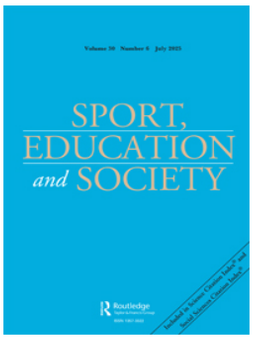
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A reflexive thematic analysis on the lived experiences of elite Gaelic games student athletes at third level education in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of elite Gaelic games student-athletes (EGSAs) in managing dual careers while pursuing third-level education in Ireland. Using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach, data were generated through four semi-structured focus group discussions (N = 14) with current senior inter-county athletes (7 male, 7 female) enrolled in full-time third level education across multiple sporting codes and academic disciplines.

Two overarching themes were identified: (1) well-being and the dual-career experience, and (2) athletic identity and its impact on academic life and social perception. Participants described significant challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with the demands of elite level sport, including financial strain, travel fatigue, social isolation, and institutional inflexibility. A dominant athletic identity, reinforced by peers, coaches, and institutional cultures frequently overshadowed academic engagement, leading to perceptions of academic disadvantage and uncertainty regarding future career transitions.

This study offers new insights into the dual-career realities of amateur elite athletes within a culturally embedded, non-professional sport context. It contributes to the limited empirical literature on Gaelic Games and dual-career management and puts forward actionable recommendations, including dedicated dual-career liaisons, structured recovery periods, peer support networks, and targeted financial aid for universities, sporting bodies, and policymakers aiming to build athlete-centred systems of support.

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Elite Gaelic games student athletes; dual career athletes; Gaelic athletic association; identity; mental health

Introduction

Dual career (DC) athletes pursuing a third-level degree while competing at the elite level in sport face significant demands, requiring them to carefully balance academic and sporting commitments (Gomez et al., 2018; Sport Ireland, 2021; Stambulova et al., 2021). A dual career is defined as an athlete's combination of education, training, or work with a sporting career, enabling engagement in high-performance sport while safeguarding a secure income and future career (Hassan et al., 2023). While previous research on dual careers has primarily focused on structured, professionalised sports systems (e.g. Olympic pathways or state-funded academies), less attention has been given to athletes in amateur yet high-performance environments, such as those within the Gaelic Games in Ireland (Nikander et al., 2022; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015).

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Gaelic games are a family of Indigenous Irish sports deeply embedded in Irish culture and holding significant historical and social importance (Jackman et al., 2024). As amateur sports, Gaelic games differ fundamentally from professional sports systems in their financial structure and community-based ethos (Hughes & Hassan, 2017). Participation is tied to local areas, fostering strong community identity and allegiance (Geary et al., 2022). Elite Gaelic games athletes (EGSAs) competing at senior inter-county level are subjected to rigorous training and competitive demands that rival those of professional athletes. On average, senior inter-county players engage in four to five structured training sessions per week, combining on-pitch training, gym sessions, and recovery protocols, in addition to participating in national league and championship competitions spanning several months annually (GPA, 2024; Hughes & Hassan, 2017).

Despite their amateur status, elite Gaelic Games athletes maintain training and competition schedules comparable to professional athletes, with the sport described as 'professional in most respects except their capacity to rest' (Boyle et al., 2023). Unlike professional athletes, elite Gaelic Games (EGSAs) receive no formal financial compensation, yet adhere to training and competition schedules that rival professional athletes (Hughes & Hassan, 2017). This lack of systemic support, combined with academic demands, places EGSAs at heightened risk of stress, burnout, and identity conflict (GPA, 2024). Previous studies on athlete well-being have largely focused on professional or scholarship-supported student-athletes, but little research has examined how high-performance Gaelic games student-athletes navigate dual careers within an amateur, culturally significant sporting structure (Linnér et al., 2019; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015).

The challenges faced by Gaelic Games student-athletes are compounded by high levels of mental ill health, burnout, and financial strain. Research indicates that 48% of male inter-county players experience common mental disorder symptoms, and 37% of student-athletes report mild-to-moderate depression within the academic semester (Gouttebarge et al., 2016). Distinct to other European dual-career models that provide state-funded scholarships and academic flexibility, Irish Gaelic Games athletes lack a centralised dual-career support system. Consequently, many experience academic disadvantage, financial difficulties, and identity struggles, reinforcing the need for tailored institutional and policy-level interventions (GPA, 2024). To contextualise this study, the following literature review explores the challenges of dual-career pathways, the unique cultural and structural context of the Gaelic Games, and the specific pressures faced by elite Gaelic Games student-athletes.

Dual-career pathways in sport and education

The concept of dual careers, where student-athletes balance elite-level sport with higher education, has been extensively explored in sport psychology and higher education research (Aquilina, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). However, much of this research focuses on structured dual-career models, such as the NCAA system in the United States or state-supported European athlete pathways, which offer financial aid, academic flexibility, and career transition support (Capranica et al., 2013; Comeaux, 2015). In contrast, elite amateur athletes, such as Gaelic Games student-athletes in Ireland, navigate similar high-performance demands but without systemic institutional support (Kelly et al., 2018). Given the cultural and social significance of Gaelic Games, where participation is deeply embedded in local identity and community structures, it is crucial to examine how elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs) manage their dual careers in an amateur, non-professionalised system.

