



**THE
CAMOGIE
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An Cumann Camógálaíochta

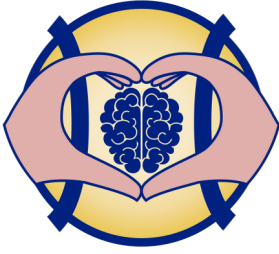


THE CAMOGIE ASSOCIATION

PLAYER WELFARE

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Player Welfare



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ATHLETIC IDENTITY

What is Athlete Identity?

As players we put a lot of time into our sport. Aside from training and games, we have travel, the food prep and any individual training we may do. All this feeds into our athletic identity.

Athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and looks to others for acknowledgement of that role (Brewer et al. 1993). It also refers to the degree to which one devotes special attention to sport compared to other roles or activities in life. It can be influenced by the experiences, relationships and involvement of the athlete in sport activities.



Self-concept refers to the image we have of ourselves. This is compiled from all our different roles that make us who we are. Our view of ourselves as an athlete can be one of these roles. Athletic identity can exist on a large spectrum, as a small part of who someone is all the way up to a large encompassing part of their life.

Athletic identity is nurtured through development of skills, belief, and the social interactions during sport. If we are progressing well in our sport we will likely develop a strong athletic identity. Moreover, if the relationships we develop in these sporting areas are generally positive that will contribute to an athletic identity.

As a result, the greater emphasis one ascribes to their athlete role, the more likely ones self esteem, motivation and outlook will be influenced by perceptions of competence, performance and achievements in this area.

Can Athlete Identity be helpful?

If we compete in sport or exercise we will have an athletic identity, but the degree to which we feel it makes up our self-concept varies. These various identities in our self-concept influence how we feel about ourselves and our view of ourselves. The stronger our identity with a certain role, the more the experiences and feelings from that role will influence how we feel overall. These identities are not completely separate either, identity is fluid in a sense, and it can cross over across different areas of our life.



Figure 1: An individual with a balanced the variety of life roles they occupy

Developing an athletic identity has many advantages. It has been shown to increase:

- One's emotional connection to sport
- Commitment to training and achieving sporting goals
- Performance outcomes
- Likelihood of remaining physically active outside of our sport
- Levels of enjoyment in sport

We can see that having an athletic identity can lead to many benefits within your sport, but also outside of sport, with people being more likely to remain physically active, which has positive long term implications for health.



What problems can Athletic Identity pose?

As we can see an athletic identity can be a positive thing, however, there is a point whereby it can begin to take over.

In a research review paper on Gaelic Games to improve research, policy and practice (Jackman et al. 2023), one of the recommendations was for those in Gaelic Games to *“be aware of the perils of an athletic identity and the performance narrative”*. But what is the issue with athletic identity, namely a unidimensional one?

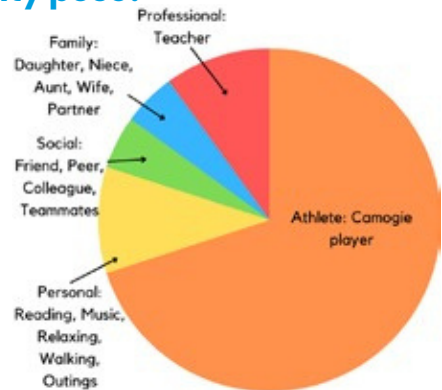


Figure 2: An individual with a unidimensional athletic identity, which dominates their self-concept

When our sport becomes dominant, we run the risk of developing a unidimensional athletic identity. Those with a strong athletic identity will define themselves almost exclusively in this athlete role (unidimensional), while someone with a less dominant athletic identity might define themselves in a wider range of roles, for example athlete, parent, teacher and so on (multidimensional). A person in this example may define themselves as a Camogie player.

If you ask them; *“What do you do?”* they might respond with; *“I’m a Camogie player”*. It becomes a very strong part of their identity. Others might say; *“Sarah, she’s the Camogie player”*.

