



# **Athletes' Lifestyles and ACE UK**

**A survey of athletes' experiences of sport, education and work, and the role of the ACE UK programme**

**Summary Document  
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**Report:**

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### The Research

It is increasingly recognised that elite athletes should seek to achieve balance between sport and other issues such as education, career and personal development. ACE UK was set up to provide athletes with the skills to cope with the special demands of higher-level sport and to help them prepare for life after sport. ACE UK athlete advisers work with the athletes to determine an appropriate and relevant programme of assistance. This includes: an initial athlete assessment, education guidance, career planning, personal development courses (now called personal best athlete workshops), the OPEN network and transition support.

The following summary presents the main findings from a research project looking at athlete lifestyles, that is, their balance between sport, education, work and leisure; and their views on the ACE UK programme. The research was undertaken by the Strategy, Ethics and Research (Search) team at UK Sport. The second stage fieldwork was administered by 20/20 Research Ltd. The research design had a two staged approach (1) face-to-face interviews with athletes (2) a large-scale self-administered postal questionnaire. The results are based on evidence provided by 570 elite athletes – drawn from ACE UK's athlete database containing 988 athletes at the time of the research. The fieldwork was undertaken in June-July 2000, in the run up to the Sydney Olympic games, and the response rate was 100% for stage 1 and 57% for stage 2.

### The Athletes

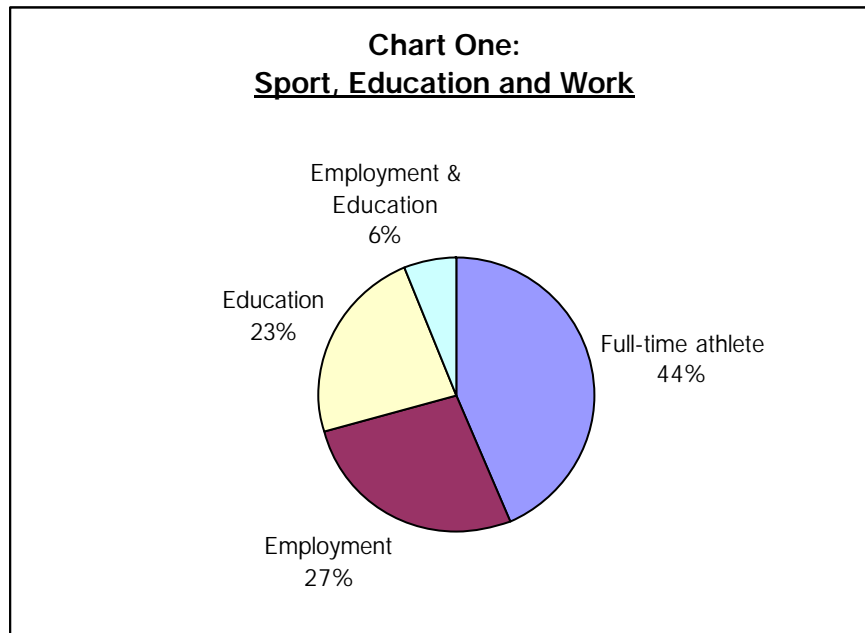
#### Sport, Education and Work

In June-July 2000 nearly a half (44%) of the athletes were concentrating on their sport full-time. This is much higher than in previous surveys: 27% of athletes were full-time in December 1999 and 14% were full-time between 1997 and 1999. These figures show how athletes alter their use of time as the Olympics (or other major championships) approach – but they also show how the National Lottery has helped athletes to spend more time on their sport.

#### Focus on Qualifications and Education

Athletes appear very well qualified. Over two-fifths (42%) had a NVQ Level 4 (degree level or equivalent) qualification. This compares to about a quarter (23%) of the GB population.

In June-July 2000, just under a third (29%) of the athletes were in education. Of these just over two-thirds (68%) were studying full-time and the remainder were part-time (32%). A majority were studying at the pre-degree (44%) or degree (39%) level, though 17% were studying for a post degree level qualification. A third were undertaking studies connected to sport. A half (49%) of athletes in education suggested they had problems balancing sport (training/competing) with their education commitments.



Base: 561 athletes.

### Focus on Work

In June-July 2000 a third (33%) of athletes were working and only 14% were working full-time. Of the remainder, 48% had previous work experience, but around one in five (18%) had no work experience! This may be a problem, particularly for older athletes, since employers often value work experience over qualifications.

As with education, the results suggest that the athletes were keen to work in positions related to sport. For example, of the 100 respondents who provided details of their current occupations, 30 were coaches, and many more were fitness centre managers, life guards, leisure assistants etc.

Over a half (55%) the athletes had problems balancing sport with work, suggesting, rather obviously, that work is harder to balance with sport than education. However, three-fifths (60%) suggested they were satisfied with their career prospects.

