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# ATHLETE ENGAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE FILIPINO ATHLETE

Michele Joan D. Valbuena

Psychology Department  
Silliman University  
Dumaguete City, Philippines

John Saunders

Vanessa Rice

Elizabeth Aumond

Australian Catholic University  
Melbourne, Australia



Aimed at exploring the concept of athlete engagement, qualitative interviews on athlete engagement were conducted among 10 Filipino athletes who were competing at the international level. Data indicated that similar to New Zealand (Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007) and Canadian athletes (Lonsdale, Hodge & Jackson, 2007), Filipino athletes experienced confidence, dedication, vigour and enthusiasm as dimensions of their engagement. Filipino athletes experienced spirituality as an added dimension to their experience of engagement. Sporting experiences like relationship with coach, social support and assurance of fair play have been found to be antecedents of engagement. Love of the game and discipline were shown to be aspects of enthusiasm and dedication respectively. Flow was experienced by these athletes as a consequence of athlete engagement.

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**KEYWORDS:** athlete engagement, Filipino, spirituality, sport

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## INTRODUCTION

ATHLETE ENGAGEMENT (AE) has been defined as a “persistent, positive, cognitive-affective experience in sport, characterized by confidence, dedication, and vigour” (Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007, p. 451). AE was initially derived from the work/employee engagement construct. Work/employee engagement is a fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being believed to be the opposite of job burnout (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008). Employees who are engaged are found to possess high levels of energy, experience enthusiasm in their work and are frequently immersed in their job (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). “An engaged individual is one who is fully committed and enthusiastic about investing one’s best effort at work, which means that one is physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and spiritually aligned with a purpose over and above one’s immediate personal interest” (The Human Performance Institute, 2010, p. 1). Hakanen, Schaufeli, and Ahola (2008) identified vigour, dedication, and absorption as characteristics of work engagement. They defined vigour as high levels of energy and mental resilience when working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work and persistence amidst difficulties. They defined dedication as a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge, and absorption as being fully concentrated and happily engrossed when working. They added that absorption is having the feeling that time passes quickly and experiencing difficulty in detaching oneself from work.

Other researchers in organizational psychology have reported variations of these constructs as characteristics of work engagement. Some have redefined them; others have added new constructs. For example, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) identified efficacy along with vigour, dedication, and absorption as employee engagement dimensions. Loehr and Schwartz (2001), in examining training and development of employees in business, addressed competencies such as endurance, strength, flexibility, self-control, and focus. They termed this *full engagement*. In simple terms, *full engagement* is about being able to manage energy well. A fully engaged employee is physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually energized (2001). These constructs and the concept of engagement have been extended to sport.

Similar to employee engagement, research on how AE may prevent burnout among athletes has been undertaken (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Jackson, 2007). Their data illustrated that AE and burnout are potential bipolar opposites. When engagement in an athlete occurs, burnout is prevented. Additionally, results of an exploratory investigation of the antecedents and consequences of AE in elite sports indicated that AE partially mediated the relationship between needs satisfaction, an antecedent, and flow, a consequence (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009).

Elite athletes learn to balance multiple dimensions of themselves—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual—and improve performance by allowing recovery (Groppel & Wiegand, 2013), as one of the important parts in energy management. Loehr (2013) found “that tennis players can improve their performance when they learn to perform in intervals—that is to disengage from stress (produced by the effort of playing a point) and return to a calm state of mind within 16 seconds before the next serve” (p. 2). These top level tennis players developed recovery rituals during the 15 to 20 seconds interval between points during a game. Hence, the ability to recover is one very important attribute of a fully engaged athlete.

Because *athlete engagement* is a fairly new construct within sport psychology, the authors saw a need to replicate Lonsdale et al.’s research with New Zealand elite athletes, and since validated it with Canadian elite athletes. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the efficacy of current approaches within a different group of athletes coming from a different country. Filipino athletes were interviewed to determine the applicability of the current athlete engagement concept to an Asian perspective.

### **Athlete Engagement (AE)**

Lonsdale, Hodge, and Raedeke (2007a) interviewed 15 elite athletes from New Zealand in their initial exploratory study. The common themes that emerged from the descriptors included confidence, dedication, and vigour. A second study was then implemented to develop and validate a quantitative measure for AE, Athletic Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ), using the dimensions reported from the first study. This second study also investigated preoccupation and enjoyment as additional AE dimensions, and sought to provide evidence for them as valid dimensions of AE

(Lonsdale, Hodge & Jackson, 2007b). Lonsdale, et al. (2007b) reported on three studies on elite athletes from New Zealand and Canada. Study 1 showed that enjoyment was strongly related to AE. It must be noted that enjoyment was not included in the vigour dimension as was the case in the first reported research. Rather, enjoyment and excitement were taken as separate factors and called enthusiasm. Studies 2 and 3 supported the factorial validity of the AEQ scores, and study 3 particularly supported the nomological validity of the constructs. Therefore, the AEQ measured four dimensions: confidence, dedication, vigour, and enthusiasm.

Evidence of the construct validity of the AEQ was provided in a later study where AE was examined in relation to basic psychological needs (antecedents) and dispositional flow (consequence) (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009). This research looked at AE as a possible mediator between basic needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness, and flow. Feelings of autonomy were “perceptions of volition, choice, and self-directedness” (p. 188). Competence was one’s feeling of ability and having the opportunity to be effective. Relatedness was “a sense of mutual caring and connectedness with others” (p.188). Flow was “an intrinsically rewarding, state-like experience characterized by total involvement or immersion in an activity” (p. 187). When an athlete is in a flow state, the experience of challenge in the achievement of a goal in either training or competition is on a par with the level of competence the athlete has. This is necessary to overcome that challenge. The athlete possesses a sense of control over the current situation and that allows for the achievement of a goal. Results among Canadian elite athletes showed that satisfaction of basic needs predicted AE that further predicted dispositional flow. Further, AE partially mediated basic needs and flow (2009). Therefore AE influenced frequent occurrence of flow experiences.