Herein lies the problem. When our identity is so reliant on one area of our life, then we begin to rely on this area for our sense of self-worth. We can begin to neglect other areas of our lives in order to fulfil this athletic role which continues to hinder the development of a multidimensional self-concept.

The dangers of a unidimensional athletic identity include:

- Greater risk of emotional and psychological distress when facing injury or upon retirement from sport
- Increased risk of burnout
- Decreased enjoyment of sport
- Neglect of other areas of life

Of course there are times when life is going to be unbalanced and tilted in the direction of certain roles and that's okay. But we need to be wary when that begins to become the long-term norm.

Camogie and Athlete Identity

The Camogie Association is a unique organisation. That in part can lead to potential issues we have with athletic identity. Gaelic Games plays such an important role in Irish society and as a result the desire to conform to that identity can become stronger. The links we have with our parish, our teammates and the supporters are all brilliant.

That community aspect, where it can feel as though your club or county is relying on you to get a result. This feeling of responsibility can be great, and that role of sport being a massive part of our identity is brilliant at times however, it can be problematic.

It can support the development of this unidimensional athletic identity when we become so immersed in it. We feel we have to commit to the demands that are placed on us. A lot of overall identity i.e. social or personal, can be tied up in our sporting identity.

I am not saying this commitment is a negative thing. It is an important trait for any endeavour in life. However, in this case that commitment can then become too much, sport dictates our life and this affects the other aspects of our life.

As Gaelic Games become more professional, due to the professional extent of training, S&C sessions, nutrition and so on, Gaelic Games athletes are experiencing this strong sense of identity even more so.

What happens if there is no sport for us?

What happens when there is no sport for us? If we have a unidimensional athletic identity when we remove sport through either retirement or injury, this creates a huge gap in our overall identity. That value we gave ourselves from competing is removed. The thing we were motivated to do isn't there anymore. Emotional difficulties post-injury or retirement are often cited by athletes with a strong athletic identity as they struggle to grapple with the fact that their sport isn't there for them any more.

Indeed Geary et al. (2022) carried out research with dual code athletes and found that many of these athletes were reluctant to speak about the prospect of injury or retirement, in part, due to their strong athletic identity. They didn't

want to fathom it. However, the transition out of sport through retirement will happen to everyone. We know it is coming, but many athletes still struggle to manage the transition due their athletic identity and the vacuum it creates in the self-concept.

As Gaelic Games moves towards being professional in everything but name, athletic identity is becoming more prominent (Geary, 2022). At an intercounty level, Camogie players are averaging **5.6 sessions per week** between team sessions and individual sessions. It's not hard to see how players would begin to develop this dominant athletic identity. Intercounty Camogie players are averaging **3.7 hours per day** on their sport between actual sport activities and travel time. They are devoting a lot of time to their sport and this contributes to the development of a strong athletic identity.



Burnout is a topic that is studied extensively in Sport Psychology Literature and one of the strongest links to it is a strong athletic identity. Indeed research in Gaelic Games into the same topic has found similar links around the area of commitment to sport and burnout (Woods et al. 2020). It is an amateur organisation, however the athletes are training in a way that is close to professional while the vast majority are trying to hold down full time job or study.

	Agree (%)
Can incorporate other hobbies	15
So tired from physical demands, struggle to work/study	82
So tired from mental demands, struggle to work/study	74
Mood impacted by success/failure	86

As we can see from the table the results of a 2020 WGPA survey that for many intercounty athletes, competing at that level limits them from incorporating other hobbies which can then further continue the cultivation of a one-dimensional self-concept, dominated by sport. The vast majority describe sporting results influencing their mood. Lastly, we can see how athletic identity is linked to burnout with the majority of these athletes reporting that the demands of the role impact their other professional roles.

Of course, these results don't mean that all these athletes have a strong athletic identity, but they do show the potential conditions for having a strong athletic identity.

