Olympism as education: analysing the learning experiences of elite athletes

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Olympic athletes are potentially the most visible exponents of Olympic values. How athletes learn values, however, has not captured the attention of those responsible for Olympic documentation or pedagogues. This paper examines how aspects of Olympism became relevant for three former Olympians during their athletic careers. Interview material suggested that: (1) inconsistencies within official expressions of Olympism mirror tensions in athletic experiences; (2) some claims concerning sport made in the Olympic Charter are simplistic and translate poorly to Olympic experiences that are multidimensional and complex; and (3) universal ethical principles have limited influence on how athletes conduct themselves. The results imply that pedagogues working with elite athletes should make discursive discontinuities in sport explicit, reflect on traditional views of sport education while acknowledging implicit learning, and approach questions of ethics from a specific and practice-oriented standpoint rather than a universal and principle-based one.

Keywords: Olympism; elite athletes; situated learning; communities of practice

Introduction

Pierre de Coubertin coined the term “Olympism” in 1894. Since then, literally thousands of column inches have been devoted to describing, clarifying, and critiquing what can be loosely described as the Olympic philosophy (Földesi 1992; De Coubertin 2000; Binder 2001; Bale and Krogh Christensen 2004; Chatziefstathiou and Henry 2007; Park 2007; Patsantaras 2008). It is not our intention to review these texts but to point out that despite sustained attention, delineating Olympism has proven remarkably difficult (Segrave 1988). The Olympic Charter, the site where one would expect to find a clear and detailed explanation of Olympism, is surprisingly imprecise. Broad terms like “peace”, “development”, “dignity”, “mutual understanding”, “fair play”, “solidarity”, “effort”, and “ethical principles” feature under “Fundamental Principles of Olympism” (International Olympic Committee [IOC] 2011, 10–11) yet the description is far from explicit. One gets a sense of what Olympism stands for but certainly not specific ways that it might be applied or demonstrated.
There are a number of explanations for this imprecision. De Coubertin himself stated that Olympism is, “not a system, but a spiritual and moral attitude” (2000, 48). In this sense, he probably never intended Olympism to be reduced to a set of guidelines. In Notes sur l’Éducation Publique (Notes on Public Education) produced in 1901, he commented that, “if principles are presented as recommendations or commands, participants will ignore them completely” (2000, 150). Takacs (1992) points to basic inconsistencies within official expressions of the philosophy. He suggests for example, that the notion of infinite progress communicated in the motto “citius, altius, fortius” contradicts other principles such as peace and the democratisation of sport. Still others have noted that Olympism was and still is eclectic in its design (DaCosta 2006). While some guiding ideas persist, cultural circumstances and sporting practices have changed, having inevitable consequences for expressions of Olympism (Parry 2006). The fact that women can now become Olympians is one obvious case in point. Finally, several commentators have suggested that a key reason for imprecision relates to the benefits those at the centre of the Olympic movement procure from having loosely articulated and vague principles. Wamsley (2004) contends that references to “dignity” and “harmonious development” function as a “metaphoric empty flask” (232) that can be “filled” to justify a range of political or educational projects. In his view, ambiguity is an intentional strategy used to garner political and financial support.

Although it may be general, imprecise and eclectic, we are not inclined to view the Olympic philosophy as vacuous, at least not if it somehow comes to be reflected in practices. At this point, we would imagine that values like “fair play”, “solidarity” and “effort” are “lived” to various degrees, even if examples of anti-Olympist behaviour surface with relative frequency within Olympic contexts (Moller 2004; Koss 2011). And despite differences of opinion, we are willing to entertain the notion that people agree on the meaning of terms that appear in the Olympic Charter. Like DaCosta (2006), we think it is useful to think of Olympism as providing a direction rather than a roadmap. Our concern in this paper is with whether and how the Olympic “direction” comes to be learned within sporting communities of Olympic athletes. We narrow our focus to aspects of the first fundamental principle of Olympism, namely (1) “exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind”; (2) creating “a way of life based on the joy of effort”; and (3) “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” (IOC 2011, 10). Examining how these core aspects of the philosophy gain significance in the lives of athletes necessitates a consideration of learning in and through sport.