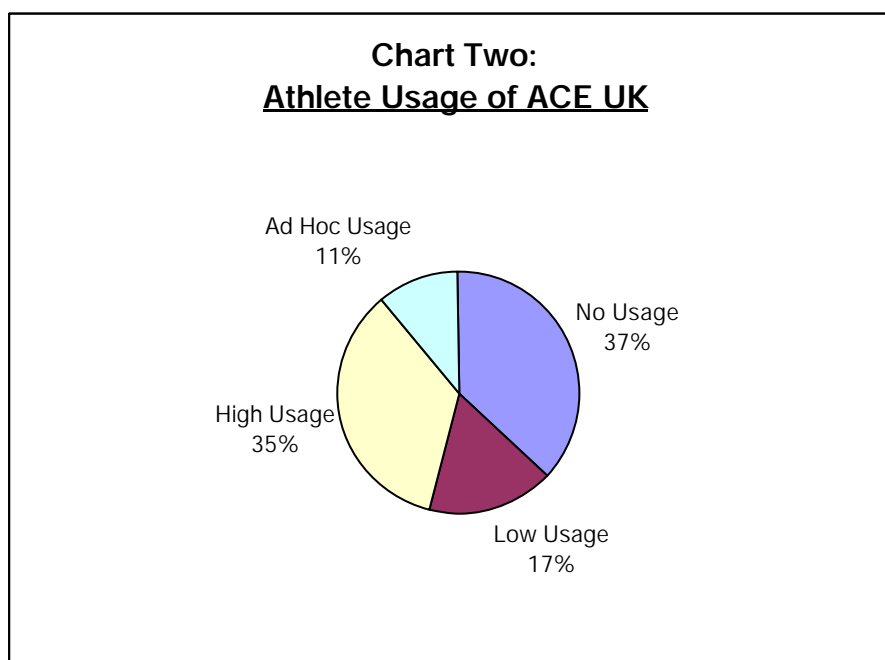
### ACE UK

#### Athlete Awareness of ACE UK

Nine out of ten athletes (92%) suggested that they had 'heard' of ACE UK. However, awareness of ACE UK, in terms of knowledge of its aims and services, varied. For example, some respondents had a high level of knowledge about ACE UK, whereas others thought it might be aimed at the unemployed, or were unsure how it differed from the UK Sports Institute (UKSI).

"ACE UK makes you think about life after sport and realise the possibilities of gaining relevant experience whilst still in competitive sport"

#### Athlete Usage of ACE UK



Base: 561 athletes.

Just under two-thirds (63%) of athletes had used ACE UK advisers or services. Just under two-fifths (37%) had not used ACE UK, including the 8% of athletes who had not heard of it.

One-in-five athletes (17%) were 'lower users' of ACE UK services, that is, at the time of the fieldwork, they had undertaken an athlete assessment only, and had decided not to take service provision any further. 'Low users' were more likely to be older, in employment, especially those in higher-level managerial and professional employment.

## Athlete Lifestyles and ACE UK: Summary

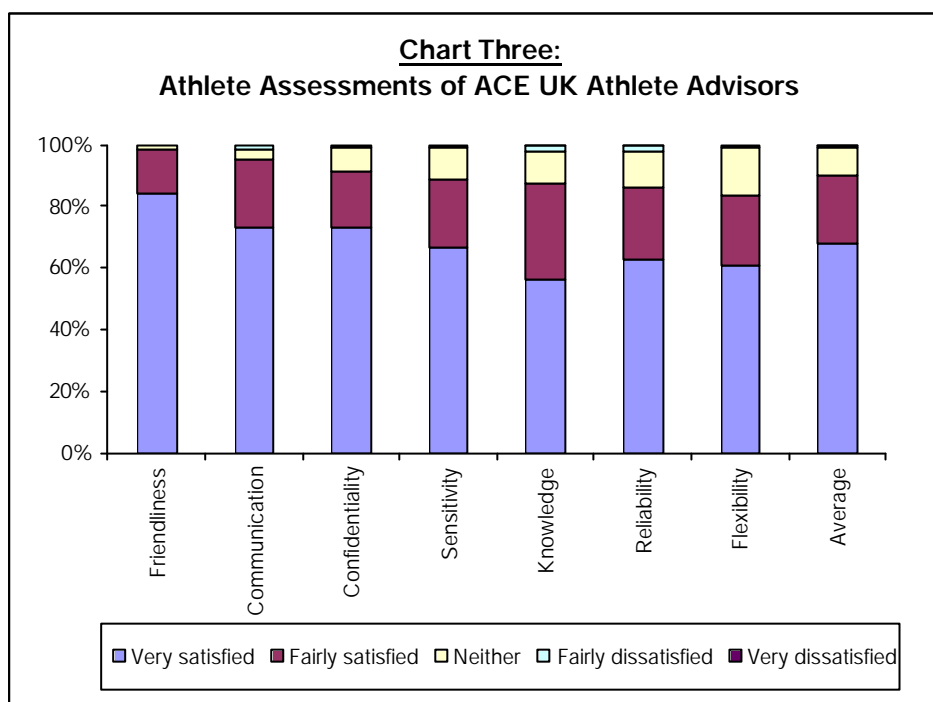
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Just over a third (35%) of the athletes were 'high users' of ACE UK services. These athletes had undertaken an athlete assessment, had developed an athlete action plan, and were either using, or considering using, some of the specific ACE UK services such as education guidance and career planning. 'High users' tended to be younger, in education, or in more routine, lower-value employed positions.