Well-being and mental health challenges in dual careers

Dual-career athletes face significant psychological strain due to the overlapping demands of training, travel, competition, and academic responsibilities. Studies have consistently shown that high-performance student-athletes experience heightened stress levels, which can negatively affect their mental health, recovery, and academic performance (Gjaka et al., 2021; Saunders, 2021).

Research indicates that nearly 40% of European student-athletes report anxiety and depressive symptoms due to their dual-career commitments (Storm & Eske, 2022). Similar findings exist in Ireland, where 37% of EGSAs exhibit mild-to-moderate depressive symptoms, particularly during exam periods and peak training seasons (Sheehan et al., 2018).

While Irish research has quantified mental health symptoms among EGSAs (Gouttebarge et al., 2016; Sheehan et al., 2018), there remains a gap in qualitative investigations exploring the experiences that contribute to these mental health outcomes. Unlike structured dual-career systems in Sweden, Germany, and the UK, where athletes receive academic accommodations, integrated mental health support, and financial scholarships (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022), Gaelic Games athletes in Ireland lack centralised policies, leaving them to navigate these challenges independently (GPA, 2024). Without formalised institutional coordination between universities and sporting organisations, EGSAs experience greater psychological strain, academic disengagement, and long-term career uncertainty (Hassan et al., 2023). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how EGSAs perceive and respond to these challenges in daily life.

Athletic identity and its influence on academic and social life

Athletic identity significantly influences how student-athletes engage with academics, social relationships, and career planning (Brewer, 1993; Cosh & Tully, 2015). Research suggests that athletes who strongly identify with their sporting role often struggle to prioritise academics, leading to reduced academic performance and career planning difficulties (Antshel et al., 2016; Brown & Potrac, 2009).

Studies of U.S. collegiate athletes have found that over-identification with the athlete role can result in missed academic opportunities, lower grades, and limited long-term career development (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). In amateur sporting environments, such as Gaelic Games, this challenge may be exacerbated by cultural expectations, which emphasise loyalty to the team and local community over academic and professional development (Hughes & Hassan, 2017). Geary et al. (2022) previously identified this trend among male EGSAs, highlighting the tension between athletic identity and academic engagement. However, female EGSAs remain underrepresented in this research, leaving a gap in understanding how gender influences the negotiation of athletic and academic identities within the Gaelic Games dual-career pathway.

Social isolation is another key issue for dual-career athletes. Research shows that student-athletes experience reduced social engagement due to their demanding training and competition schedules, leading to limited friendships and reduced participation in non-sport activities (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Additionally, athletes frequently feel socially categorised based on their sporting roles, reinforcing their athletic identity over other aspects of self-concept (López de Subijana et al., 2015). Given that Gaelic Games athletes are deeply connected to their local clubs, the pressure to prioritise athletic commitments can further reinforce a dominant athletic identity, often at the expense of academic and social development (Kelly et al., 2018). This study examines how EGSAs experience and negotiate their identity across both sporting and academic domains.

Structural challenges in the amateur dual-career model

Unlike student-athletes in state-supported dual-career systems, Gaelic Games athletes in Ireland must independently manage their academic and sporting commitments with minimal financial compensation or academic flexibility (GPA, 2024). Unlike NCAA athletes, who receive full scholarships and stipends, Gaelic games student-athletes receive minimal financial aid, making it difficult to cover training, accommodation, and travel costs (GPA, 2024; MacNamara & Collins, 2015). Many EGSAs report working part-time jobs alongside sport and academics, further increasing stress and reducing recovery time (Kelly et al., 2018).

Compared to the structured dual-career frameworks in Sweden, Germany, and the UK, where national policies provide financial support, academic accommodations, and career transition planning (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022), Ireland's dual-career approach remains underdeveloped. Many elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs) fall outside formalised dual-career resources, leaving them to independently balance competing demands (GPA, 2024; Saunders, 2021). The lack of systemic support places greater responsibility on individual athletes, exacerbating financial instability, career uncertainty, and mental strain (Hassan et al., 2023).

Rationale for the present study

Despite the expanding research on dual-career athletes, there remains limited understanding of how elite amateur athletes navigate dual-career demands. Existing studies predominantly focus on professional or state-supported athletes, leaving elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs) as an underexplored population. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes through a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Contrasting with prior studies that quantify academic and mental health outcomes in dual-career athletes, this study prioritises student-athlete voices to uncover the nuanced social, cultural, and structural challenges of Gaelic Games dual careers.

By examining factors influencing well-being and identity development, this research offers novel insights into how dual-career pathways can be better structured to support EGSAs. Additionally, it explores the structural challenges that arise from competing in an amateur high-performance sporting environment without formalised dual-career support systems. Findings will contribute to sports psychology, athlete identity theory, and policy discussions on dual-career support frameworks, informing strategies that enhance both academic and athletic outcomes for EGSAs and student-athletes in amateur high-performance sports.

Methods

Study design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2024). RTA was selected as it enables an in-depth, interpretative exploration of participants' experiences while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To ensure methodological rigour, this study adheres to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) (Braun & Clarke, 2024), which emphasise transparency in analytic procedures, researcher reflexivity, and the interpretive construction of themes. RTARG provides a framework to ensure that themes are developed through a reflexive engagement with the data, rather than simply identified as pre-existing patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Santhosh et al., 2021). This approach aligns with the study's objective of understanding how elite Gaelic games student-athletes navigate their dual careers, balancing academic and sporting demands within an amateur high-performance context.