Learning the Olympic way

Historically, the Olympic philosophy was to be learned through the physical. In his many writings, de Coubertin described goals such as mastery over one’s self and one’s environment, achieving balance and harmony, and the display of courage and will power (see de Coubertin [2000, chapter two] for insight into his educational philosophy). The idea that social and moral learning can take place automatically through sport participation, though common in Victorian England (Mangan 2000), has received serious critique in recent decades.
Various educational theorists have argued the confidence placed in sport to deliver positive socio-moral outcomes reflects pedagogic idealism (Kirk 1992; Talbot 1997), and that desired learning will take place only with planning and adequate guidance (Hellison 2003; Pühse 2004). Contemporary educational thinking also suggests that learners are socialised through sport participation and that unintended learning takes place in various sporting contexts (see for example, Bain 1990).

Although sport’s educational capacity in the socio-moral realm has received attention (see Jones 2005, Theodoulides 2003, Theodoulides and Armour 2001, for thoughtful discussions), consensus on whether and how it might be realised has not been forthcoming. With specific reference to Olympism, a handful of theorists have examined teaching and learning in schools (Binder 2001; Kohe 2010), but few authors have considered how participants might experience the philosophy. Here, it is useful to note that as a global phenomenon, the Olympics reach an enormous number of people. Athletes, coaches, managers, and volunteers, not to mention spectators could all be thought of as Olympic “participants” to varying degrees. That said, our concern is with athletes and their immediate social environments. We are specifically interested in how Olympism comes to be reflected in the experiences of athletes. This process has escaped critical scrutiny (see Koss 2011, for an exception) and yet seems particularly important since athletes are expected to model principles of Olympism (McNamee 2006). In the second part of the paper, we introduce empirical material in the form of three cases in response to this assumption. Before that, we do two things. First, we outline the ideas that we used to conceptualise athlete learning. Second, we describe the procedures we used to generate data.

**Situated learning**

Learning can be conceptualised in many ways. As Hager and Hodkinson (2009) note, some conceptual lenses allow certain features of learning to be considered more easily or more rigorously than others. In contrast to theories of learning that are cognitive and/or individual-oriented (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008), situated learning is a conceptual framework that foregrounds social interaction and practices (Lave and Wenger 1991). From a situated learning perspective, learning takes place as individuals become increasingly able to participate in the activities of a given group. Groups are defined by agreement on (1) what comprises the group’s “work”, and (2) the ways members should go about this work. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to such groups as “communities of practice” (CoPs). When an individual starts to participate in a CoP, say a sports team or club, they begin with limited participation. A novice gymnast for example, might be unable to take part in competitions, will have limited training hours, gain instruction from junior coaches, and train only on specific apparatus. Over time though, the nature of participation changes and the gymnast will gain access to social practices that were previously unavailable. For the athlete to progress they must show not only that they can perform required physical skills but also that they know how things are done. This is an encompassing idea that attempts to link personal learning with the cultural dimension of a setting (Kirk and Kinchin 2003). For the gymnast it could entail learning anything from being punctual to
dealing with pain to wearing one’s hair in a certain way. The notion of learning in and through communities connects well with Olympism which involves quite special ways of being, thinking and valuing.

Rather than a series of discrete events where skills or tools are acquired, situated learning is viewed as an on-going activity (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). In characterising this process, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as movement from “legitimate peripheral participant” towards “full/expert participant”. Several points should be made here. More-intensive or expert participation is empowering, however, such participation does not mean that a uniform “centre” or “core” of expertise exists. There is no end to learning, rather, as settings change, so do relations between individuals and their worlds. Learning is thus continuous and dynamic. Second, it has been argued that all learning is situated and as such, learning is constructed within particular socio-cultural climates that serve particular interests and carry particular values (Lave and Wenger 1991). The implication is that the ways in which social relationships are structured within communities influence what can be learned. The gymnast that works with an authoritarian coach in a hierarchical relationship for instance, will learn different ways of being from the gymnast working with a coach that values reciprocity and collaboration. And finally, because this view of learning frames learning as “becoming”, rather than as “acquiring” (Lave 1997), it is concerned with the construction of identities. In relation to the previous point, this theoretical approach attempts to take account of how identities are formed in relation to other members of the community.

**Methods**

Attention to the situated nature of learning has implications for how the topic of Olympism and education is approached empirically. Situated learning theory necessitates a consideration of the contexts in which Olympic athletes find themselves. Specifically, social interactions and practices are of relevance regarding what learning is, and is not, possible and/or desirable. We have attempted to understand Olympic athletes’ views of their social worlds and how Olympism finds form in these worlds through extended conversations. These conversations allowed us to investigate the kinds of relationships the athletes developed, the practices that were commonplace in elite sporting communities, and how Olympism comes to shape athlete identities.

