploma, he was sponsored by the Hong Kong Football Association's former president to study a Master's degree in Business Management at UoW. He stopped playing football professionally, but continued as a student athlete for UoW's football club. After graduating from UoW, he signed a professional player contract with Kitchee, making him HK's first professional footballer with a Master's degree. He continued life as a student athlete accepting HKU's sports scholarship to study Sports Science and Leisure Management. Post-university, he accepted a position as Financial Director of Birmingham City Football Club in the UK and then as the Chief Executive Officer of Lee Man Football Club in HK. At the time of writing, FKK is 41 years old, married with one child, and Director of Sky Kids, a consulting company for sports, travel, and education.

### *Procedure*

The study was approved by the University of Edinburgh's Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Initial contact with the participant was made through a mutual acquaintance. Two interviews were agreed at the outset. For the first interview in June 2019, he was asked to read the Information Sheet and sign the Consent Form. For the purpose of ethics, he was made aware that he would be identifiable in any publications resulting from the research. He was offered the option of being interviewed in either Cantonese or English. He chose the former, and code-switched between Cantonese and English throughout the interview. The initial interview enquired into three areas. First, his background and general reflections on being a student athlete (e.g., "What made you like football?", "What were your strengths and weaknesses as a footballer?", "What were your strengths and weaknesses as a student?"). Second, his experiences of being an international student athlete in England (e.g., "How did you make the decision to leave for England to start your Master's?", "How did you balance studying and football during your Master's?", and "How did being a university student athlete at UoW influence your post-university life?"). Third, we enquired into his experiences of returning to HK as a student athlete after a year-long sojourn in the UK (e.g., "How did you feel about entering HKU as HK's first professional footballer with a Master's degree?", "How did you prioritise between football and your studies at HKU?", "How did being a student athlete in HK influence your post-university life?"). A short break was offered between parts of the interview. Probe questions (e.g., "Can you elaborate?") were asked throughout the interview.

A clarification meeting was held in July 2019 (14 days after the interview). This allowed for reflections on the interview transcript and voicing of possibilities for the second interview. The participant was encouraged to elaborate on experiences that were important. The initial interview and clarification meeting, conducted in a private clubhouse suggested by the participant, were

in-depth and thorough (over 4 hours in total). The participant was invited to read his English-translated transcript for accuracy and any misinterpretations. He signed an additional form to indicate agreement with the translation from Cantonese to English.