These definitions are very similar to how Loehr and Schwartz defined athlete engagement as the skillful management of energy. Athletes are able to perform at their peak when they feel confident, relaxed, and calm, energized with positive emotion, challenged, focused and alert, automatic and instinctive, and ready for fun and enjoyment. These feelings are also similar to Lonsdale et al.’s (2007) AE dimensions of confidence, dedication, vigour, and enthusiasm. Loehr further emphasized that toughness is needed

for an athlete to develop to acquire optimum performance. He added that “true toughness in sport requires balance” (p. 35) and to become tough, the athlete has to be engaged. Full engagement is the energy state that best employs performance (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005). This is true in the workplace, in sports, and in other areas in one’s life.

Although sport psychology research has few literature on athlete engagement as a concept, sport practitioners have long adapted the notion of engagement. Loehr and Schwartz (2005) discussed training manuals for Greek athletes on “work-rest” ratios to maximize performance. Russian sports scientists re-used this concept for the improvement of their Olympic successes. Loehr and Schwartz adopted this idea and worked with elite athletes on imbalance between energy expenditure and recovery that almost always lead to burnout. They coined the term *full engagement* to refer to a balance between work and rest, or energy expenditure and recovery. Athletes who were experiencing an imbalance due to overtraining or undertraining in physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual dimensions of engagement “had performance consequences that included persistent injuries and sickness, anxiety, negativity and anger, difficulty concentrating, and loss of passion” (p. 29), which are symptoms of burnout. Loehr and Schwartz reported that with *full engagement*, they were successful in helping athletes manage their energy more skillfully and systematically increase their capacities to compensate an insufficient dimension and build in regular recovery.

A range of intervention techniques to improve sport performance such as goal-setting, arousal control, and cognitive-restructuring has been used for performance enhancement (Anshel, 2013; DeRenne & Morgan, 2013; Diaz-Ocejo, Kuitunen, & Mora-Merida, 2013; and Wright & O’Halloran, 2013). They are believed to improve physical preparedness, technical skills, and psychological readiness for optimum performance. However, other dimensions, such as the contribution of spiritual and emotional experiences, associated with preparedness and psychological readiness, have been overlooked and therefore not addressed. *Full engagement* addresses these dimensions (Loehr & Schwartz, 2009). In the concept of The Human Performance Pyramid (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001), physical capacity is at the bottom of the pyramid followed by emotional and mental capacities at the next two levels respectively, and spiritual capacity at the peak. Loehr

and Schwartz emphasized that sustained engagement includes development of all of these capacities. When these four capacities are present in the athlete, an improved performance in all facets of life occurs even in those outside of the sport. When athletes are engaged, they manage both their sporting and non-sporting lives well (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005). This results in sustainable optimum performance, eventually affecting efficient management of their lives in total.

To address the issue of the robustness of the AE construct, AE in the context of Filipino athletes was investigated. The study replicated that by Lonsdale, Hodge, and Raedeke (2007), with the aim of determining if athletes from the Philippines experience the same AE dimensions as New Zealand and Canadian elite athletes.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The research employed a qualitative research methodology using an interview process called the Scanlan Collaborative Interview Method (SCIM).

### Participants

Recruitment was through snowball sampling. Two athletes were initially identified for interviews. A qualified interviewee must be currently competing at the international level. At the end of their interviews, these athletes were asked if they knew other athletes who would be interested in participating and if they knew their contact details. They gave their names and contact information such as email, Facebook account, and mobile numbers. They were then contacted. Their qualification to be an interviewee was confirmed at the beginning of the interview when they were asked about their level of competition.

### Procedure

The procedure followed Lonsdale et. al's (2007a) use of the SCIM. Figure 1 illustrates the detailed procedure of the interview among Filipino athletes. The same open-ended questions used in the

New Zealand study (see Appendix A) were asked in face-to-face interviews.

SCIM is both an inductive and deductive type of interview. There are four sections that comprised the interview proper. The first section was an introduction to the interview process, which consisted of the explanation of the procedure and questions about the demographic profile of the athletes. An introduction to the engagement concept (1A) was also provided.

The AE definition was presented to the interviewees in an index card. This served as the direction for the topic of discussion. The interviewees were allowed to ask questions regarding the definition to make sure that they understood the general concept of engagement (2B). The researchers were careful not to present any of the engagement dimensions thus far. The interviewees were asked to think back over their career and remember a time they felt particularly engaged in their sport. Other questions (see Appendix A) served as a guide for the interview. After all the questions were satisfactorily answered, emergent dimension themes were organized (2C).

In the deductive section of the interview, confidence, dedication, vigour and enthusiasm and their definitions were presented to the interviewees on index cards as possible engagement dimensions (3D). It was explained that they were dimensions that had emerged among New Zealand and Canadian athletes. The interviewees were asked if these dimensions were the same as or different from the themes that had emerged in the inductive interview. They then confirmed that the dimension was already in the inductive picture, added the dimension to their engagement picture, or rejected the dimension as inclusive of their own engagement picture (3E). Before the entire interview concluded, the interviewees' engagement picture from the inductive to the deductive interviews was reviewed, allowing the interviewees to confirm or make necessary adjustments or revisions to their engagement picture (4F).

The final stage, content analysis, compared the interviewees' final engagement picture against the verbatim statements to make sure that it was indeed the final athlete's engagement picture (5G). No "member check" was used (Lonsdale et al., 2007a, p. 456) because of the time constraints of the athlete. All of the interviewees' engagement pictures were examined and common engagement themes were named across all of the 10 athletes