**Research design**

The current investigation was interpretive in nature (Silk 2005) in that the goal was to understand individuals’ representations of their practices within Olympic CoPs. A multiple-case design (Yin 2003) was employed where eight individuals were investigated and each participant served as a unit of analysis. The three cases that are presented below functioned primarily in an instrumental manner (Stake 2005) since they were examined to provide insight into the issue of learning rather than into the intrinsic characteristics of the cases themselves (see below for sampling considerations). Like Yin (2003), we would contend
that a case study approach is useful because it allows one to focus on process. And like most case study research, the value of the findings lies not in their statistical significance but in their “social significance” (Gobo 2004). By this, we mean that we are not relying on the number of cases to support the importance of the findings but instead the depth of understanding created by each case of an issue that is already significant.

**Sampling/recruitment**

We wanted to interview individuals that had trained for and competed at the Olympic Games (winter or summer) and had hence experienced movement from peripheral participant to expert within a sporting CoP. We concentrated on athletes that had competed at the Olympics in the last seven years and had since retired. This focus was based on the assumption that these individuals could reflect on their experiences and make a “meaningful contribution” (Stroh 2000) to the discussion. As we were trying to capture neither the national sporting context nor aspects of a particular sport, the athletes’ nationalities and disciplines were not considered in the initial selection process. As is sometimes the case with sampling, access played a significant role (Charmaz 2005) and we worked with people from our respective countries of residence who were willing to take part in the project.

Potential participants were contacted via email through sport institutions. They received information about the nature of the investigation and an invitation to take part in the project. If an individual accepted, interviews were scheduled for times and places of their choice. Participants were informed that anonymity could not be guaranteed (given the specialised nature of their experiences) but that efforts would be made to make identification difficult. These efforts included using pseudonyms and minimising identifying information in publications. Participants were provided with an opportunity to check material intended for publication and remove personal comments if they felt necessary.

Although eight individuals took part in the project, only three cases are dealt with in this paper. The decision to concentrate on three allowed us to represent the participants’ commentaries in what we believe is sufficient detail. The three specific cases were chosen because they contained variations which helped to produce a thick description of Olympic experiences. Importantly, they are not representative of the larger data set – the participants had unique perspectives and made sense of their experiences in different ways. At the same time, the arguments developed from the three cases would not change if the other participants’ data were to be added.

**Data production procedures**

Two semi-structured interviews (Rapley 2004) were held with each of the participants, both lasting approximately 1.5 hours. Such interviews have been advanced as an appropriate strategy for investigating individuals’ life worlds (Amis 2005). The first interview covered topics relating to athletic career progression, learning and social relationships. The schedule included questions such as: “How did your sporting participation change over time?”, “What did you need to learn in order to do well in the sport?”, and “Who was important to you in your sporting context?”. After the interviews had been
transcribed, and in line with Alvesson and Sköldberg’s (2000) notion of reflexive methodology, the participants were inter-viewed a second time using material from the first conversations as prompts. During the second interview we explored how the individuals connected their Olympic experiences to other aspects of their lives. Although schedules were individualised, all participants were asked to comment on moving away from a CoP in which they were experts, how their sporting selves were accepted (or challenged) in other communities relating to employment or study, and on how learning occurred during their Olympic experience.

**Analysis as practical activity**

Interviews were transcribed using Edley’s (2001) transcription notation. The first three authors considered the interview transcripts independently. Data were organised into themes and the material within each theme was then inspected more closely. This part of the analysis process involved multiple readings and note taking. Annotated transcript excerpts were subsequently developed into written interpretations. Writing with and about the transcripts functioned as a method of inquiry (Richardson and Adams St Pierre 2005).

Analysis also contained a collective element. Once interpretations of the participants’ data sets had been produced, dialogue took place between the four researchers, which facilitated further reflection. Discussion centred on the nature and meaning of the athletes’ statements leading to alternative – and more comprehensive ways of understanding the data. Importantly, collaboration was not used as a tri-angulation-type strategy to ensure convergent interpretations (Cresswell 2003) but as a way to explore divergent and competing explanations.