### **Data analysis**

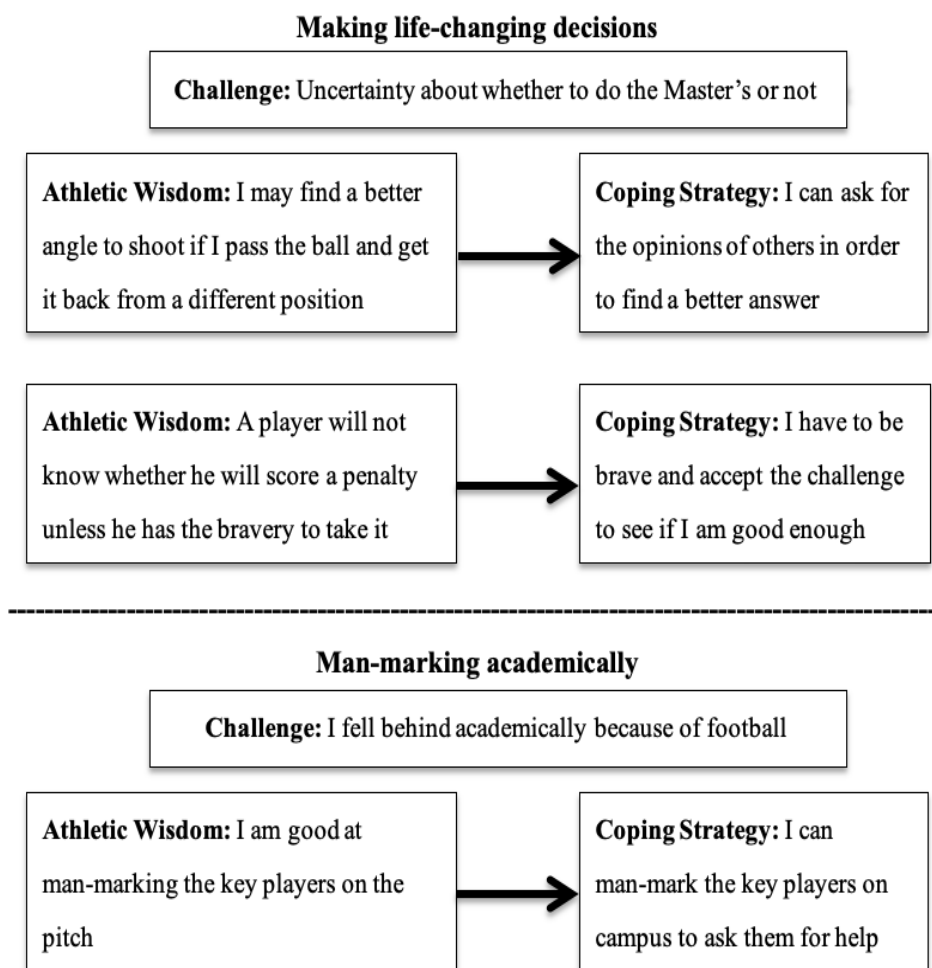
The transcript was analysed according to the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), and adapting case study guidelines, from Bramley and Eatough (2005) and Horrocks et al. (2016). The transcript was read and reread several times to enable thorough familiarisation with the content and “entering the participant’s world” (Smith et al., 2009, p.82). Language considered interesting, rich, or allusive was highlighted, and the author’s observations and thoughts were noted alongside. Based on these highlights and notes, initial themes which best captured the essentials of the participant’s lived experiences were identified. Themes that seemed connected psychologically were grouped together and given headings. Interview extracts were selected to exemplify the themes and to check the internal coherence of the interpretation. The second author acted as a “critical friend” in a review of the themes generated and discussion of the data. Member checking was also employed – the participant was invited to read the preliminary analysis of his interview transcript.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Three main themes were identified from the interviews: 1) Deploying athletic wisdom to inform life coping strategies, 2) Wellbeing through intellect and body developing together as a system, and 3) Living between cultures through bicultural identity. The first theme reflected how football-specific wisdom played an important role in coping with the challenges at different stages of his student athlete life. The second theme captured the different possibilities of wellbeing he experienced through the combination of sport and scholarship, including possibilities that occurred during and after university. The third theme reflected his understanding of the cultural differences between being a student athlete in the UK and in HK. Due to space restrictions, only the first two themes, relevant to study-sport balance, are analysed in this paper.

### ***THEME 1: Deploying athletic wisdom to inform life coping strategies***

Deploying athletic wisdom, the theme analysed in this section, refers to knowledge and experience FKK gained in the sporting arena that he extrapolated as a coping resource for life more generally. This theme is constituted of the two subthemes: *Making life-changing decisions* and *Man-marking academically*. The concept of sport as a microcosm and crucible of personality development was put forward by Chan and Lee (2020), in an interpretative phenomenological study of how badminton players made sense of their personalities and lived experiences on court. The players identified, cultivated, or refined in the sporting arena, a psychological or developmental need that paralleled their challenges in broader life. Figure 1 provides a representation of this process.



**Figure 1.** Fung Ka Ki's experiences of coping

### ***Making life-changing decisions***

Choosing to accept the offer from UoW to do a Master's degree was a potentially life changing and difficult decision. FKK was already a professional footballer in HK at the time and would need to quit the salaried position to study abroad. He recounts how he made the life-changing decision:

"I did enjoy sharing my stuff with my friends. I would tell them that I wanted to hear their thoughts about something, or I might ask them if my solutions to a problem made sense to them. I think such interactions were kind of like playing football. Sometimes, I might not be able to find the right angle to take a shot, but if I passed the ball to someone else and moved to a different position to receive the ball back, then I might find myself a better angle to shoot [...] You need to pass the ball around, to hear what others think, and subsequently you might be able to find the answer more easily."