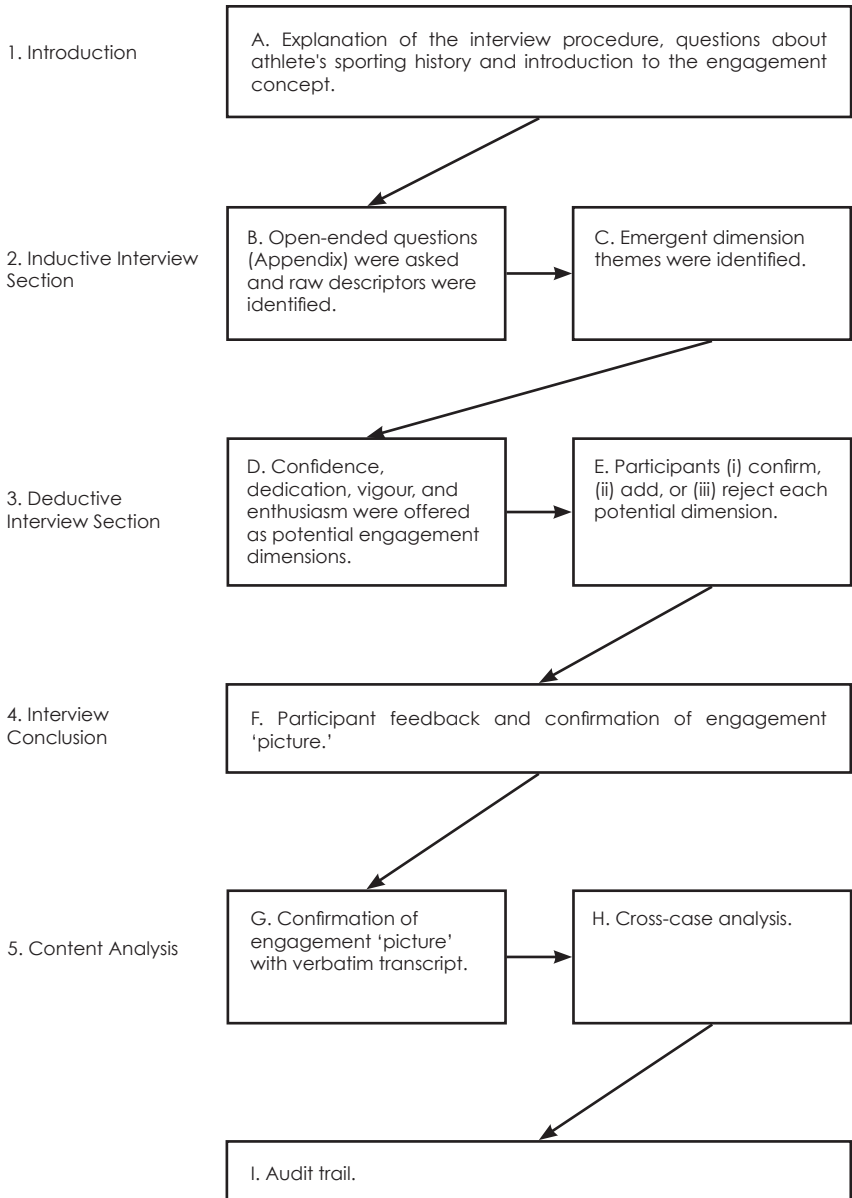


Figure 1. **The Scanlan Collaborative Interview Method Was Adopted from Lonsdale et al. (2007a) Study.**



(5H). In the audit process, an expert of the field was asked to look at the raw descriptors and the engagement themes that were used to describe them (5I). He confirmed the same dimensions and suggested re-classification of others as antecedents or consequences of AE.

## RESULTS

The interviewees consisted of archers, golfers, marathoners, and mountain bikers. While all of them had been competing primarily at the Asian regional level such as the SEA (Southeast Asia) Games and in international matches like the GrandPrix games in their respective sport, three of them were Olympians. While these three were elite athletes, another one was the first Filipino Skyrunner who had received several gold medals in international marathons, and was therefore considered as the fourth elite athlete among all of the interviewees. The others were in the sub-elite level based on the awards they won and the level of games they competed in. Their mean age was 27.8 years old. They ranged in age from 18 to 46 years old. Five were males and 5 were females. Seven finished college through athletic scholarships. Two of the 7 took a long time to finish because it took them longer to finish their primary and secondary schools due to their low socioeconomic status. One finished two years of high school and another one finished one year of college. Both of them could not balance their training and studies because they had to work hard in training for financial reasons, so they decided to just stop their studies and concentrate on their sport. The youngest, who was 18 years old, finished high school and was currently on her way to college in the USA. Among the six who indicated they were breadwinners in their families, four were the primary earners in their families who put food on the table and helped their siblings through school. Two built houses for their families and one even bought a car for the family.

The average interview time ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The athletes described the experiences they believed to be an engagement experience with a number of examples and descriptors. Most of what they related as engagement experiences were fairly recent, with the majority being within one to two years to the time of the interview, and were most unforgettable ones in

both training and competitions.

Similar to New Zealand and Canadian athletes, Filipino athletes indicated that they experienced *confidence*, *dedication*, *vigour*, and *enthusiasm* as engagement dimensions. Table 1 shows the interviewees' raw descriptors of their emergent engagement dimensions. All of them described their *confidence* as feeling good about themselves as athletes, and possessing abilities and skills. Commitment and having a purpose as an athlete were the most common descriptors of *dedication*. Being energized physically—possessing strength—and mentally having focus, and feeling interested and positive about their sport were the most frequent descriptors of *vigour*. Feelings of happiness, excitement, enjoyment and passion were their descriptors of *enthusiasm*.

They added a description of a “feeling of an adrenaline rush” as a descriptor of enthusiasm because when they were excited, enjoying, and happy, they felt some kind of elation they attributed to the adrenaline in their body. They added a few others namely *love of the game*, *relationship with coach*, *social support*, *discipline*, *assurance of fair play*, and *spirituality*, which were reclassified as either antecedents or dimensions of AE.

## Confidence

The interviewees looked at confidence as a characteristic that varied with level of competition, wins and losses, and frequency and quality of training. Most of them said that as they regularly competed at one level, their confidence became stronger because they were comfortable in that level of competition. When one moved to a higher level of competition, confidence dwindled and efforts were made to meet a certain level of confidence in order for one to have a sufficient amount of comfort competing at that level. This was so because one's competitors were better and more skillful than those at a previous lower level. The competition was tighter. Winning was more challenging to achieve. One interviewee related that as he mastered winning at a particular level of competition, confidence increased until it levelled off. He explained:

After competing at one level and winning each time, you feel very confident of yourself. And then when that experience continues at a period of time, you lose the

Table 1. Themes From the Cross-Case Analysis Given the Interviewees' Raw Descriptors of Engagement, N=10.