Participants & sampling

A nested sampling approach was used to recruit participants from an initial quantitative study (N = 320), ensuring a diverse representation of gender, academic disciplines, stage of education, and sporting code (Ashton et al., 2022). Invitations were distributed via the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) portal, targeting registered elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs) who had previously participated in the survey phase of the study.

Participants were purposively selected based on their active participation at the senior inter-county level within the last 12 months and current full-time enrolment at a third-level institution.

The final sample included 14 participants (7 males, 7 females) from six third-level institutions across all four provinces of Ireland (Connacht, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster). Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.4 years. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate (Level 8) to PhD (Level 10) programmes, allowing for an exploration of how dual-career demands vary across different academic (Table 1) stages (Palinkas et al., 2015).

To verify the elite status of participants, all were actively competing at the highest tier of the Gaelic games structure (senior inter-county level). On average, participants reported engaging in four to five structured training sessions per week during peak competition seasons, including on-pitch training, gym workouts, and recovery sessions, typically amounting to 10–12 hours of structured physical activity weekly. They also competed in national competitions such as the All-Ireland Senior Championship, which spans up to eight months annually and includes league matches, provincial championships, and national finals. This intensive training and competition schedule mirrors the rigorous demands placed on professional athletes, underscoring the elite nature of their participation. Their athletic experience ranged from 1 to 7 years on their respective inter-county panels.

To ensure a balanced discussion and allow for diverse perspectives, participants were divided into four semi-structured focus groups, each consisting of three to four EGSAs. Focus groups were separated by gender to facilitate open discussion of gender-specific experiences, with male and female athletes placed in separate groups (Grossoehme, 2014). The decision to ensure gender balance was made to capture a range of experiences, even though gender was not a primary analytical variable. This approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research, ensuring inclusivity while allowing for the emergence of gender-related (Table 2) themes, should they arise (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from the Atlantic Technological University Research Sub-Committee. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were anonymised using pseudonyms, and all identifying information was redacted from transcripts (Iversen, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

Table 1. Individual participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Academic Level	Years at University	Sporting Code	Years at Inter-County Level
Andrea	23	Female	Level 9 (Masters)	5th year	Ladies Football	5th year
Aoife	21	Female	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	3rd year	Camogie	4th year
Bryan	22	Male	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	3rd year	Football	2nd year
Carla	21	Female	Level 9 (Masters)	5th year	Camogie	5th year
Claire	27	Female	Level 10 Doctorate (PhD)	7th year	Ladies Football	7th year
Dean	22	Male	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	4th year	Hurling	2nd year
Elaine	18	Female	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	1st year	Camogie	1st year
Jack	23	Male	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	3rd year	Hurling	3rd year
Kevin	21	Male	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	2nd year	Football	2nd year
Paul	24	Male	Level 9 (Masters)	5th year	Football	4th year
Ryan	20	Male	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	2nd year	Hurling	1st year
Shane	29	Male	Level 9 (Masters)	5th year	Hurling	9th year
Shauna	22	Female	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	4th year	Ladies Football	5th year
Siofra	20	Female	Level 8 (Undergraduate)	2nd year	Ladies Football	2nd year

Table 2. Participants' collective characteristics.

Variable	Male (n = 7)	Female (n = 7)	Total (N = 14)
Mean age (Years)	23.0 (Â ± 2.9)	21.7 (±2.8)	22.4 (±2.8)
Years at Inter-County Level	3.3 (±2.7)	4.0 (±2.0)	3.64 (±2.31)
Years at University	3.4 (±1.3)	3.4 (±2.1)	3.43 (±1.65)
Course Level (Undergraduate / Postgraduate / PhD)	5 UG, 2 PG	4 UG, 2 PG, 1 PhD	9 UG, 4 PG, 1 PhD
Sporting Code	4 Hurling, 3 Gaelic Football	4 Ladies Football, 3 Camogie	7 Gaelic Football, 4 Hurling, 3 Camogie

Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the voluntary nature of the study and completed informed consent forms prior to participation.

Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted, with groups separated by gender to encourage open and candid discussions. The first group consisted of three male participants, the second group included three female participants, the third group involved four male participants, and the fourth group included four female participants. Gender-segregated groups were used to facilitate discussion, allowing participants to express their experiences without concerns about gender-related dynamics. This method enabled a deep exploration of participants' experiences, capturing the nuances of their daily lives, identity negotiation, and the cultural and social contexts within which they operate (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Santhosh et al., 2021).

Data collection was conducted online via Microsoft Teams, with both audio and video recording enabled. Each session lasted between 55 and 75 minutes (M = 65.0, ± 8.16 minutes). Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to encourage interaction and collective meaning-making, as shared experiences within a group setting can reveal nuances that may not emerge in one-on-one discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1996). Focus groups are particularly useful for understanding the complexities of identity, cultural expectations, and dual-career challenges, as participants can build on each other's reflections and offer deeper insights (Sagoe, 2012). The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to guide discussions while enabling the organic emergence of participant-led topics, ensuring that the most relevant and pressing issues were explored (Basnet, 2018; Ryan et al., 2015).

A preliminary set of discussion topics and focus group prompts were developed based on findings from a previous quantitative study involving 320 elite Gaelic games student-athletes. The survey results identified key areas of interest, including the balance between academic and sporting commitments, the impact of scholarship status, mental health and well-being, and athletic identity and personal development, which informed the design of the semi-structured interview guide. These prompts were further refined through consultation with supervisory researchers to enhance clarity and relevance. Theme development occurred inductively through reflexive engagement with the qualitative data, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2024) approach to thematic analysis. This allowed for a flexible, participant-led exploration of emergent topics, beyond the scope of the pre-prepared prompts (Flick, 2014).

All focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim using a three-step process to ensure accuracy, with both audio and video recordings cross-referenced during transcription. The final transcripts ranged from 32 to 44 pages (M = 38.0 pages) and served as the primary data source for thematic analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's (2022, p. 2024) framework. This approach provided a structured yet flexible process for identifying patterns and themes in the data while emphasising the active role of the researcher in constructing meaning. Disparate with traditional thematic analysis approaches that assume themes pre-exist within the data, RTA recognises that themes are generated through the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data, shaped by theoretical positioning and interpretative decisions (Braun et al., 2024). This aligns with the study's social constructionist perspective, acknowledging that participants' experiences are embedded within broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006, 2019, 2024). First, during familiarisation with the data, the transcripts were read multiple times, with reflective notes taken to capture early analytic insights. Next, open coding was conducted, using NVivo 12 software to systematically generate initial codes that captured key features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). These codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into broader themes and sub-themes, ensuring that thematic development remained fluid and reflective rather than rigidly pre-defined. A combination

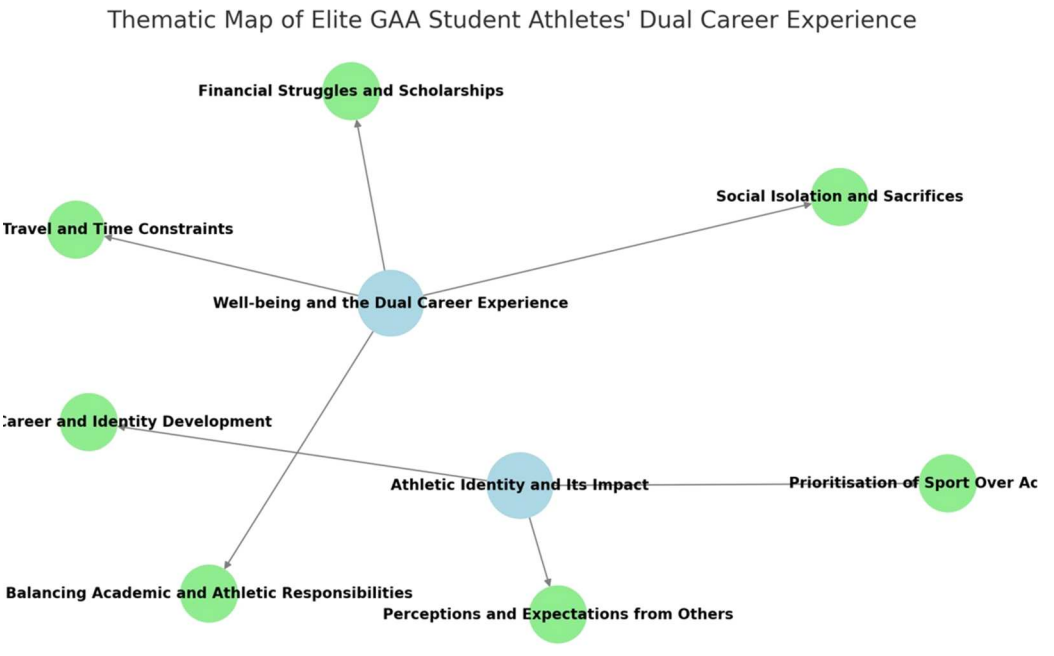


Figure 1. Thematic map.

of inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-informed) coding was applied, allowing themes to be shaped both by the raw data and by pre-existing dual-career theoretical frameworks (Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2018). This approach facilitated a nuanced interpretation of the experiences of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes, capturing the dynamic interplay between academic, athletic, and identity-related challenges.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, a reflexive triangulation process was employed. The initial coding was performed independently by the primary researcher, after which themes and sub-themes were reviewed by two supervisory researchers to ensure analytic coherence (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Additionally, discussions were held with critical friends, experienced qualitative researchers external to the study who challenged assumptions and provided alternative perspectives (Flick, 2014). Any discrepancies in interpretation were resolved through consensus-building discussions, ensuring the robustness of the analysis. Throughout the process, researcher reflexivity was prioritised, with reflexive memos maintained to document analytic decision-making, acknowledge potential biases, and ensure transparency in theme construction.

A thematic map was generated to illustrate the relationships between themes and sub-themes, providing a visual representation of the analytic process. Theme identification was not solely based on frequency but on conceptual significance, ensuring that the themes captured meaningful insights into the dual-career experiences of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (Braun & Clarke, 2019) (Figure 1).

Results and discussion

The focus group discussions (FDDs) provided insights into the challenges faced by elite Gaelic games student-athletes (EGSAs) that impact their wellbeing and identity. The results are presented in two main themes: Well-being and the Dual Career Experience and Athletic Identity and its Impact on Academic Life and Social Perception. Within these overarching themes, several sub-themes emerged, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by EGSAs.

Well-being and the dual career experience

Many participants described the struggle to maintain a balance between their academic and athletic responsibilities, with competing demands often leading to stress, fatigue, and compromised well-being. The intensity of training schedules meant that athletes frequently experienced conflicts between lectures, assignments, and training sessions, making it difficult to manage both domains effectively.