One of the teammates he "passed the ball to" was Tam Siu Wai, a senior player whom he looked up to:

"Tam Siu Wai, one of my former teammates, taught me a simple lesson, 'You will never know whether you're good enough to do something unless you are willing to give it a try', that was such a powerful quote for me [...] It was back in the days when I had

to decide whether to go to Warwick or not. The conversation happened after a training session. It was a rainy day, and he was nice enough to give me a lift. I told him that a British university, one of the top four, accepted me to do a Master's degree. However, I was still a full-time professional footballer back then, and my coach, he was not very supportive. The coach told me not to go, he said that I would probably not be smart enough to do a Master's, and that I should just stay in HK and focus on my football career. I was feeling uncertain what to do. So, I asked Tam Siu Wai for his thoughts. His response? 'Are you crazy? Of course you should go and do the Master's! That coach also said that I would not be good enough to take penalties - did that stop me from taking penalties? No! I wouldn't know the result unless I was brave enough to take it! [...]. The way he used a football example to answer my question of whether I should go and do the Master's, was exactly what I needed."

In these two extracts we can see FKK deploying metaphors from football to help in making life choices. He had learned through his footballing experiences that if he could not find a clean opportunity to shoot for goal, he needed to pass the ball to a teammate and receive it back for a different perspective. This informed his decision-making: "the offer or not" became the ball, which he passed to his teammate to find a better "angle" and response. The second extract offers a further metaphor which he generalised as a life lesson. Here, a player cannot know if he is good enough to take a penalty unless he tries it. Taking the penalty was the Master's degree: he would not know whether he was "smart enough" unless he embarked upon it. Building on Heidegger's (1962) concept of being-in-the-world, which emphasises the inextricable link between a self and its world, Dale (1996) argued that when analysing an athlete's experiences, researchers and practitioners could not talk about an athlete without implying their lifeworld. He notes "the two [athlete and world] do not exist apart from each other, and each individual and his or her world are said to co-constitute one another" (Dale, 1996, p.309). Further examination of FKK's lifeworld offers opportunities for a deeper analysis. At that time in HK no other professional footballer had completed a Master's degree, and this may illuminate layers of his conflict and uncertainty in accepting the scholarship offer. His coach, who advised him to stay in HK, exacerbates his self-doubt by questioning his ability to study. We can see from other parts of the transcript his propensity to listen to his coach. We also know from another part of the interview he did not do well at A-level and failed to get into university. The opportunity to study in "one of the top four" universities in England, only three years later after his diploma at IVE, may have seemed like a prize beyond his reach.

The clash in his lifeworld was mitigated by others willing to listen sympathetically. The account of his conversation with Tam Siu Wai allowed him to devise the life lesson of "passing the ball" to garner multiple perspectives on his difficulty. It is noteworthy that he remembers the small details of the exchange, including the timing (after a training session) and the weather (rainy) on the day. This testifies to how the conversation did not only help him with the answer he needed at the time, it was pivotal to literally changing his world – to a world where he eventually became HK's first professional footballer with a Master's degree, a title that would continue to pave new paths and opportunities for years to come.

### ***Man-marking academically***

FKK's ability to remain focused, meant he was "frequently asked to 'man-mark' the key player of the opposing team". In a game between the HK Under-23 and Japan Under-23, the coach gave him the challenging task of man-marking Shunsuke Nakamura, who later played for Celtic Football Club and was awarded the "Scotland Premiership Player of the Year" award (Macpherson, 2017). In the following, he shares how the metaphor of man-marking helped him academically:

"I had plenty of games for my club back then. As a consequence, I had to skip my lectures. It was difficult for me, because when you missed them, you're lost, you couldn't really follow, like other students were a few chapters ahead of you [...] I was quite outgoing, I won't just stay in my room and cry [...] If I missed this and this chapter, then I would 'man-mark' my classmate, and ask him if he could lend me some of his notes."