Confidence	Dedication	Vigor	Enthusiasm	Spirituality	Antecedents of AE
Felt good about oneself as an athlete (n=10)	Devoted (n=7)	Felt energized (n=10)	Felt happy in the sport (n=10)	Deep sense of values (n=7)	Relationship with coach (n=4)
One had ability (n=10)	Committed (n=10)	Emotional maturity (n=5)	Felt excited (n=10)	Faith in God (n=10)	Social support (support from family, friends, Filipino people, Philippine Sports Commission) (n=10)
Skillful (n=10)	Had direction/purpose as an athlete (n=10) Faithful to one's sport (n=5)	Focused and interested in the sport (n=10) Had willingness to do anything and everything for the sport (n=9)	Enjoyed playing one's sport (n=10) Passionate (n=9)		Assurance of fair play (n=1)
	Sacrificed other aspects in life for one's sport (n=5)	Had physical strength (n=10)	Felt an adrenaline rush (n=10)		
	Discipline (n=1) <i>*originally reported as dimension</i>	Possessed positivity (n=10)	Love of the game (n=4) <i>*originally reported as dimension</i>		

feeling of challenge and so confidence loses its value. Because it wouldn't matter anyway. You keep winning anyway. (Archer, 29 years old)

When he moved to a higher level of competition, for example from one level of international competition to the Olympics, confidence started to fluctuate. Because one is competing with equally or better skilled athletes at the Olympics, one's confidence may not be as high as in the lower level of competition where greater confidence was felt. The interviewee reiterated that confidence was definitely a primary dimension of his engagement experiences even when its degree was dependent on the level of competition and how long one had been competing and winning at that particular level.

In the context of winning, an interviewee experienced a sudden decrease of confidence after losing the first round at a prestigious international Grand Prix competition. He learned not to be too confident, especially that he was unaware of the capacities of his opponents. He needed to focus instead on how to do his best to win and outperform his opponents. The other athlete experienced losing a game she knew she could have won if she had not felt overconfident at the pre-competition stage. She initially believed that her opponents were not as good as she was. She did not put all of her efforts into the game when it started. She was feeling relaxed. When she started losing in her rounds, she found out she could no longer change the situation.

While all of them illustrated that understanding the development of their confidence was based on their past experiences, one said that if she had had proper nutrition in the many years of her early marathon career, she would have been more confident of her athletic skills and abilities. Despite running barefoot across villages when she was a teen, and competing barefoot because she could not afford to buy a pair of running shoes, she still won gold medals. She expressed

*Wala akong pera, mahirap na mahirap kami. Pero hindi naging hadlang yun sa pagkamit kong ambisyon ko. Na kahit mahirap kami, nagawa ko pa ring manalo ng golds. Kasi, alam ko na kaya ko. [I did not have money; we were very poor. But that did not become a hindrance to the fulfillment of my ambition. Despite our hardship, I was still able to win gold medals.*

Because I know I could make it.] (Marathoner, 37 years old)

She believed that if she had the necessary resources for good training, including a good pair of running shoes and nutrition, she would have been number one in the Philippines at an earlier time in her life. She explained that she would have felt more confident as an athlete if she had the resources she needed. Similarly, two other athletes mentioned that the lack of proper equipment and a complete training program especially in preparation for and during a competition, affected their level of confidence. These two athletes competed in mountain biking (downhill and cross country); hence, an appropriate set of tires were necessary. They were either not given a new set of tires until their competition dates, despite requesting them at the earliest time they could from the Philippine Sports Commission, or they received them after the competition started. There were times too, they claimed, that they received hand-me-down equipment, or that their equipment was not the appropriate size. One athlete received a full set of clothing that was too big. He laughingly said that his helmet would revolve around his head, his sleeves were longer than his arms and his cycling shorts were as good as boxer shorts. He felt he was taken for granted, became angry and disappointed at the kind of treatment he received from his government. Nevertheless, he learned to overcome these factors so that they will not affect his will to win. He said,

*Wala na akong magagawa kung ganun sila. Wala na yun sa control ko. Sinabi ko sa sarili ko na I only have myself to depend on. [I can't do anything about them. They are not under my control. I told myself that I only have myself to depend on.] (Mountain Biker, 22 years old)*

He maintained a mindset that he would no longer depend on what his government could or could not do for him. He would depend on himself to train and compete for himself, his family, and the Filipinos who looked up to him as their hero in sports. He said that if Filipino athletes could win gold medals despite the lack of training resources from their country, then they would win more medals if full provisions were given. He added that with appropriate government support, more athletes would have

more opportunities to become excellent performers, consequently winning at international competitions bringing glory to their country.

Confidence levels were influenced primarily by how athletes are able to fulfil their goals and secondarily by the resources available to the athletes—from training programs to sporting equipment.

## **Dedication**

Among these athletes, dedication was consistently described as experience at high levels. They emphasized that they placed the greatest amount of time and effort into their sport in order to achieve optimum performance. This was further affirmed by all of them who claimed that they trained many hours a day, in most if not all days in a week. Their education was disrupted so that they could spend more time training. There were those who decided to stop school because they had a hard time balancing training and education. They prioritized sport over education to achieve their dreams of becoming professional athletes. There were those who took a long time finishing school because it was constantly disrupted by their training. They failed in their classes either from too many absences or from failure to submit requirements. However, this was not always the case. The youngest athlete interviewed provided an example of someone who was able to maintain a balance between fulfilling her academic responsibilities and putting time and effort into her sport in both training and competition. The tremendous support of her family and school helped her maintain this balance. What she said she sacrificed instead were her social activities, such as parties and hanging out with friends. She often used those times driving balls at the golf range. She said “in that way, I did not grow up normally like any teenager my age. Although at some point I felt inadequate in that manner, in the end, I appreciated what I compromised because I became better as an athlete” (Golfer, 18 years old). Shortly after the interview, she left for Tennessee, USA as an athletic scholar and started training for a USA team.

One athlete’s love for the game turned her into a highly dedicated runner. She said that her poverty could not afford her proper running shoes, and that she was only able to buy Robertsons shoes (a type of sneakers that was very popular in

the Philippines) later on. She used them until they wore off. She further stated that she could only afford three meals a day and nothing in between. Despite that, she continued to put time and effort into her sport. She said she was determined to achieve her dream of becoming a champion regardless of the obstacles. She developed a mindset that nothing could stop her from becoming what she wanted.