**Result**

Our conceptual framework directed our attention to certain elements of the participants’ accounts. In this sense, our results are not neutral but are already “theory-laden”. Below we show how athletes train and compete within communities and how the members of these communities shape sports people’s athletic identities. We identify key attitudes, dispositions and practices that the athletes believed were necessary for “expert participation” in their sports and describe how these features came to make sense in different settings. In the following section we consider the significance of the empirical material to Olympism as an educational philosophy.

**Case one: Patrick – combat sport**

Patrick described an active childhood, taking part in many organised sports. At 12, he wanted to concentrate on the combat sport and give up his other activities but his parents convinced him to wait until he was 15. He had already shown a certain aptitude in the combat sport and during adolescence he began training with adults and competing in regional and national tournaments. He achieved a placing at his first national tournament, an event that allowed him to take part in international competitions. Patrick eventually attended three Olympic Games experiencing a “shock defeat” in the first
round of competition at the second Olympics where he was expected to place. In his final Olympics, he won a medal and indicated that this enabled him to finish his career “at peace” with himself.

A number of people comprised what Patrick referred to as his “entourage” – people that could be considered members of his Olympic CoP. According to Patrick, his parents were important. He worked closely with a national coach and a club coach. A small group of professionals, including two doctors, a physiotherapist and a nutritionist, provided not only medical advice but also emotional guidance. Patrick had three close friends who were also involved in the combat sport and whom he described as influential. He also had a friend that worked voluntarily as his manager.

Patrick emphasised that achieving success in increments and foregoing “instant gratification” was a significant feature of learning to be an expert. He cited interactions with his club coach and his parents as critical in this area. His club coach worked from the premise that technique development should take precedence over winning at the start of an athletic career. In practice, this meant that Patrick lost matches and missed medals during his teenage years. The scope of this challenge was especially evident in the following account:

I was always losing against the kids from that club there [in Shelby]. And I told my dad, “Listen, I want to go to the Shelby [combat] club because I’m always number two, number three or number four but they are always number one. I always lose against them.” And then he told me, “No. You don’t go there. I don’t allow you to go there. You still go to your coach.”... And I’m glad that my dad took this decision because all my opponents at that age which were beating me, they all stopped [the combat sport]. Because this club is pushing young kids during two, three years, and they are so fed up afterwards that they retire. And actually, my coach was just doing the opposite. Trying to give the pleasure working on the technique, to give the plea- sure to find out that you get better every day.

Another recurring feature related to being an expert was achieving distance from the sporting world. This distance was developed in various settings and with different people. Conversations with medical practitioners were useful as he was able to see the perspectives of people who were not “living” the combat sport. Reflecting on the sport culture, Patrick acknowledged that it was important to “be a strong man”, “to be hard”, “not to cry or show fear”. Still, he maintained that,

If you want to be good and you want to be free, you have to take a distance from this. Otherwise you are in this world. Then you have the pressure. Maybe it works. You can win one time, two times. But one day it gets you. And that’s one part of it that got me at the [second] Olympic Games.

His unexpected loss constituted a critical incident, however his account suggested that the following months were formative. They allowed him to reflect on the importance he placed on sporting success and the consequences it had for his view of himself. He recounted how, in the lead up to his final Olympics, he realised that this value system could be destructive:
What happens if you fight and you lose and you don’t have the recognition? You commit suicide or what? You have to find something else.

Although Patrick did not use the term paradox, he described how the sporting culture encouraged athletes to focus on medals, money and success, and yet to be really successful over time he maintained that you have to “be free” and break away from these values. His account of Russian combat athletes was illustrative. He commented that, although he was similar to these athletes,

I was a bit more free. Because for them it’s really a question of death or life, almost, which was not my case. And you were able to...you saw it on their face... they want to kill you, they want to destroy you, because they want to get the money, they want to win. You see it, and at the beginning you are a bit impressed. But after a while, actually, it’s a weakness of them, they show a weakness. Because that shows they depend on this, and that gives actually more motivation to beat them. So it’s a weakness, but it takes time that you understand that it’s a weakness of them.

What enables someone to become an expert then, according to Patrick, was free-dom. This was because passion and joy for sport – necessary ingredients for expert Olympic participation in Patrick’s view – only come with freedom from elements of the sporting culture.