He would also "man-mark" his lecturer:

"I would also man-mark my lecturer and ask him questions. I suppose nowadays, the students may be afraid to ask their lecturer questions [...] I was not afraid, because I only missed the lecture for an actual football match, I did not miss it because I went to sing karaoke or play snooker. I actually wanted to be there. So, I did nothing wrong. Luckily, my lecturer was quite reasonable, he would be willing to help me out and give me advice on how to do my revision."

He claims being forced to skip lectures due to football commitments was "difficult" and made him feel "lost". In this scenario, the concept of man-marking, something he excelled at in football, enabled him to approach his lecturer and classmate and to recruit them as a study resource. According to Galvin and Todres (2011), when wellbeing is experienced deeply in the domain of identity, there is a sense of "I am" (sense of self backed-up by the continuous histories and contexts that fit with who one is), coupled with a sense of "I can" (sense of being able to). This account fits with FKK's coping experience. For the former, his sense of himself as "outgoing" is supported by a history as a proactive student whom: 1) would not "just stay in my room and cry", 2) "was not afraid" to ask for help, and 3) "wanted to hear" other people's thoughts. Regarding the latter, his sense of "I can" was apparent from being able to get the help he needed from his lecturer, something he, unlike other students, was "not afraid" to do.

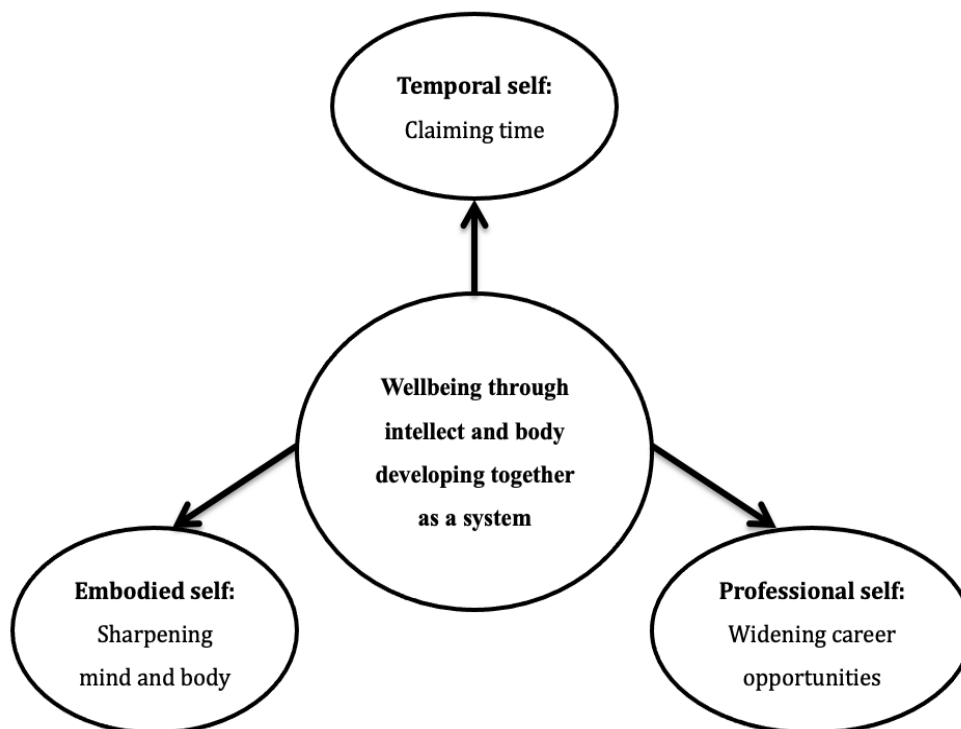
FKK's lived experiences of handling his difficulties on and off the pitch helps to inform and flesh out the concept of problem-focused coping, a strategy that university student athletes tended to lack when balancing sport and study (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Focusing on this particular stressor, he did not devalue his studies or student role, as in Adler and Adler (1985), or rely on emotional support and avoidance strategies, as in Cosh and Tully (2015). Instead, his focus was to minimise the effect of the stressor (being left behind and feeling lost) through active coping (employing his lecturer and classmate as supports). Building on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) distinction between emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, Gaudreau and Blondin (2004) have proposed a threefold structure: task-orientated, distraction-oriented, and disengagement-oriented coping, which is frequently used in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Kaiseler et al., 2019).



