Australian female high performance athletes: Bullying experiences at school

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Purpose
This study was part of a larger project that explored the pressures and conflicts faced by high performance athletes whilst still at school. These students strive constantly to cope with the pressures of their educational and sporting roles (O’Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013a). An interpretive paradigm was used to explore the experiences of these students with bullying being identified as an unexpected problem for many of these high achievers. This presentation focuses on the bullying experiences and perceptions of female high performance school-age athletes (O’Neill, Calder, & Allen, 2013b). The findings are designed to inform parents, teachers, schools and sporting organisations about the bullying problems faced by successful high performance school-age athletes with a view to reducing this activity in schools.

Methods
Subjects: 12 female high performance school-age athletes from a variety of schools and sports

Data collection
All subjects were in-depth interviewed about their views about the pressures they experienced at balancing school and sport. Livescribe™ pen recorded all interviews.

Data analysis
NVivo 10™ analysed the data which was exported to Excel™. SPSS version 21™ used chi square to reveal correlation/matrix.

Table 1. Sport and school types of female high performance school-age subjects. (n=12)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport type</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Non-Government</th>
<th>Specialist Sport pathway</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual sport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team sport</td>
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<td>Government school</td>
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Results
The main social impacts identified by subjects included:
- 18% felt life balance was important
- 9% had self-imposed guilt
- 9% felt the pressures of drugs and alcohol
- 64% spoke of the impact of bullying they experienced in school.

The most significant issue that all 12 female athletes collectively spoke of was bullying. The main source of this issue included behaviours related to the “Tall Poppy Syndrome” (Table 2). These behaviours were often based on envy and aimed at normalising successful student athletes. Subjects for all the school types were victims of bullying (Table 3).

Conclusion
The bullying of high performance school-age athletes is not uncommon in Australia. Successful student athletes are targeted by others through envy and bullying practises are designed to reduce the victims to the norm (O’Neill, Calder, Allen, 2013b). The challenge for athletes and parents is to have better coping strategies to deal with bullying practises. Teachers and schools must recognise this as a problem for high performance school age athletes at their schools. School s should aim to minimise bullying behaviours for all students and include resilience training for high achievers who are subject to Tall Poppy Syndrome behaviours.

References