Carla: You're training four or five times a week … it's nearly five hours gone in the evening and then like you're in no mood to actually do anything when you come home.
Paul : You get stressed thinking you should be studying when you're training and vice versa.

The continuous cycle of academic and sporting commitments was challenging for participants, particularly during exam periods or intense training blocks with some reporting feelings of burnout and mental fatigue.

Shauna: Sometimes you just want a break from it all … it does get overwhelming, like going from one campaign into the next like you just don't really get a break at all.
Shane: You're just trying to prioritise around games that you're getting enough sleep in the lead into them and that you have managed it all. That would be one of the major challenges.

The impact of travel on well-being

Many participants cited travel as a significant source of stress, with extensive commuting between university and training venues adding to their already demanding schedules. Several athletes described how travel disrupted their study routines and personal lives, further exacerbating the challenge of balancing dual careers.

Dean: I think travelling is the number one challenge that I have being a student and playing hurling.
Jack: I'd be driving 35 or 40 minutes each way. We would be training five times. I suppose you'd have your three on pitch sessions. You'd have a gym, or maybe 2 gym sessions, so definitely driving an hour when you're going there and back like so it definitely eats into time that you could be studying, spending time with friends or family or even relaxing.
Bryan: I feel that around exam time when you're training, I'm having to travel back home for training and like you're fairly all over the place.

Social isolation and 'little sacrifices'

Many athletes highlighted the necessity of making 'little sacrifices' in their social and personal lives to maintain their dual commitments. The unpredictable nature of training schedules meant that plans with family and friends were often disrupted, leading to feelings of isolation and limited engagement in typical student social activities.

Elaine: I found once I started my first year in college, I did find it hard to keep in touch with my secondary school friends … I literally would go like months without seeing them.
Jack: I find it a struggle to manage the whole lot. Just doing things at the weekend with your family or partners or friends … Sometimes training gets changed and moved, and it can be very last minute.
Shane: When I was younger, everybody I was friends with in college would have just seen me as a hurler … They would say there is no point in even asking me to do stuff or anything because they just knew I wouldn't.

Financial struggles and scholarship challenges

Financial challenges emerged as a key challenge for many participants, with insufficient scholarship support, high travel costs, and the need to work alongside their studies and sport being major stressors. Some athletes expressed frustration that their scholarships were not enough to cover basic living expenses, while others highlighted the uncertainty of receiving funding.

Byan: Trying to manage your finances as the best you can is a big challenge.
Claire: So, I'd have to pay for my own accommodation and everything like that, so it is sometimes like tough financially
Jack: Theres diesel expenses, food expenses, food prepping. So you have to buy your own stuff throughout the week and it's hard to sort all that expense at once.

Athletic identity and its impact on academic life and social perception

Prioritisation of sport over academics

Many participants described a strong athletic identity, often perceiving themselves first and foremost as athletes rather than students. This prioritisation of sport frequently resulted in missed lectures and limited study time, reinforcing feelings of academic disadvantage.

Elaine:
I kind of feel like I identify more as a camogie player than a student … I only really got like one month … where I could really experience that student life.
Bryan:
I'd say that I'm probably acting more like an athlete than I am a student majority of the time.Carla:
I probably identify more as an athlete than a student, you know, I probably looked at my college as more of a sporting institution rather than an academic college in one sense.
However, some participants expressed that their ability to manage a dual career improved as they progressed through college, and that their social connections were embedded within the team dynamic, reducing feelings of isolation.
Shauna:
As I am in 4th year, I kind of find that I have found a balance between being a student and an athlete.Bryan:
When I am getting the chance to go training constantly it is great as a lot of my friends are on the team anyways.

Perceptions and expectations from others

Participants also highlighted how their athletic identities shaped how they were perceived by others, particularly in social and academic settings. Many noted that conversations were often dominated by discussions about their sporting performances, reinforcing their athlete-first identity.

Bryan: If you meet anyone … the first sentence of the conversation is always going to be about hurling … It's never actually how are you … how is college going.
Elaine: I think my friends like whenever they're making plans like they just presume I'm training like that. They always ask, but it's gone to a stage now where it's like I presume you're training, so you can't come.
Jack: All the conversations I would have with club mates and school friends it would be talking about football, the games coming up or what happened in the game, there's no real talking about anything else.
Dean: I think definitely college wise anyways some lads would be thinking there is no point of even asking him to come somewhere or do something, he's not going to come anyways.
Shauna : I think my friends who don't play sport would view me as more of an athlete than my friends that would play sport.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs), focusing on well-being, identity development, and structural challenges associated with managing a dual-career pathway. The findings provide new insights into the complexity of balancing elite sport and higher education within an amateur, high-performance sporting environment, adding to the growing body of literature on dual careers in non-professional sports settings (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015; Nikander et al., 2022).

Participants described persistent challenges in managing academic responsibilities alongside intense training and competition schedules, long-distance travel, financial pressures, and the

social sacrifices required to sustain their dual careers. Additionally, the results highlight how athletic identity often dominates academic identity, shaping both self-perception and external expectations, with implications for career planning and long-term athlete development. These findings align with prior research on stress and mental ill-health among student-athletes in Ireland (Sheehan et al., 2018) and reinforce the need for structured policies and institutional supports that better facilitate dual-career sustainability in Gaelic Games (Jackman et al., 2024).