Finally, just over one-in-ten athletes (11%) were 'ad hoc' users of ACE UK services. These athletes had not had an athlete assessment, had not developed an athlete action plan, but had used some ACE UK services, particularly, personal development courses.

### Athlete Views on ACE UK

The athletes were asked their views on two main areas: (1) the athlete advisers (2) the specific ACE UK services i.e. education guidance, career planning, personal development courses and the OPEN network.



Base: Athletes who had met an ACE UK adviser and who expressed a view on the service offered.

### Athlete Views on the Athlete Advisers

The athletes were very positive about their athlete advisers. Over three quarters (68%) suggested they were very satisfied, 22% were fairly satisfied and only 1% were dissatisfied.

The athletes used their athlete advisers in a number of different ways. Most important was the adviser's role as a source of 'friendship, mediation and motivation'. For example, using a range of measures - 'friendliness', 'communication', 'confidentiality' and 'sensitivity' - between 67% and 84% of athletes were very satisfied with their athlete adviser, and only around 1% were dissatisfied. During the face-to-face interviews the athletes commented that advisers were a 'release valve' against the demands of the performance environment.

"[Athlete advisers provide] someone to talk to outside of my sport - but still understands the demands made by training full-time and so are able to give good advice"

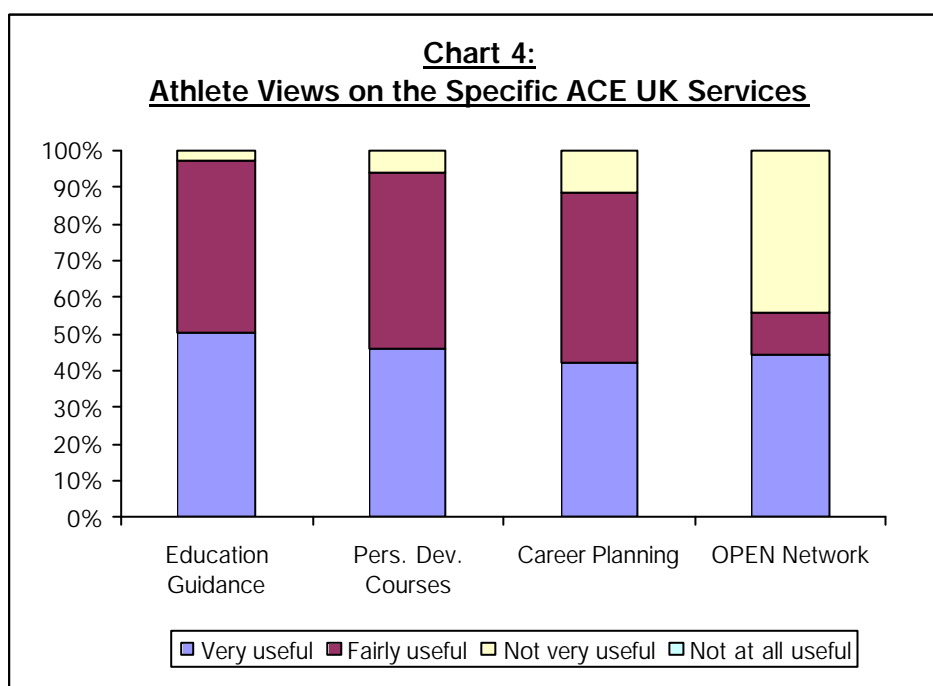
"[Athlete advisers are] somebody in the sports hierarchy who I actually know well. The feeling that there are others out there that are willing to help"

## Athlete Lifestyles and ACE UK: Summary

The athletes also used their athlete adviser as a source of 'information and advice' about education, career and personal development issues. Just over half (53%) suggested they were very satisfied with their advisers' knowledge and a further third (31%) suggested they were satisfied. These results are positive – but they hide concerns on the part of some athletes about the advisers' knowledge of more specialised or technical education and career opportunities.