While most of the athletes showed how a high dedication to their sport was consistently present throughout their career, two athletes described times when it decreased. One said that for more than 20 years of having been extremely dedicated to her sport that produced several medals internationally, things slowly changed when she decided to adopt a child. Being a single mother, this required a lot of her time away from the archery range. She said that although excelling in her sport might have been her purpose for most of her life, that direction has dramatically changed with the presence of her son. Parenting became her priority over her sport. She explained, "When you have a child, everything else in your life changes. I feel that he was meant to be mine, so I was going to work hard at being a really good mother" (Archer, 46 years old). Another athlete related how she was intensely dedicated to her sport until her relationship with her coach soured. She did not want to attend training sessions anymore. She lost her drive towards becoming an excellent athlete. Her time and effort spent for training diminished and this became worse when she looked for other activities to become involved in. Her interest in those other activities pulled her away from her sport. Except for these two instances, dedication was consistently and concretely demonstrated by the athletes. They clearly asserted that dedication had to be present in order for them to be optimal performers in their sport.

## Vigour

The athletes described their physical, mental and emotional energies in different contexts and demonstrated that these influenced their sporting lives in different ways. For the athletes in archery, they emphasized that mental energy was an important requirement to perform well. Archery is primarily a mental game. If an archer lacks the necessary mental energy, he or she will not be able to do well shooting arrows. One archer said that although

mental energy is needed first and foremost in archery, he realized, later in his career, that his physical energy was also equally important. Another archer indicated that she associated mental energy with mental focus. She added that when one is not focused, shooting arrows automatically becomes distorted. She also said that her vigour was distorted when she had her menstrual period. She could not feel at ease thinking she might get stains on her pants while she was competing. Her mental focus was disrupted by the discomfort and embarrassment she felt. She also said that she felt physically tired and her emotional energy seemed to fluctuate from high to low, perhaps due to her hormones, she thought. In contrast, a mountain biker in the sample sustained high levels of vigour from training to competition. He assessed his mental energy as being higher and stronger than his physical and emotional energies. Another mountain biker indicated that his emotional energy decreased when he had to compete with an inappropriate tire. His feelings of disappointment over his sport organization, who failed to provide him with the proper tire for his bike, decreased his emotional energy, consequently decreasing his mental energy and resulting in a poor outcome.

Two athletes experienced a change in vigour depending on the outcome of a game. One athlete indicated that when he performed well, his vigour increased. Otherwise, it decreased. Another athlete specifically mentioned emotional energy as changing depending on the outcome of a competition. Her mental energy changed depending on her physical energy expenditure. When she became physically tired from training, her mental energy decreased considerably.

One athlete had a very different experience with vigour. She said that her experience of vigour was high at the start of training periods, but when the training routine became the same every day, she started feeling bored and tired. She reiterated that she needed her coach to keep her engaged in her sport; otherwise, she looked for other things to do to sustain her over-all drive. Vigour, in her engagement experiences, was not one-dimensional. It had to revolve around other facets in her life, even those outside of sport, in order for her to be able to sustain it in her sport. She expressed:

It might be different for other athletes or other people who really give their all in their sport. I'm different. I need a



coach who understands me and who knows how to get me interested all the time. Otherwise, my training and competition performances are poor. (Archer, 22 years old)

Interestingly, one athlete looked at vigour in the context of how it wholly developed his athletic career. His vigour did not depreciate with age because according to him, as one type of energy weakened through the years, the other types of energies strengthened. He specifically told about how his physical energy was no longer as aggressive as it was when he was younger because of the physiological principle of “wear and tear”; nevertheless, his emotional energy strengthened due to the maturity he gained from his experiences. He had learned how to balance his energies—how to manage his different types of emotional energies—already knowing what was good for him or not. Also, his mental energy sharpened through the years. Similarly, another athlete experienced vigour nearly in the same context. She learned to balance her emotional and mental energies because they dictated her physical energy and hence, performance in a game. She learned to overcome certain emotions like fear because she did not want them to disadvantage her. She added that she had to have the right amount of mental energy. She ensured that she did not think too much nor too little in order to perform well. She said that thinking too much drained her physical energy. Hence, the right amount of mental energy resulted in the right amount of physical energy necessary for optimum performance. She gave the following illustration:

I can't really say how much mental energy is necessary. You just know because you can feel it. I experienced very high levels of mental energy and it didn't serve me well. I seemed to have overly focused, overestimating my strategies at my game and it consumed a lot of me. (Track and Field, 30 years old)

Most interesting among all the athletes' experiences of vigour was one athlete's experience of poverty as reinforcing the maintenance of a certain level of vigour. The difficulties in juggling single parenthood and finishing school encouraged her to be more vigorous in her athletic career. She had to condition and keep herself in shape, maintain a positive emotional and

mental energy so that she could keep going. Her vigour was not centered solely on her sport, but also, on how she lived her life as a whole. In fact, her sport defined her entire life. Vigour was her survival tool. She reiterated:

*Kelangan kong magiging positive at masaya para maka-survive ako sa buhay. Dahil kapos ako, iginuhit ko sa puso at isipan ko na dapat akong maging lively at puno ng buhay para magiging worthwhile pa rin yung mundo, especially na nagkaroon ako ng anak at ibinubuhay ko syang mag-isa. Naniniwala ako na kung magtanim ka ng positibo sasarili mo, maraming mabuting bagay ang mangyayari. [I need to be positive and happy in order to survive in life. Because I'm poor, I cultivated in my heart and mind that I need to be lively and full of life so that I can see worth in this world, especially that I now have a child to raise on my own. I believe that if you plant optimism in yourself, there are many good things that will happen] (Marathoner, 37 years old)*

The levels of physical, mental and emotional energies experienced by the athletes influenced each other. Although vigour impacted upon the athletes in different ways, vigour seemed to hold a primary role in the way they succeeded in their athletic careers.