A final “way of being” was what Patrick referred to as a “fighting spirit”. This appeared to be extremely important and Patrick explained at length how this needed to be embodied if one was to become an expert. The fighting spirit went beyond determination and giving everything (although these features were certainly part of the fighting spirit). Patrick used the phrase being “rude” and related the idea to egotism:

We miss a bit this rudeness... Sport is like this... when you do competition sport, you think about you, what I’m gonna do to beat my opponent. That’s it. You have to think like that. If you quit and you retire from sport, you can’t only think like this and you are not alone anymore, and it’s not only going on success or that you win. You are living with other people and you have to socialize or whatever. It’s a bit more complex.

Indeed, Patrick has found that since his retirement, there are few times when he needs to think only of himself. When he is coaching for example, he cannot simply concentrate on what he wants and how he can get it. He must consider his junior athletes and their needs and sometimes these are very different from his own. In essence, the way he learned to interact and participate with others as an athlete contradicts the demands of his current setting. From this perspective, Patrick’s experience effectively highlights the situatedness of his learning.
Case two: Lisa – artistic sport

Lisa began her sport at the age of nine. During her first interview, she recounted how she had grown bored with ballet and track and field and said that she wanted to do a more intense activity. She chose an artistic sport and began training once per week for between two and three hours. From the age of 10, she trained three to four times per week. Lisa described how at first, her parents struggled to accept her “commitment” but they eventually understood that she enjoyed this relatively intense participation. Her parents stipulated, Lisa remembered, that she could participate as long as she made her own way to training (a train ride to the next village) and maintained her school performance.

As a teenager, Lisa achieved various national titles and quickly moved from national development to junior and senior teams. She competed at a number of international competitions, including European and World Championships, and two Olympic Games. Nationally, Lisa frequently held the top ranking, and internationally, she consistently placed within the top 10. During her account, Lisa stressed that she received little financial support and paid her own costs.

A number of individuals formed Lisa’s CoP. From the age of 17, she lived away from home so that she could train with two national coaches. Lisa described these coaches, both from the former Soviet Union, as extremely tough and authoritarian. Other influential members of her CoP were Lisa’s team partners. During the preparation for her second Olympic Games, she lived together with her team partner. She recounted how they used to laugh about their closeness, describing it as more inti-mate than a romantic relationship. Finally, medical specialists, physiotherapists and two club officials were significant members of her CoP.

Lisa maintained that self-subordination was essential for success in her sport. She linked it with “functioning”:

That was very important, that you can simply function, in all situations and moments of your life. To ignore your needs, to accept critique and to deal with that critique.

Lisa suggested that submitting to others and suppressing personal needs were necessary during training and competitions. While some team members spoke out when they felt that something was wrong, Lisa said that she:

Simply submitted. Because I knew, if I wanted to achieve my goal, I had to submit.

Lisa said that even at the time, she felt that her submission was problematic and “put her in difficult situations”. She agreed, for instance, to continue her Olympic preparation with her team partner despite illness and desperately wanting to retire. In retrospect, Lisa expressed satisfaction at having “stuck it out” for her partner but realised that she had subverted her own needs and desires. Although Lisa had achieved her sporting goals, she questioned whether her prolonged career had been worth her while.

Subordination also involved stretching physical and emotional limits. When asked about her training, Lisa described it as:
Inhumane … every now and then, someone had to carry me out because I was so finished. To push yourself to this limit, that requires a lot of will. And that wasn’t nice, actually … we always had to train until we almost fainted.

She referred to several situations in which she was pushed to her limits. She described how during a training camp in Asia, she became sick:

I must have eaten something bad and I had something intestinal and they sent me to see a doctor. He said, “Yes, it’s completely normal that you have diarrhoea” and I said, “No, it’s something else.” And then he gave me Imodium and I trained with this, but always also a sip of brandy, a sip of coke and that was all that I could eat. And my coach said, “You train, you stay”, because we had to prepare for the Olympics. And then later, I called the Olympic doctor at home and he gave me antibiotics and things got better. But it was one week, completely at my limit and I had to keep going and that was very tough.

Lisa not only became “expert” in dealing with physical hardship. Her precarious financial situation throughout her Olympic career meant that she became accustomed to psychological hardship. The circumstances surrounding the training camp in Asia were illustrative.