"My adviser's actual experience of careers or careers advice must be pretty minimal. Her/his experience comes from being a full time athlete, so s/he can relate to that side, but I don't think her/his experience as a career adviser is particularly high"

The main criticism – if it could be called that – of athlete advisers was directed at service delivery. Though the quantitative results were positive – 63% were very satisfied with their advisers' 'reliability' and 61% were very satisfied with their 'flexibility' – qualitative results from the face-to-face interviews were a little more critical. The problem it seems is one of resource. There are simply not enough athlete advisers to provide a quality service to all athletes who demand it.



Base: Athletes who had used the specific ACE UK services.

### Athlete Views on the Specific ACE UK Services

The athletes were also positive about the specific ACE UK services. Just over one in ten athletes had used education guidance (14%) or personal development courses (13%). Of these, over nine out of ten athletes (97% & 94% respectively) suggested they were useful and around half thought they were very useful (53% & 47% respectively).

Though very few negative comments were made about education guidance, a number of respondents made suggestions about personal development courses. For example, athletes with established and developed education and career profiles sometimes questioned the relevance of the courses to their specific needs. Other athletes argued that courses should be delivered on a wider regional basis, that is, not just in the main cities or training centres – or at a more appropriate timetable in relation to their training schedules.

"The ACE adviser helped me through a difficult year of injury by creating projects, which creatively enabled me to combine my professional qualification with my experiences as an athlete"

Just over one in ten athletes used career guidance and 2% had used the OPEN network. Of these, just under nine out of ten suggested that career guidance was useful (42% suggested it was very useful). Just over a half (56%) suggested the OPEN network was useful, but just under a half suggested it was not useful!

The results suggest that career guidance was generally well received. However, as highlighted above, a number of respondents questioned the extent to which the career advice on offer was appropriate to those with more developed specialised and technical career aspirations.

Many respondents agreed with the ideas underpinning OPEN and indicated that they would use the services proposed, but they suggested that the service was not yet fully developed. Moreover, they argued that there was a need for more employers to become involved in the scheme before it would start to function effectively.

"The OPEN scheme is potentially a very good idea [but is] not yet fully developed"

### Overall Opinions on ACE UK

As the reader may have noted, athlete views on ACE UK were very positive. On being asked their overall opinion, three-fifths suggested they were positive about ACE UK, including 30% who were very positive; and only 2% were negative. More importantly, however, those athletes who had used ACE UK were the most positive about the programme. Of the 'high users' nearly all were positive (94%) including two thirds (65%) who were very positive, and none were negative.

"I can't say a bad word about the ACE UK programme. It was just a brilliant experience dealing with the ACE adviser"

### Using the Research To Improve ACE UK

The following section sets out some of the main policy recommendations which emerged from the research, and the actions that the ACE UK team has taken, or intends to take, to improve service provision as a result.

**Recommendation 1.** Consider the need for additional resources, or increase the targeting of services to specific athlete groups on the basis of age, education, career and performance.

***ACE UK Action:*** All eligible athletes will continue to be able to contact their local ACE UK athlete adviser and receive assistance from the ACE UK Programme. However, to ensure that those athletes most likely to benefit from ACE UK services are proactively contacted by a member of the ACE UK team, a checklist is being developed (by August 2001) to target those athletes with the greatest need.

**Recommendation 2.** Recognise the importance of advisers as a source of friendship, mentorship, mediation and offer appropriate training to advisers

***ACE UK Action:*** All members of the ACE UK team undergo initial training on their appointment. However, as a result of the research all advisers will be offered additional training during their professional development week in July 2001, and further individual training needs will also be assessed.

**Recommendation 3.** Develop the skills of the advisers if delivery of specialised education and career advice is a strategic priority. Consider the use of 'adviser specialists'

***ACE UK Action:*** The role of the ACE UK team is to offer general career, education and lifestyle advice and guidance. This includes being equipped with the resources to refer athletes to relevant specialists in their field.

In June 2001 ACE UK entered into a partnership with Drake, Beam, Morin (DBM), the largest career management consultancy in the world, to be able to offer specialised career transition services to athletes. This will enable athletes, wherever they are based in the UK, to receive specialist career services locally at no charge to the athlete.

**Recommendation 4.** Improve service content/delivery of the OPEN Network and Personal Development Courses. Personal Development Courses need to fit in with athletes training and competitive requirements. The OPEN Network needs to recruit more employers.

***ACE UK Action:*** The OPEN service was reviewed during May and June 2001. This included reviewing the resources currently available to attract businesses to the network and the opportunities that OPEN may be able to offer to athletes. The partnership with DBM will also assist in making links with local businesses throughout the UK.

*The ACE UK personal development courses are also being reviewed both in terms of content and delivery mechanisms. The outcomes from this review will be available in August 2001. This will include a schedule for the changes and developments required. A CD Rom was produced in March 2001 as an alternative method of publicising the courses to athletes. It is hoped to be able to offer a small number of courses on-line by the end of 2001.*

### **Summary Published July 2001**

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