## Enthusiasm

Athletes experienced a level of enthusiasm dependent on the outcome of a game. When one athlete achieved his/her performance goal, enthusiasm increased right after a game. One athlete experienced enthusiasm before and after competitions but never during competitions. He said that he felt very enthusiastic just before the start of a competition. It shut off when the game started, and he mentally focused on the game. Enthusiasm returned when he finished. He mused:

*Yung pag-cross mo sa finish line and andun yung mga tao nagchi-cheer sa yo, walang bagay ang makapagpalit ng experience na yan. [When you cross the finish line and you see all of these people cheering you on, nothing can match that kind of experience] (Mountain Biker, 25 years old)*

In contrast, another athlete felt that her enthusiasm was at its highest during a tournament, which she believed might be caused by the adrenaline rush she felt. She felt relaxed 2 to 3 days after a competition, but she did not equate this with losing enthusiasm. She said it might have decreased because she was in the relaxed state, but it did not mean enthusiasm had disappeared. It started soaring high again when she went back to training. More interesting is one athlete's story about archery as all he could think of every day. Oftentimes in the classroom, his mind just spaced out to archery and he could not wait to be back to the range shooting arrows. He would dream about his sport. He slept and woke up to archery. He breathed archery.

Another athlete had a slightly different experience of enthusiasm. She became enthusiastic at training when she was preparing for a competition. As the competition neared, her enthusiasm increased, experiencing very high levels right before her competition started. She said, "I get very excited approaching a game that I can just smile all day" (Archer, 22 years old). Her enthusiasm decreased when the competition ended. She would start thinking that she would be back to training again. She would start feeling bored and tired. In contrast, one athlete sustained high levels of enthusiasm during training, at competition and towards another training, because of her passion for running. Despite the difficulties faced in her life, her love for running and competition was what kept her moving. She became more enthusiastic when she competed with other athletes from different countries. The thought that she was among the best athletes in the world made her feel excited.

An archer mentioned that her enthusiasm was closely related to her level of confidence. She explained that her confidence determined her experience of enthusiasm. When she was feeling very confident, she became more excited at the thought of competing with those she knew were of the same calibre as she was. She was excited at the chance to prove that she could be better than them. She also enjoyed the competitions when she performed according to how she envisioned she would. When her level of confidence was high, her level of enthusiasm was also high.

Athletes experienced enthusiasm in varying levels and in various contexts. While some experienced it before a competition,

others only experienced it after a competition. While most felt enthusiastic at training, one felt bored and tired. Excitement and enjoyment seemed to happen at sporadic periods in training and competition. They did not necessarily exist for sustained periods of time.

### Other Themes

There were other experiences that the athletes described as dimensions of athlete engagement. They were *love of the game*, *relationship with coach*, *social support*, *discipline*, *assurance of fair play*, and *spirituality*. Four of the athletes added *love of the game* as an engagement dimension. One athlete related that despite the odds that he had faced especially in the way his coach treated him at a particular time at training and how the Philippine government had been deficient in its support for him, he had stayed in the sport and continued playing because he passionately loved it. He trained himself to believe that he need not depend on anyone. He had to work on his own to become an elite athlete. He had that dream and he said that against all odds, he would achieve that goal. Another described the same experience. He said that despite all the hardships in his personal and sporting life, he adopted an attitude of "I don't care what is happening. I am here to achieve my goal" (Archer 24 years old). The two other athletes related similar experiences.

Of the four that identified *relationship with coach* as an engagement dimension, one said that it was important for him to have his coach because he realized he was better when he had a coach who taught him excellent technical skills. However, when his coach started meddling into his personal affairs, he began to distance himself from his coach, which unfortunately changed his performance. The three others had very similar experiences. They said that they needed to have a coach who could continually teach them skills, tell them what went wrong or right, and motivate them to do better. They said that their relationship with their coaches generated different kinds of emotions. Those emotions could make or break a game, hence defining an event or competition.

Although all of them consistently referred to the lack of government support and the importance of family and friends in their sporting careers, only two considered *social support* as an engagement dimension. One athlete said that the

insufficient support from the Philippine government made him feel “heartbroken” and this contributed to his career path deviating from being a full-time archer to taking on a job outside of sports. He gave up his dream of becoming a professional athlete. Nevertheless, the support he received from his family and loved ones motivated him to still train in archery on a part time basis and compete whenever he had a chance. Another athlete explained that the support from her loved ones was very important in sustaining her athletic career. She might have felt happiness many times with her achievements of gold medals in international competition, but at the end of the day, if she did not have anyone to share those victories with, the awards would lose their meaning. She emphasized that the happiness she obtained outside of being an athlete is what sustained her sporting life.

Only one athlete identified *discipline* as a dimension for athlete engagement. She said that in half of her life as an athlete, dedication was not enough. She explained that an athlete might be dedicated to one’s sport, investing time and effort into training and putting up a good fight at competition, but might not be disciplined enough to do what was necessary to become an excellent athlete.

Another athlete identified *assurance of fair play* as an engagement dimension. She could not categorize this as social support because this was specifically different. She described this in the context of the pledge by the Philippine Sports Commission (PSC) that whoever was qualified to compete internationally should be those who would finally go. She explained that when she was told that she would represent her country, she practiced intensely; however, her endorsement was recalled at the last minute. She said that, oftentimes, PSC would suddenly change their list of national athletes favoring those who were politically advantageous to the current administration. When she was again listed as one of the archers who would join an international team, she no longer put a great amount of effort into training because she did not want to feel disappointed again in case of a change in the roster of national athletes.

*Spirituality* was identified by one athlete as a fifth dimension along with confidence, dedication, vigour and enthusiasm in her experience of athlete engagement. She said she would not have gone through and survived life’s difficulties, and would probably have given up her sporting career if not for her strong faith in her Creator. She also said that values were very important in being able

to hold up one's credibility and maintain one's integrity in sports. There had been a lot of athletes who would make competition a money-making activity. Many times, cohorts in marathons were formed. These cohorts are composed of runners whose aim was to pin other runners so that these other runners slow down, decreasing their chance to win and giving an opportunity for a runner in the cohort to win. When a cohort runner wins, they divide the prize money amongst themselves. This behavior, to her, is very rude and disrespectful. In the world of sports, she said one might get tempted to be sucked into the sea of filthy politics and greed. The strength of one's values is the ground on which one's integrity can stand firmly. She said that these strong values would not have been possible without her strong faith. She referred to this as her spirituality.