In the foregoing analysis, FKK's coping style may be interpreted as task-oriented – concentrating on how to solve the problem, rather than switching to other issues (distraction-oriented) or lowering his expectations (disengagement-oriented). His sense of self as outgoing helps to flesh-out the observed statistical correlation between extraversion and task-oriented coping already established in the literature (e.g., Kaiseler et al., 2012; Kaiseler et al., 2019). Barker et al. (2011) have encouraged practitioners of sport psychology to employ case studies in developing interventions for athletes. Previous research indicates stress management is considered an area where student athletes require interventions (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). FKK's lived experiences of managing his challenges may inform such interventions, such as those that promote problem-focused and action-oriented coping. Both are healthier than avoidance-focused coping and are more in-keeping with the high levels of energy and focus of student athletes (Azizi, 2011; Ben-Zur, 2009).

***THEME 2: Wellbeing through intellect and body developing together as a system***

A recurring theme of the interviews was how the unity of academic study and physical sports enhanced the possibilities for living well. This main theme of the intellect and body developing together as a system, is constituted of three subthemes: Temporal self; Embodied self; and Professional self. Figure 2 represents the possibilities experienced through his different senses of self.



**Figure 2.** Fung Ka Ki's wellbeing based on his temporal self, embodied self, and professional self

***Temporal self: Claiming time***

The discipline of a rigorous timetable was paramount in FKK's use of time:

"I would go to class or do my schoolwork between 7am to 3:30pm. I would then go to training between 4 to 7pm. Between 7 to 10pm, I would be having my dinner and doing

my revision. Pretty much like that. The schedule worked well for me. [...] The key was always just about self-discipline. Say if it was already 4pm, then mentally I would not think about what happened earlier during the day in my studies. I would remind myself I should only focus on my training. During my training between 4 to 7pm, I had to avoid thinking about things related to my modules.”

The time discipline was vital to physical health as well as mental wellbeing:

“Following a timetable was vital. And sometimes you needed to break it down a bit as well, say for example within the 3 hours of training, what you would want to focus on. The same for revision, like which chapters you needed to focus on. As a student athlete, I felt like I was in control, I felt well prepared, and that helped my wellbeing too [...] People in my course, as we were doing Sports Science after all, we were all quite physically active, I mean like most of us played at least one sport. I had a part-time job to do for my professional football club, whereas some of them had to work part-time as personal trainers or yoga instructors. So, we all had to follow a schedule. In contrast, there were people in my hall who studied quantitative finance or mathematics, they were younger than me for like 5 years, as I had already finished my Master’s and they had only just started their undergraduate degree. But they looked much older, as if they could be my uncles. I think it was because they did not exercise at all. They spent most of their time studying in the student accommodation. They rarely left their room.”

We can see how FKK took ownership of lived time, as displayed through a rigour towards temporal boundaries between sport and study. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) characterised Dasein as temporality. He argued from phenomenology, that time is derived from nature, experienced first-hand as the diurnal cycle of day and night, and the perennial cycle of the seasons, and in ageing and decay – these give Dasein’s sense of duration and ‘lived time’, and allowing the projection of a future. FKK’s experiences highlight that in order to be “in control” of his life and destiny, he had to claim and apportion his time rigorously to specific purposes. As a student athlete, he followed his timetable not just physically, but also mentally: he would remind himself to avoid ruminating about his modules during time reserved for training, and he stressed the importance of knowing “what to focus on” prior to the session. This temporal sense-making recalls a previous finding on runners and boxers that “psychological preparation for the training session ahead is vital” (Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2015, p.256). He even accounts for his perception of aging and of physical differences between himself and inactive students, through his hold on lived time.