We went there right after Christmas and I thought “Okay. I have absolutely no money. I’m away for three weeks, I come back and I don’t know how to pay my bills.” I was totally at my limits even then… When I talked to my coach, she insisted that I travel to the camp, even though I said “I don’t know how to finance my life.” And she said, “Yes, you come, we have to train, we will find a solution.” And then I got sick and everything came to a head, the entire situation of coming home, no money, receiving payment reminders…

At the same time, Lisa maintained that the physical and emotional challenges that she endured allowed her to develop ingenuity. She began to ask businesses for financial support. Pushing limits, Lisa argued, made her believe that she could always find a solution. Her efforts, while intimately linked with hardship, made her optimistic:

And somehow, those are moments when you realise, “Okay, I have to do this on my own. You have to take care of this, you have to get it sorted. It doesn’t matter how.” And yes, you learn to deal with that somehow, and I learned to deal with problems and to find a solution. It didn’t matter how, when or where. There’s always a solution for everything.

Although Lisa would like to have avoided constantly working at her limits, she stated that optimism had developed from having to manage these difficulties. She felt that it gave her a basic trust in herself and a confidence that she could handle any situation.
Case three: Michelle – interceptive team sport

Like the previous two athletes, Michelle recalled an extremely active childhood. While she enjoyed a number of these sports, she excelled early in the sport she eventually focused on. Michelle began representing her city at the age of 11, being on average two years younger than her teammates. This became a recurring feature of her participation as she was typically the youngest athlete selected for junior representation. She became immersed in the sport quickly and represented her country for the first time at the age of 16.

Michelle’s escalating involvement in the sport was facilitated by a number of key people. She met a small group of athletes while playing in representative teams and they ended up being teammates in various Olympic campaigns. Michelle identified several coaches that were instrumental in her development as a player and who were strong contributors (not always in positive ways) to her Olympic experiences. Team support personnel (e.g. strength and conditioning, sports psychology) were referred to as an important part of her community regarding her development in the lead up to, during and after her Olympic involvement. Finally, Michelle cited the impact of her parents and later, her husband and spoke highly of their contributions to her sporting endeavours.

As her participation changed from social to performance-focused, Michelle was able to recall the increasing training and travelling commitments involved in her sport. Rather than as a sacrifice, Michelle framed her increasing participation in positive terms:

Yeah I love travelling. We’d go overseas three or four times a year most years so that’s very cool. I love that part of being an athlete.

She also articulated a passion for training and expressed an enthusiasm for being involved:

I almost loved it more than playing... sometimes you wouldn’t get a ball in a game. So I love training.

A theme that Michelle emphasised when referring to her achievement was the need for purposeful effort. She was very clear that it was not enough to just train. Rather for her, there was a need to “make training purposeful”. While she credited some part of this approach to goal setting activities she had done with elite sport academies, this insight was primarily distilled from watching fellow athletes who,

Would get up at five o’clock, go to the gym, go to training, go to work, come back to training, six days a week and never get anywhere.

For the majority of her career, the importance of purposeful effort was about personal improvement. As she matured and became a more senior member of the national team it was about setting a standard because as she put it,

When you make the national team or you make the Olympic teams, everyone has to be a leader.
In her junior years, Michelle could not identify why she was being selected in representative teams. As she progressed in her playing career however, she gained confidence and became increasingly aware of what she needed from those around her – particularly her coaches. In her second Olympic Games she became disappointed that her coach did not understand how to get the best from her. Her frustration was compounded by her view that it was the coach’s job to do this. In her third Olympics (with her third Olympic coach) she took a more active approach:

I think it was my best, the best “me” I could ever be in that period of time because I just said to that coach … “This is who I am, this is what I need, this is what I need you to tell me, this is what I’m feeling when I’m playing bad, this is what…” I just spelled it out and we were awesome. He was awesome for me but it’s like I almost showed him.

Michelle attributed much of this active attitude to having limited success with previous coaches and the knowledge that it was likely to be her final Olympics. However, Michelle’s concern for her body was also an important factor in shaping her approach. She commented that she could not rely on coaches to know what was best for her, suggesting that she started to become more responsible:

I’d had five surgeries by then … So you just can’t do that anymore. So train less in some things, train differently in others. I had to be okay with it.

While Michelle appeared to gradually take control of her sporting experience, her attitude to elite sport also shifted. On a number of occasions she noted that even at the Olympic level “it’s just a game”. Michelle referred to a kind of epiphany while at an international competition:

We were in Holland. It was midnight, one degree [Celsius]. I just remember standing there giggling. It was freezing and we were playing a game – the same game that these other random people that I don’t even know are playing and they’re on the other side of the world. Here we are playing a game. It’s just a game.