Well-being and the dual career experience

Participants in this study consistently reported significant challenges in balancing their academic and athletic responsibilities, which is consistent with existing literature on dual career athletes (Gjaka et al., 2021; Saunders, 2021; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). Participants highlighted the considerable stress that arose from juggling the demands of elite-level sport with full-time academic responsibilities. This aligns with existing literature that suggests student-athletes are particularly vulnerable to high levels of stress due to their competing commitments (Gouttebarge et al., 2016; Sheehan et al., 2018). For many EGSAs, the overlapping schedules of training, competition, and coursework left them feeling overwhelmed, with little time for rest and recovery. Participants reported that this often led to mental fatigue and a sense of constant pressure to perform both academically and athletically. This reflects research demonstrating that time constraints among dual-career athletes can result in insufficient recovery, increased stress, and reduced academic performance (Sheehan et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2023). For elite Gaelic games student-athletes (EGSAs), maintaining balance requires not only strategic time management but also adaptability, as their focus shifts between academic and athletic commitments throughout the year. A potential policy to support EGSAs could involve appointing a dual career liaison within academic institutions. This liaison would act as a central resource for student-athletes, streamlining communication between academic departments, coaching staff, and student services. Their responsibilities would include advocating for flexible academic scheduling – such as adjusting assignment deadlines and exam timetables during peak competition periods – and offering targeted resources for time management, mental health support, and academic planning. By reducing the stress of independently navigating these dual demands, this system would promote a healthier balance between academic and athletic commitments, ultimately enhancing the overall well-being and performance of EGSAs.

The impact of travel on athlete well-being

Another major stressor reported by participants was the excessive travel required to attend training and competitions, which further reduced their ability to manage academic commitments, recovery, and personal well-being. Many EGSAs described long commutes between university and training facilities, with some travelling several hours per week, significantly cutting into study time, rest, and social engagement. This finding aligns with previous research, which identifies long-distance travel as a major contributor to athlete fatigue, psychological strain, and academic disengagement (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Storm & Eske, 2022). However, FGDs highlighted even in densely populated areas where training facilities and universities are relatively close in distance, traffic congestion can create a significant time burden, exacerbating stress and time constraints. This is not widely discussed in existing dual-career literature, which predominantly focuses on athletes travelling long distances between cities or across regions (Rossiter et al., 2022). Another key contributor to mental strain was the lack of time for relaxation and personal time, which many participants viewed as a necessary trade-off for succeeding in both sport and academics. The sacrifice of downtime often led to feelings of isolation and burnout, as participants struggled to find a balance between their commitments and their need for self-care. This supports previous findings that show how the intense physical and mental load of elite sports can lead to burnout, particularly when athletes are unable to prioritise rest and recovery (Gomez et al., 2018; Tamminen et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, academic institutions and sporting bodies should consider implementing structured policies that prioritise rest and recovery for dual-career athletes. One potential strategy is the introduction of mandatory recovery periods within the academic calendar, strategically aligned with off-peak training or competition phases, ensuring that athletes have dedicated time for mental and physical recuperation (Eccles & Kazmier, 2019). While such interventions have been explored in professional and NCAA collegiate contexts, they have never been trailed specifically with EGSAs, highlighting a critical gap in current dual-career policy frameworks. Future research should investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating structured recovery periods within the unique demands of Gaelic Games student-athletes, potentially offering insights into enhancing long-term well-being and performance sustainability.

Social isolation and the cost of dual commitments

A particularly striking finding was the extent to which dual-career athletes experience social isolation due to their training and academic schedules. Participants frequently expressed frustration over missing key social events, struggling to maintain friendships, and feeling disconnected from typical student experiences. This supports previous research indicating that elite student-athletes often sacrifice social relationships to meet their sporting and academic demands (Brown, 2021; Guidotti et al., 2015). Participants described the unpredictability of their training schedules as a key barrier to social engagement.

Unlike traditional students, who can plan activities in advance, EGSAs often had to cancel plans at short notice due to last-minute changes in training or competition schedules. This unpredictability led some athletes to feel excluded from social circles, as peers assumed they would always be unavailable. These findings align with research on athletic identity and social isolation, which suggests that dual-career athletes often have trouble maintaining friendships outside of sport (Brown & Potrac, 2009). For many, the only social interactions they maintained were within sporting environments, reinforcing the insular nature of their athletic identity. This is concerning, as strong athletic identity without broader social support has been linked to mental health risks and difficulty transitioning out of sport (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

However, not all participants shared this experience, with some reporting that they did not feel socially isolated. These athletes described being able to maintain friendships, engage in social activities, and strike a balance between their commitments, suggesting that the impact of social sacrifices is not uniform across all EGSAs. This divergence highlights the individual variability in how athletes experience and navigate their dual careers, influenced by factors such as personal time-management strategies, institutional support, and social networks within and outside of sport.

As noted by Drew and Matthews (2018), this tension between athletic commitments and social engagement is a common experience among elite athletes and can lead to long-term consequences on well-being and social development. These findings underscore the need for universities and sports organisations to recognise and address the social well-being of student-athletes, ensuring that they are supported not only in their academic and athletic endeavours but also in their personal lives (GPA, 2024; Rutledge, 2023; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

One strategy to address this could involve creating structured opportunities for social engagement through the establishment of dual-career student-athlete networks or peer support groups. Research has shown that social support networks can serve as a protective factor against stress and burnout in elite athletes, helping them develop resilience and psychological well-being (Lu et al., 2016; Rees & Hardy, 2000). These groups would provide athletes with a platform to connect with peers facing similar challenges, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding, which has been identified as a key contributor to athlete identity formation and life satisfaction (Hagiwara et al., 2021).

