

Performance Point

Career Transition in Sport - Moving Beyond Retirement



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You say to yourself I could do such and such next year or the year after...but the reality is that you can't! Even when you look after yourself, there's a big stigma when you get to 30 and retirement is on everybody's mind even though you want to ignore it. But when you've played so many games – I've played 450-odd- and then find yourself scratching around for a living after sport, you ask 'Is it worth it?' - Olympic athlete

Career transitions in sport have received increasing attention in recent years due to media attention on high profile athletes struggling with retirement. With the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games behind us, for some athletes attention will unwillingly be drawn to the question: *Should I retire after the Games?*

Although career retirement as a transition is one of the few certainties in an athletic career, athletes often fail to plan for retirement. Researchers suggest that there is reluctance by elite athletes to discuss retirement while they are actively competing and coaches are particularly resistant to retirement preparation, fearing that it will detract from their concentration on sport. This reluctance may also be related to fear. According to Sport Psychologist Terry Orlick, the thought of entering an employment environment other than sport, where their talents may be of little use, frightens athletes. The thought of starting at the bottom of a field, years behind their peers, leaves athletes feeling frustrated and lacking self-esteem. Orlick suggests that the athlete needs to prepare for retirement through positive actions such as education, career training and alternative leisure pursuits.

The ability to plan and prepare for retirement is also closely linked with athletic identity. The often single-minded pursuit of excellence that accompanies elite sports has potential psychological and social dangers. The narrow focus and high investment in a single goal may lead to restricted development and an ability to cope with transition issues. Thus the athlete's identity becomes an 'Achilles heel' to the survival of the self. This dilemma is magnified during 'off-time' transitions such as injury since the athlete does not foresee the transition and may not be ready for its challenges in terms of skills and attitude.

Interventions for retiring athletes typically involve counseling techniques reserved for the injured athlete, since injury in some cases, results in premature retirement. One intervention focuses on delivering a life development intervention framework from which different techniques and practices could emanate. The framework's starting point is the basic assumption that change is a natural occurrence in one's life and that any intervention should optimize rather than remediate performance. The goal should not be to prevent the crises from happening, for that is impossible; nor should it be to prevent the crisis from impeding growth. Intervention strategies used by sport psychologists to maximize adaptation to career transition include goal setting, imagery, relaxation techniques, pre-retirement training, and specialized counseling techniques.

The use of specific intervention strategies such as goal-setting, team-building, mental rehearsal and stress management are often of immense value beyond the athletic environment because these skills can be applied as life skills in other areas. The development of these life skills counteracts the notion that athletic excellence requires an involvement and commitment where other areas of life are sacrificed as a means to maintain their performance excellence in elite sport. In contrast, the development of life skills training may lead to positive adaptation to retirement because of a better understanding of how to use existing support networks and transfer skills between life domains and the athletic domain. The use of life skills programs in a sport context also prepares the athlete to deal with the complexities of life and increases the chance of the athlete becoming a better athlete and member of the community.

For more information on career transition and life after sport, please visit www.cscpacific.ca to determine the athlete/coach services contact in your region.

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