## DISCUSSION

What emerged from the interviewees' stories was the influential roles of the engagement dimensions to each other. Confidence was reinforced by the degree of dedication they gave to their sport. The more they trained, the more confident they felt and the more vigorous they became. Consequently, when they trained hard, they were able to achieve their goals, and when they were vigorous, they became more enthusiastic. These dimensions appear salient in shaping athletes to experience high levels of engagement.

Filipino athletes primarily experienced the same broad engagement dimensions as New Zealand and Canadian athletes, but the nature of their experiences were different in terms of the cultural traits/values that Filipinos chose to narrate. Their traits/values were relationship-orientedness, religiosity, and resilience. These qualities are related to the different forms of personal challenges they have endured.

All of the interviewees emphasized the importance of their families and friends in their sporting lives. Family members, especially parents, helped the athletes through their difficulties. Whenever they felt hurt by the lack of support from their government, they had families who helped them look for funds to finance their trips, boosted them when they were emotionally down, and supported them even when their schooling was

disrupted because they were focused on their training and competition. This kind of support from parents is not common among Filipino families because most parents prioritize education over other involvements such as sports, especially since a sporting career in the Philippines does not lead to financial stability. Additionally, one athlete reflected that when she did not have anyone to celebrate her gold medals with at the end of the day, such as family and friends, all her successes were worthless.

Religiosity is recognized to be strong among Filipinos. Cherry (2013) emphasized that Filipinos are religiously active and primarily Catholic. "Catholicism has been one of, if not the, most culturally pervasive influence in the Philippines over the last four hundred years" (p. 41). Social Weather Survey (2002) indicated that 86% of Filipinos were Catholic with more than half of them reporting that they attended church at least once a week (2013). However, it must be noted that religiosity is not religion-specific. It is equally exhibited by other religious affiliations as well. It might have been Catholicism that the Spaniards introduced in the Philippines influencing more Filipinos to be Catholic, but it is the Christianity component of Catholicism that has gained root in Philippine culture. Even when many Filipinos have moved away from Catholicism and into Protestantism, Christianity remains very strong, facilitating in them strong religiosity. From observation, Christianity is expressed through going to Church, praying regularly, and participating in Church-related activities (Valbuena, 2008). This expression is religiosity-engagement in the beliefs and practices of a particular religion (Abe-Kim, Gong & Takeuchi, 2004). Religiosity to Filipinos, like praying daily and asking for God's guidance and blessings, would bring them solutions to their problems and help them overcome their struggles. In situations where events are no longer under human control, Filipinos find solace in their God to help them stay hopeful. Their religiosity has become a very powerful coping mechanism, and this has been illustrated by the athletes who had to overcome difficulties in their sporting careers, most of them outside of their control. Therefore, their strong religiosity shaped their spirituality.

Loehr and Schwartz (2001) reported that the spiritual dimension was a very important part in optimal performance. For example, they said, in the corporate arena, management theorists only looked as far as rich material rewards, the right culture and

management by objectives as answers to the question why some workers perform well under pressure and others do not. Loehr and Schwartz mentioned that the problem with most approaches was that they understood that good performance was in terms of a cognitive function. They added that most executive managers were cautious at addressing the spiritual level of the performance pyramid because it seemed to create conflicting emotions and did not appear to be relevant to high performance. Yet literature has demonstrated a shift in focus towards the relationship between emotional intelligence and high performance (2001) which further lead to giving attention to spirituality. Spiritual capacity has been explored as an influence on performance. By “spiritual capacity, we simply mean the energy that is unleashed by tapping into one’s deepest values and defining a strong sense of purpose” (p. 127). Loehr and Schwartz found that spiritual capacity sustained a person in the face of adversity and was powerful in making one motivated, focused, determined and resilient.

One athlete’s experience of spirituality perfectly matched Loehr and Schwartz’s concept of spiritual capacity in successfully understanding sustained high performance. The High Performance Pyramid explains that levels—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities—profoundly influence each other. When any one level is unsatisfied, it compromises performance. This was illustrated when the athlete said that if she had proper nutrition, she believed she could do better than how she was already performing. It can be further understood that if she had better lower level capacities, she would also have better higher level capacities, such as a stronger spiritual capacity, henceforth a better sporting performance than what she had. Further, her description of deep values that were important for her or any athlete to sustain an engagement experience with a sport was consistent with what the pyramid illustrates. Spiritual capacity “serves as sustenance in the face of adversity and as a powerful source of motivation, focus, determination and resilience” (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001, p. 127).

While only one athlete presented spirituality as a fifth dimension, all of the other athletes actually experienced it, even when not naming it, in the way they described their various engagement dimensions. All of them related to similar struggles of being a Filipino athlete. It would be expected that an athlete who goes through many athletic difficulties would quickly give up or



fail to deliver results. On the contrary, not only did these athletes survive those difficulties, they even thrived as they achieved a high level of performance that qualified them internationally and consequently rewarded them. They reiterated that if they had received appropriate support from the PSC especially putting them in programs that fully developed their physical, emotional and mental capacities, they could even have achieved much more than they did. Despite their struggles, they were motivated, focused, highly determined to achieve their goals, and developed resilience that made them bounce back from bad moments. Furthermore, all of the interviewees mentioned that their faith in God was the source of their strong values and purpose in life, and this helped them through the challenging path of becoming good athletes. Spirituality was experienced as having a connection to a greater significance that aided in the meaning and purpose of life, and helped make sense of life's struggles (Hardt, Schultz, Xander, Becker & Dragan, 2011). Spiritual individuals have been found to have a greater purpose in life, better life satisfaction and greater wellbeing (Abe-Kim, Gong & Takeuchi, 2011). Filipino interviewees demonstrated these characteristics.

Filipino athletes' resilience appeared to be associated with their high levels of religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity is one of the indicators of a person's ability to withstand harm (Verma, Sta. Maria & Morojele, 2011), or to become resilient. Resiliency is characterized as "the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity" (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p. 13) and/or "the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with significant change, adversity or risk" (p. 13). Filipino athletes managed to perform at an optimal level in the midst of struggles. It seems that their spirituality predisposed them to optimism in the face of the adversities they met in their athletic careers. Adapting a positive perspective despite adversities is one of the defining characteristics of a resilient person (2013). Termed positive adaptation, it emerged as central to the athletes' stories even when they spoke about their hurts, frustrations, and disappointments.