Although she presented a self that was easily accepted in her sporting community (highly driven, extremely competitive, and talented-but-modest), she developed a view of elite sport that was at odds to her coaches’ views. Indeed, at one point she indicated that, “The coaches don’t like it when I say that it’s just a game… probably won’t mention that again.”

Discussion
We would like to consider the implications of the findings for Olympism as a broader educational philosophy. Specifically, we focus on parallels and tensions that emerged between sporting practices and the kind of learning that the Olympic Charter prescribes. As stated earlier, we have chosen to concentrate primarily on the following aspects of the first fundamental principle of
Olympism: (1) “exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind”; (2) creating “a way of life based on the joy of effort”; and (3) “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” (IOC 2011, 10). Although we focus on three aspects, we would suggest that our arguments are relevant to a broader consideration of Olympism and can be used to stimulate further discussion.

We will begin by commenting that, as previously noted (Parry 2006; Segrave 1988), the language of the Charter’s statements is imprecise. Despite ambiguity, one can draw parallels between the first aspect above and the commentaries provided by the participants. The need to be determined and to train at physical and emotional limits was a recurring theme in the participants’ explanations. In this respect, their accounts could be seen to reflect a central aspect of Olympism. At the same time, narratives of emotional subordination, self-centeredness and repeated injury also emerged. These features implied imbalance and contradict the tenor of the statement, regardless of the vagueness of the language. One might argue that these events constitute anomalies or alternatively that they somehow call into question the relevance of the Charter to the “real” experiences of athletes. We disagree with both positions and if we consider Olympism more broadly, we can reconcile this apparent discrepancy. References to imbalance and excess align with the Olympics’ assignment of infinite progress and its motto “citius, altius, fortius”. From this perspective, the contradictory nature of athletic experiences can be seen to reflect the inconsistent nature of Olympism itself (see Takacs 1992). Just as the Charter simultaneously contains balance and excess, so too do athletes’ experiences.

Making this conflict explicit in official documentation would probably help to avoid confusion and criticism. We would argue that tensions are not inherently problematic at the level of practice either, if they are made overt. In fact, as far as an Olympic education is concerned, this kind of incongruity could be extraordinarily generative. The data suggest that finding balance and moderation while achieving feats of extreme difficulty represents an enduring challenge that shapes athletes’ environments. Attention to how one negotiates these competing discourses could form an important part of an alternative Olympic pedagogy. Importantly, this would not be done by adhering to a traditional view of learning through sport where learning is seen to take place by default (Jones 2005; Theodoulides and Armour 2001). Rather, learning (and coaching) could take place in a reflective manner with attention to the cultural dimensions of settings (Kirk and Kinchin 2003) and the role of significant others (Lave and Wenger 1991).

We might add here that the participants in this investigation were successful and reflective and had managed to negotiate the contradictions inherent in their cultures – Michelle and Patrick’s distance from their sporting cultures serve as illustrations. Still, this appeared to have been the result of good fortune rather than good planning. Both Michelle and Patrick explained how developing distance had meant challenging the practices of their communities. We are suggesting that reflection constitute an accepted part of sporting cultures. As an additional note, we might well ask how many athletes finish careers without making it to the Olympics and without the ability to reflect on the contradictory nature of elite level sport.

With respect to the second aspect of the statement, there is no doubt that
Olympic performance requires effort. Whether individuals learn to take joy from this effort is less clear, especially if effort is not associated with success. Patrick’s account showed how despite attempts by his coach to teach him to enjoy training, prizes and recognition were important. While he indicated that he had learned to value effort and that passion and joy were crucial, he still pointed out that had he not won an Olympic medal, he probably would not have been satisfied with his athletic career. Pleasure featured in Michelle’s accounts and one gets a sense that she learned to value effort from a young age. Of the three participants, Lisa made probably the most reference to effort but the least to joy. For Lisa, adjectives like “inhumane” countered any suggestion that the substantial investment she made was joyous. Somewhat ironically, Lisa still attached importance to effort even though she could not take enjoyment from it.