Despite the effectiveness of peer-based social support structures in other dual-career frameworks (e.g. NCAA-supported student-athlete programmes in the U.S. and European dual-career models)

(Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Yıldırım & Celik, 2020), Gaelic Games and higher education sporting departments have yet to formally incorporate such initiatives. Unlike structured athlete development systems that prioritise holistic athlete welfare, Gaelic Games operate within a decentralised and largely amateur framework, where social engagement strategies for elite student-athletes remain underdeveloped. This lack of formalised support places greater responsibility on individual athletes to navigate social and emotional challenges independently, increasing the risk of isolation and disengagement from broader student life. Future research should explore how existing dual-career support models in other contexts such as mentorship initiatives and structured peer-group interventions – could be adapted for Gaelic Games athletes, ensuring they receive comprehensive well-being support that extends beyond training and competition demands.

Financial strain and dual-career sustainability

Participants identified financial pressures associated with pursuing a dual career as EGSAs. Many expressed that balancing the demands of academics and high-level sport was made even more difficult by the financial burden it entailed. This financial strain came from various sources, including travel costs for training and competitions, inadequate financial support, and the cost of not being able to obtain employment due to their packed schedules. These findings align with prior research indicating that financial burdens in amateur elite sports create additional stress, impacting both academic and athletic performance (Kelly et al., 2018; Saunders, 2021), with the majority of EGSAs facing 'serious financial difficulties' (GPA, 2024). Scholars have previously called for increased financial support for student-athletes to help alleviate these pressures (GPA, 2024; Hassan et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2019). As financial pressure added to the strain faced by student-athletes, greater assistance from stakeholders is essential to ensure that EGSAs can thrive in both their academic and athletic careers. Building on the recommendations of Bourke (2020), one potential approach could be the implementation of targeted financial aid programmes, such as universal scholarships specifically for dual-career student-athletes. These scholarships could cover costs such as travel for competitions, training equipment, and tuition fees, thereby reducing the financial strain on EGSAs and enabling them to focus more effectively on their academic and athletic goals.

Another approach could involve providing stipends or grants funded by national sporting organisations and university partnerships specifically for Gaelic Games student-athletes. These funds could help cover living expenses, making it more feasible for EGSAs to manage their dual commitments without the need for external employment. This would alleviate the stress associated with financial insecurity, contributing to improved mental well-being and allowing athletes to dedicate time to rest and recovery. By implementing these financial support mechanisms, stakeholders can help reduce the burden on EGSAs, enhancing their well-being and enabling them to achieve greater balance in their academic and athletic pursuits.

Identity and the dual-career challenge

Participants in this study frequently described prioritising their athletic pursuits over academic obligations, with many reporting missed lectures and altered study schedules to accommodate training and competitions. This reflects the complex interplay between athletic identity and academic engagement, a phenomenon well-documented in dual-career literature (Geary et al., 2022; Jackman et al., 2024). Many EGSAs expressed that they viewed themselves primarily as athletes rather than students, emphasising that their self-concept was shaped more by their sporting role than their academic responsibilities. This finding aligns with research indicating that over-identification with athletic identity can negatively impact academic performance, reduce engagement with career planning, and lower decision-making self-efficacy (Antshel et al., 2016; Dunn & Burns, 2012; Huang et al., 2016). Participants in this study echoed these concerns, noting that their intense commitment to sport often resulted in academic underachievement, particularly during

exam periods and high-pressure academic deadlines. Some acknowledged regret over their lack of academic engagement, expressing concerns about future career uncertainty beyond sport. However, not all participants perceived their academic and athletic identities as conflicting. A minority described successfully integrating both aspects of their identity by implementing effective time management strategies, which allowed them to maintain progress in both domains without feeling overwhelmed.

To address the imbalance between athletic and academic identities, universities and sports organisations should implement structured mentoring programmes that connect EGSAs with dual-career alumni who have successfully navigated both pathways. The YODA dual-career model in Europe has piloted mentorship initiatives aimed at supporting elite student-athletes in managing their dual commitments by providing guidance from experienced mentors (YODA, 2025). These mentors can offer strategic advice on integrating academic and athletic responsibilities, share practical techniques for balancing priorities, and help EGSAs recognise the long-term value of their education alongside their sporting careers. Implementing a similar mentorship framework within Gaelic Games could provide EGSAs with essential support, fostering a more sustainable dual-career balance and promoting long-term career development.

External reinforcement of athletic identity

Beyond personal identity conflicts, participants emphasised that external social influences reinforced their athletic identity, making it even more challenging to prioritise academic and career development. Many noted that they were primarily recognised and valued for their sporting performance, with limited acknowledgment of their academic achievements. These experiences align with the research findings of by Geary et al. (2022) and Hughes and Hassan (2017), which highlight how Gaelic Games athletes often struggle with identity balance due to the cultural and community emphasis on sporting excellence. Student-Athletes described interactions where conversations in their local communities, social circles, and even academic settings overwhelmingly centred on their sporting success. This external reinforcement of athletic identity can create psychological barriers to academic engagement, as athletes may feel less motivated to invest in their studies when their social recognition is tied exclusively to their athletic role. This supports research by Cosh and Tully (2015) and Steele et al. (2020), which suggests that elite athletes may experience identity foreclosure – a psychological state in which an individual strongly commits to one role (e.g. athlete) while neglecting other aspects of self-development.