How can we manage our Athletic Identity

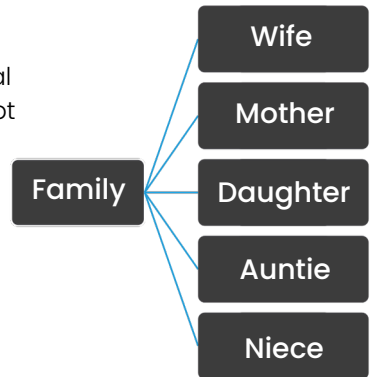
As we have seen athletic identity is not necessarily a negative thing, but we just have to be aware when it is becoming unhelpful. Here are 4 ways in which we can do that

1. Who are you?

Take a person first approach. A unidimensional identity occurs when we allow our self-concept to become dominated by one area.

However, we are more than just an athlete. There many different roles that make us who we are.

Have a think about these roles. If you're struggling to come up with ideas, think about the important people in your life, what sort of role do you play for them?



Record all these different roles and the sub roles within them. These are all different roles that are a part of our self-concept. How much are we tapping into and engaging with these roles?

We don't have to start engaging all these areas but it just give us an idea of the all the possible dimensions that make us who we are.

2. Separate yourself from the athlete

When we have reflected on the different roles that we have it can become easier to separate ourselves from the athletic dimension that we have. We can let sport take over our self-concept. *"I am a Camogie player"*. We tie our value up in this dimension of life. The value we place on ourselves is based on performances. We feel good about ourselves as a person when we play well, but we feel bad about ourselves as a person when we play poorly. It can be important to remember the mantra;

“What you do does not equal who you are”

It can be easy to define ourselves as athletes. Here we need to be careful of the language we use. When we use inflexible language to describe ourselves we can begin to tell ourselves that we are just an athlete. Indeed famous boxing trainer and trainer to Muhammad Ali, Angelo Dundee when asked about working with fighters, he replied;

“I don’t work with fighters. I work with men who happen to fight”

This outlook can be a helpful way to view our sporting identity. You don’t have to be a Camogie player. You happen to be someone who plays Camogie, while still retaining all the other dimensions of your identity.



**What you do
does not equal
who you are.**

3. Cultivate relationships outside of Camogie

As we said above, the Camogie Association is a unique organisation. It can encapsulate everything about our area and as a result it can be easy to let it dominate our self-concept. An important part of this is the relationships that we have within a group.

Camogie can provide us with a great opportunity to form relationships. We sometimes allow these friendships to stay in Camogie surroundings rather than bringing them outside that particular arena. Create opportunities to cultivate relationships outside the sporting arena.

Can you get together with some friends and do something non-sport related. Especially when we look at the effect that being away from the sporting environment through injury or retirement can have, it is vital that we normalise and integrate these relationships outside the sporting sphere.

4. What else do you enjoy?

Linking in with all of the above, what else do you enjoy in life? Are you doing as much of it as you would like over a period of time? Perhaps there are things that you would like to try out away from sport. Create time to develop your interest away from your sport in order to cultivate those other areas of yourself and continue to develop that multi-dimensional self-concept.

Create time to engage with these other areas of enjoyment. It could be worth setting a particular time aside week in order to you to do this. This can build our belief in life outside of sport when the time comes to leave our sport.

With this article, I don't want to make out that all Camogie and Gaelic Games athletes have a dominant athletic identity, that is certainly not the case. I do want to make people aware that Gaelic Games, and its cultural importance to daily life in Ireland can at times provide a risk factor for athletes developing a strong athletic identity and the risk that poses in terms of burnout, transitional issues with retirement and injury and the neglect of other areas of life.



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Player Welfare and Inclusion Resources

Below are some of the resources which can be found on the Camogie Association website.

You can check them out at camogie.ie



Player Welfare Booklet Vol 1 & 2



Player Welfare Booklet Vol 3 & 4



Player Health Check Programme



Injury Prevention Programme



Self Care Series



Player Welfare Podcast



Player Safety and Helmets



Concussion Guidelines



Health and Wellbeing Information



Camogie Association Disability Inclusion Policy



Supporting Organisations contact information