Other athletes from other countries may also exhibit *spirituality*, but the kinds of hardships that Filipinos endure provide depth, vastness, and intensity to their spiritual lives, which may not be seen in other cultures. Filipino athletes experienced *confidence, dedication, vigour, and enthusiasm* as athlete engagement dimensions similar to New Zealand and Canadian

elite athletes. However, unique to them is their experience of *spirituality* as deeply meaningful and important in facing various forms of adversity.

*Love of the game* was believed to be subsumed in *enthusiasm*, and *discipline* subsumed in *dedication*. *Love of the game* was evidenced in excitement when training and competing. Because competition gave them enthusiasm, they expressed their love for it and so, continued their sport regardless of the difficulties they faced. *Discipline*, on the other hand, meant investing time and effort into one's sport. If one is highly dedicated, then one invests a great amount of time and effort into training and competition. Time and effort includes the constancy and consistency of an athlete's training schedule, making use of rest and proper nutrition for one's health, and choosing a healthy lifestyle as in avoiding alcohol and smoking.

Other factors that surfaced in the interviews included *relationship with coach*, *social support*, and *assurance of fair play*. These factors did not fall into the category of an athlete engagement dimension. In the stories they told, these factors were antecedents of athlete engagement. A research study by Hodge, Lonsdale, and Jackson (2009), found basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as antecedents to athlete engagement. All three factors of relationship with coach, social support and assurance of fair play, fall into the category of *relatedness*. An athlete's relationship with one's coach is unquestionably a concrete example of relatedness. A coach is a significant other in an athlete's career. S/he becomes the parent of the athlete in both training and competition; therefore a coach plays a nurturing role in athlete development. Consequentially, athlete development may pave the way for athlete engagement to happen.

*Social support* included emotional support from family and friends, and technical support from the Philippine Sports Commission (PSC). Athletes mainly talked about their sense of relatedness with their family and friends who contributed to their motivation to work hard in their sport. Also, these feelings of relatedness with their family and friends were important in putting value to their accomplishments because it was important for them to be able to share their achievements with their loved ones.

Technical support from the PSC included provisions for

appropriate sport equipment, comprehensive training programs, professional training and coaching staff, and sufficient living allowances. All of the athletes interviewed expressed frustration over the disproportionate and insufficient provisions for these items. They complained about being given inappropriate sized uniforms; lack of equipment like tires for their bikes, arrows for their bows, and running shoes. They were likewise disappointed with the lack of nutritional support, such as regular supply of vitamins and adequate allowance for food. One athlete indicated that when she was depressed because of a poor performance at an international competition, she had to purchase her own medicines. When she lost in that competition, she felt PSC did not support her because she did not win a medal. She worked so hard for her country, was pleased at giving her country a name, but when she was down, PSC was not there for her to lean on. She was at her lowest moment in her athletic career and she did not know where to turn to. It was only her family and friends who supported her. Her emotional experience with her country was very similar to the other athletes' experiences. They also felt that PSC was not giving them the same value they have given their country. There was no feeling of mutual care, which is an essential element of relatedness. One athlete who felt "heartbroken" said that he had to process his own papers for permanent residency in the Philippines, so he could compete at the international level. He said he did it all by himself because PSC was taking too long to do it for him. He paid for all of the fees. Later on, he learned when he was already at SEA Games, that it only took PSC three weeks to process the residency of the Philippines' imported players in rugby. He said that most of the athletes in that rugby team did not even grow up in the Philippines while he spent half his life growing up in the Philippines. Consequently, he did not feel cared for and valued.

All of the athletes interviewed shared similar experiences about spending their own money on processing travel documents for international competitions, having to book their own flights and hotel rooms and advancing the expenses because PSC only promised them reimbursements. The reimbursements either came more than a year after the competition or not at all. There were a few who were told to request their equipment at specific amounts but the equipment that they received did not even cost half of the amount indicated. They felt like some officials in PSC

pocketed the money. They always had to live with inferior quality or second-hand equipment.

Assurance of fair play was subsumed into the aspect of technical support. One athlete described how she felt betrayed when, at the last minute, she was replaced by someone else to represent the country in a very important international competition. Her frustration intensified as she realized that her replacement did not actually practice and train as much as she had.

Although *flow* was not a variable under study in the interviews among Filipino athletes, it emerged in the athletes' engagement experiences. Although "a feeling of adrenaline rush" was described as a component of *enthusiasm*, this was believed to be more like the experience of flow. Lonsdale, *et al.* (2007) observed in the interviews on New Zealand athletes that they illustrated a flow experience from their descriptions of having the ability to focus. Flow seemed to have occurred among the Filipino athletes because of having experienced engagement. Given the results found with Filipino athletes, it is important that flow is studied to determine its potential role for athletes, especially to those who wish to train themselves into becoming elite sport performers.

## CONCLUSION

The universal core dimensions of athlete engagement for Filipino athletes were *confidence*, *dedication*, *vigour*, and *enthusiasm*. *Spirituality* emerged as a unique Filipino athlete engagement dimension. It is recommended that similar researches will be done among athletes from other countries in order to validate and expand the existing conceptual definition of athlete engagement beyond the New Zealand, Canadian, and Filipino athletes so that sport practitioners will know what needs to be developed in an athlete in order to have optimum performance.

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## APPENDIX A

### Open-ended Questions:

1. Having heard the definition of engagement (displayed on index card in front of the participant), can you think back over your career and remember a time you felt particularly engaged in your sport?
2. Tell me about that experience, what was it like?
3. Can you recall any of the feelings associated with that experience?
4. Can you recall any emotions surrounding that experience?
5. Can you recall any consistent thoughts you had during that experience?

6. How did you feel about training?
7. How did you feel about competition?
8. How did you feel about your involvement in your sport over-all?
9. How did you feel mentally?
10. How did you feel physically?
11. Were there any other thoughts, feelings or emotions that you had during this experience?
12. How long did this experience last?