Such identity reinforcement was particularly evident in male athletes, who reported greater social pressure to prioritise their sporting commitments. Female participants, on the other hand, were more likely to discuss the importance of academic planning, suggesting potential gender-based differences in identity development among EGSAs. Future research should explore how gender influence's identity balance in Gaelic Games athletes, particularly in relation to long-term career planning and transition out of sport.

These findings highlight the need for educational institutions and sports organisations to provide structured support systems that recognise and accommodate the dual roles of student-athletes. Research suggests that flexible academic schedules and mentorship programmes can help alleviate these pressures, enhancing both academic success and a sense of belonging, which is critical for the well-being of student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Kelly et al., 2018; López de Subijana et al., 2015; Ni & Feng, 2023).

A key strategy to support identity balance is the implementation of structured goal-setting programmes, enabling EGSAs to set and track academic, athletic, and personal objectives. MacNamara and Collins (2015) found that Irish student-athletes who set clear, measurable goals were better equipped to handle the pressures of their dual roles, demonstrating the importance of proactive planning in dual-career sustainability. Facilitators such as academic advisors, coaches, and dual-career liaisons can guide athletes in aligning these goals, ensuring that both personal growth and

long-term career planning remain priorities. Regular check-ins on progress would further help maintain focus and prevent the overemphasis on athletic identity, fostering a more sustainable dual-career trajectory.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs) in Ireland, highlighting the complex challenges they face in maintaining well-being and identity while managing dual academic and athletic commitments. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the study identified key factors impacting EGSAs' well-being, including the difficulties of balancing responsibilities such as travel and socialisation, financial constraints, and the prioritisation of athletic over academic identity. Additionally, participants' experiences underscore how external perceptions shape identity development, reinforcing the dominance of athletic identity over academic engagement. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on dual-career athlete management, particularly within amateur, high-performance sporting environments, where formalised support structures are less developed compared to professional or state-funded systems. By addressing these challenges through policy-driven solutions, universities and sporting organisations can enhance the dual-career experience, fostering an environment that prioritises the holistic development of EGSAs. This will ensure that student-athletes thrive both academically and athletically while safeguarding their long-term well-being and identity development.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study emphasise the need for structured policies that better support EGSAs in managing their dual careers. To address academic challenges, universities should promote flexible scheduling, adjusted deadlines, and alternative assessment structures for all EGSAs, enabling them to balance academic and athletic commitments (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). Mentorship programmes, modelled after the YODA dual-career framework (YODA, 2025), should also be incorporated to provide EGSAs with guidance from experienced dual-career alumni, equipping them with strategies for time management, identity integration, and career planning (Aquilina, 2013; López de Subijana et al., 2015).

Given the financial pressures faced by EGSAs, expanding and increasing targeted scholarships and travel stipends through university-sporting body partnerships is essential (GPA, 2024). Additionally, structured rest and recovery periods, already implemented in professional sports, should be adapted for Gaelic Games athletes to support mental and physical well-being (Eccles & Kazmier, 2019). To strengthen identity balance and social integration, universities and sports organisations should develop peer support networks and career transition programmes, helping athletes prepare for life beyond sport while ensuring they feel supported in both academic and athletic domains (Kelly et al., 2018; Ni & Feng, 2023). Finally, institutions should implement longitudinal monitoring of dual-career athletes to continuously evaluate and refine support structures, ensuring their effectiveness over time (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022). By implementing these targeted interventions, stakeholders can create a sustainable framework that enhances academic success, athletic performance, and overall well-being for EGSAs, ensuring that the Gaelic Games dual-career pathway remains viable for future generations.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the of elite Gaelic Games student-athletes (EGSAs), several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on qualitative data collected through focus groups, which, while effective in exploring experiences, comes with inherent methodological challenges. Group dynamics and social desirability bias may have influenced participants' willingness

to disclose certain experiences, particularly given the researcher's insider/outsider status (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Some participants may have moderated their responses in the presence of peers, potentially limiting the depth of personal insights shared. Future research could complement focus groups with individual semi-structured interviews, allowing for greater privacy and deeper exploration of sensitive topics (Flick, 2014).

Another limitation relates to the cross-sectional nature of this study, which captures student-athletes' experiences at a single point in time. Dual-career challenges evolve throughout an athlete's academic journey, and the pressures faced in first year may differ from those encountered in later academic stages. Longitudinal studies tracking student-athletes across multiple years could provide a more dynamic understanding of how dual-career challenges fluctuate and how athletes adapt over time (Caruana et al., 2015). Additionally, the study was conducted within the context of the Irish educational and Gaelic games, which may differ significantly from those in other countries. As such, the findings may not be fully applicable to student-athletes in other cultural or institutional contexts. Comparative studies across different countries or sports systems could help to identify whether the challenges and support needs identified in this study are consistent across different settings or if they vary based on local conditions (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022).

Finally, while the study ensured a gender-balanced sample, other demographic variables such as socio-economic background and sporting code (hurling, football, camogie, and ladies' football) were not analysed as primary factors. Future research could explore how socio-economic factors influence access to dual-career support, particularly given the financial challenges highlighted by participants. Expanding research to include a broader range of sports and institutional settings would also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dual-career experience in Ireland (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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