### ***Embodied self: Sharpening mind and body***

FKK recalls how maintaining balance between exercising and studying helped to keep both body and mind active:

“If you don’t exercise, you may need actual medicine, like pills or things like that. But if you do exercise regularly, you probably don’t need any of that. I think that was an important lesson I learned through my experiences as a student athlete. Maybe football did not make me a world champion, but it did help my wellbeing. Not just physically, but

also psychologically, you know. I think wellbeing is probably the most important thing for people in general. I think even if you're not earning a lot of money, but you're both physically and psychologically well, then you'll be fine [...] I didn't want pills, so I just had to keep playing football, you know. I was like, I couldn't handle liquid medicine at all! Oh, and I hated Panadol too. So yeah, that was pretty much why I needed sport. As for my studies, I was aware of the importance of knowledge. I knew that I had to know more. It was not just about going to the library to read a book, but also about being able to digest, analyse, and apply the things you learned."

He elaborates on the irreplaceabilities of knowledge and exercise according to his lived experience:

"For human beings in general, the need for knowledge and the need to exercise are equally important. Both are irreplaceable. You need both in your life, regardless of whether you're a student athlete or not! The need for knowledge keeps your brain active. It enhances your ability to analyse, be critical, and think about the cause of something. Exercise, on the other hand, trains the rest of your body and keeps you well through the various ways I mentioned earlier. Yeah, I think that's how I reflect on my experiences as a student athlete [...] Even though I am a director now, I still attend workshops regularly, just to make sure that my knowledge is up to date. Even though I am no longer playing the game competitively, I still try to go for a run at around 5pm every other day, because I know that's what my body needs."

He claims that studying made him analytical, critical, and thoughtful, while playing football helped him feel well and kept him away from medicine. The account is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's (1962, p.203) "our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism, it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system". Merleau-Ponty was attempting to explicate an understanding of the world, as it appears to us, as inseparable from our bodily insertion into it – he says they "form a system". Thus, the human being is a body-mind system where both co-create being-in-the-world in productive ways. When FKK says "I think for human beings in general, the need for knowledge and the need to exercise are equally important", he shows how maintaining both body and mind, for him, has reciprocal ramifications for their functioning as a system, that manifests as wellbeing. The training of the body that is not accompanied by a mind developing knowledge is like a body without a heart or a vehicle without navigation. Similarly, studying and acquiring knowledge without physical expression is like a heart without a body, unable to express its ardour through accomplishments in the world. As a student athlete, the mutual discipline of the mind and body were key to his wellbeing. He continued to sustain their symbiosis through his professional life, running and participating in continuing professional development to the present day.

### ***Professional self: Widening career opportunity***

FKK's status as an athlete and as a postgraduate were pivotal for his post-university career:

“When I was studying in Warwick, I thought, once I got my Master’s, I should have no problem getting a decent job. And as expected, when I eventually came back to HK with the Master’s, I felt that the degree was very useful, very useful indeed [...] I mean, that was probably why Cable TV invited me to be a football commentator. They were like, ‘You got this Master’s, your communication skills should be good enough’, so they could count on me to do a good job commentating. Cable TV was very popular at that time, so I was proud to get the job.”

After being hired as a football commentator in HK for Cable TV came an opportunity at Birmingham City Football Club:

“The degree helped me significantly – it gave me the permit to work as a financial director at Birmingham City [...] I felt like because of my study-sport balance, I had two different tools. Metaphorically, it was like I had a screwdriver and I also had a spanner, so yeah, two different things, both very useful. The guy who hired me to work as the financial director wanted someone with both tools. On the one hand, he needed someone with knowledge in business management, which was what my Master’s was about. On the other hand, he also wanted a football person, and I think I could call myself a football person thanks to my experiences as a player. After all, we’re talking about a football club.”

He claims his experiences of playing the game alongside his communication skills and business knowledge made him the best candidate as a football commentator on live television and as a financial director of a football club. It is relevant to draw from two other parts of his transcript for further interpretation. First, he mentions that during the start of his career as a footballer, people in HK tended to think that “footballers represented people who were not educated”. Second, despite his achievement as HK’s first professional footballer with a Master’s degree and his directorial job offers, he describes himself as “nothing special” and “just an ordinary guy”. These show both dwelling and mobility are present in his sense of identity: A continuous sense of I can, coupled with a strong sense of I am – an ordinary guy who happened to be in the industry (Galvin & Todres, 2011).

Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) offers a framework for further discussion of study-sport balance. SDT proposes that one’s motivation to engage in a goal-directed behaviour is influenced by the degree to which three universal psychological needs are fulfilled: 1) autonomy (freedom of choice), 2) competence (ability to control the outcome), and 3) relatedness (a sense of shared experience). Individuals experiencing higher levels of satisfaction of these three needs are more likely to be self-determined and self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applying SDT, FKK’s experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness all contributed to his success in managing a balance between study and sport. It was his own choice to keep studying and playing football as a university student (autonomy). He was not coerced in either studies or sports, and emphasised a need for both in his life. This might not always be the case for student athletes, as David (2005) reports, the decision to engage in elite level sport or continue studies was more often taken by coaches or parents. In relation to competence, FKK believed in his own ability, in particular, to remain focused on a demanding schedule on a daily basis. According to Martin et al. (2010), some

student athletes may lack this discipline, becoming distracted by teammates during study sessions. In terms of relatedness, he felt connected to the people involved in both contexts: in his footballing world through deep connections with teammates, and in the academic world through classmates on a similarly tight schedule.

Taken together, FKK's understanding of his life during and after university helps to disclose how former student athletes are in position to enjoy good later-life outcomes, including perceived health, exercise adherence, and employability (Gallup, 2016; Stracciolini et al., 2018). This case study also contributes to the debate on whether high performance athletes (HPAs) should only focus on their sport, or continue in education as a dual career athlete. This question was raised in Pavlidis and Gargalianos' (2014) review of experts' opinions, focus group discussions, and case documentation. Those arguing for the former believed that: 1) winning should be the sole focus for HPAs; 2) pausing school should help HPAs focus more thoroughly on their sport; and 3) it would be very difficult for HPAs to find the time and energy to study amidst the frequent and intensive training required (Athletes to Business, 2011). Those arguing for the latter pointed out that: 1) HPAs should not focus solely on their sport, as injury or loss of form could put an end to their athletic careers prematurely; 2) retired HPAs experienced difficulty in finding work to support themselves financially due to lack of academic qualifications; and 3) education could guide HPAs into different occupations and enhance opportunities for maturation during and after an athletic career (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). FKK opted for the latter and this case study challenges the assumption that full-time education is too much for HPAs. His reflections on his work as football commentator for Cable TV and financial director for Birmingham City Football Club endorse the role of education in helping secure the future employability of HPAs.

## CONCLUSION

Through in-depth analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews, this study is the first to understand phenomenologically a former student athlete's lived experiences of elite level sport and academia. The analysis of FKK's lived experiences provides some illuminating insights into the integration of physical and mental wellbeing during university life and reflect on how these helped him chart a successful career.

A strength of this study is the richness of the interviews drawing from lived experience. The in-depth interpretative analysis offers a detailed, insider's view of the challenges of high level sport and study internationally in HK and the UK. There is little existing qualitative research of this kind, and it was made possible by commonalities between the first author and the participant. According to Palmer et al. (2010), the quality of the interview hinges on the degree of shared experience between the researcher and participant. The first author grew up in HK, and studied as a local student in HK and as an international student in the UK. He completed a postgraduate degree and played for a university sports team in the UK, worked in HK's football industry, and is bilingual in Cantonese and English. These facilitated rapport throughout the interviews. As for the limitations, this is a single case study and thus generalisation is limited, and readers may judge for themselves

the wider psychological import of the idiographic study. Further, the findings are the result of personal meaning-making of the participant and of the researchers, as appropriate to qualitative, phenomenological methodology, and thus do not indicate cause-and-effect relationships.

Finally, according to Stokoe et al. (2013), current university students tend to play down their achievements. This may possibly explain the relative lack of in-depth, successful experiences of coping in previous research on sports participation while at university. Given the findings from this study, future qualitative research may profitably seek to understand the lived experiences of other former student athletes in different sports and cultures, especially in terms of how they make sense of their wellbeing and achievements, both physical and intellectual, in different areas of their lives.

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