All three cases draw attention to the complexity of ideas like “effort” and “joy” in Olympic experiences and encourage us to question the at times one-dimensional nature of statements espoused by de Coubertin (2000) and the Olympic Charter. They illustrate how principles that relate to recognition and domination, for example, become embedded in athletes’ frameworks of meaning without being part of the official Olympic mandate and possibly without even being part of the training intended by coaches. In this respect, the cases support critiques of sport’s positive educational capacity (Kirk 1992; Talbot 1997) and remind us that ignoring implicit learning that takes place during participation is both idealistic and risky.

Finally, the participants’ comments are relevant to a consideration of ethical aspects of learning through Olympic participation. The Charter makes references to moral behaviour in phrases like “fair play” and “human dignity” (IOC 2011). These concepts are expounded in the IOC’s (2009) “Code of Ethics”. With the exception of allusions to doping and abuse, the Code has a clearer focus on the conduct of Olympic “parties” – “the IOC and each of its members, the cities wishing to organise the Olympic Games, the organising committees of the Olympic Games, and the National Olympic Committees” (IOC 2009, 83) – than it does on the conduct of athletes. Ethics have been a focus of educational materials produced by the IOC (see for example, IOC 2007) but here intended audiences have been school children.

The seeming lack of concern for athletes’ conduct may account for the recurrence of anti-Olympic behaviour (Moller 2004; Koss 2011) but again, this would be a simplistic argument to make. While the participants in this project did not claim to have engaged in un-ethical practices neither did they make claims to especially ethical behaviour. It would be difficult in our view to argue that Olympic participation had produced individuals that were ethically superior to people that have worked as plumbers or lawyers for instance, or that they should be held up as moral role models (McNamee 2006). Our analysis suggested that the participants’ behaviours were guided by the accepted practices of the communities in which they worked. What was “appropriate” was negotiated and determined by the members of the group in their everyday interactions.

This result has pedagogical implications because it emphasises the importance of commonplace, routine actions such as comments and gestures.
The result suggests that these too, shape how things should be done and hence have an ethical dimension. The result also however, challenges the notion of universalism. The empirical material suggests that rather than being led by universal principles, learning is likely to be context-specific and driven by perceived consequences. To paraphrase Lisa, “it’s not what she wanted to do but it got her to the Olympics”. In this light, ethics education for athletes should provide not statements of abstract principles but ideas and examples for how practices can be discussed, challenged or changed. This kind of focus would involve all members of communities because, as we have suggested, all members act and are hence responsible for emerging cultures. This type of approach would appear to fit the democratic approach that the Charter advocates.

Conclusion

We began the paper by claiming that Olympism is a slippery term and that concrete expressions of the philosophy are difficult to find. We argued that despite ambiguity, one could get a sense of what Olympism referred to and that it was possible to look at how the philosophy could find form in athletic experiences. Utilising the notion of situated learning, we examined three individuals’ accounts of learning to become “experts” in their respective sporting communities, focusing specifically on their relationships within those communities.

The participants identified a number of ways of being that they maintained were crucial for becoming expert. These included being patient, determined, submissive, egotistic and purposeful. The accounts were then examined against a backdrop of Olympism and three contentions were made. First, tensions in athletic experiences mirror tensions within official expressions of Olympism. Second, claims to effort and joy made in the Olympic Charter depict elite sport participation in a one-sided, idealised manner. The individuals’ commentaries underscored the multidimensional nature of Olympic careers and pointed to the complexity of learning through sport. Finally, our analysis suggested that athletes’ behaviours are determined by interactions and local consequences. Universal ethical principles did not appear to have significant influence on how athletes conduct themselves.

Each of these results has implications for pedagogues working with elite athletes. We have argued that rendering discursive discontinuities in sport visible is particularly important. We have stressed the need to question traditional views of sport education while still acknowledging implicit learning. And lastly, we have proposed that ethical dimensions of Olympism should be conceived in specific and practice-oriented terms rather than in universal and principle-based terms.

We recognise that in exploring intersections between Olympism as educational philosophy and Olympic athletic participation we have touched on a number of issues. These issues warrant greater attention and there is still a range of questions to be addressed. What does Olympism mean to coaches and other sports pedagogues? What kinds of assumptions are contained within the language of official Olympic documentation and how do these affect how Olympism can be taught or learned? And why have athletes constituted an educational “blind spot” both for the IOC and for scholars? If athletes are to emerge from Olympic careers with a comprehensive understanding of Olympism and if they are to be held up as cultural role...
models then these questions are worth answering.

References


Koss, J. 2011. Athletes’ rights and Olympic reform: A discussion with Johann