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Managing the Transition into Retirement for Elite Athletes

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Aim:

The aim of this article is to raise awareness, amongst strength and conditioning coaches, of the challenges that may be encountered by elite athletes as they transition into retirement from their sport. This includes a discussion of common themes identified in the athlete wellbeing literature as well as a review of the athlete support systems for a range of sports. In doing so, it is hoped that athlete welfare can be enhanced throughout this period of an athletic career.

Introduction:

The transition into retirement represents a challenging part of an athlete's career as they enter a new period of their life after sport (1). Unlike other careers, most athletic retirement normally occurs relatively early in life and because of this, athletes face an extensive range of psychological, social and occupational adjustments as their identity shifts to that of being a former athlete (2,3). Although planned retirement is the most common route into ending an athletic career, there is also a degree of uncertainty regarding when retirement will occur for athletes as retirement can be forced by injury or deselection (4). In addition to the immediate changes in an athlete's life post-retirement, they also need to be educated to self-manage any previous medical or physical issues that may have a lifelong effect, as support will be substantially reduced when they leave the high performance system (5,6). Due to the diverse

combination of potential problems that athletes may face when retiring, it is necessary to review these in order to raise awareness for athletes and members of the high performance team.

Planned and Unplanned Retirement

Competitive sports retirement represents a unique period of life change, as, unlike retirement from other careers, it usually occurs early in life (7). Although retirement is an inevitable part of any athletic career, the unpredictable nature of elite sport means there is usually a degree of uncertainty when this will occur with athletes undertaking planned retirement when their sporting career has run its course or unforced retirement through either injury or deselection (4,5). Planned retirement is associated with less adjustment difficulties while forced retirement is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems (8,9). Retirement that is forced upon an athlete by injury or deselection is associated with a substantial psychological effect due to the lack of an adjustment period (5). The degree of voluntariness during sporting retirement is highly associated with better outcomes as there has normally been time to pursue other interests and prepare for life after sport (10). Although this is the case, ultimately it depends on the individual's coping and support resources as well as the degree to which they have planned for occupational alternatives before they retire that dictates the impact of adjustment difficulties (3,7). For these reasons an increasing demand is being placed on sports clubs and government bodies to bring these issues to the attention of athletes and provide the necessary support both during and after the sporting career.

Athletic Identity

Elite athletes dedicate themselves to their chosen sport physically and mentally from a young age in order to achieve their athletic goals and due to this, they attribute a large proportion of their self-identity to the sporting version of themselves (6,11). This is often at the detriment of sacrificing commitments towards education, peers, family and romantic relationships which become prominent safeguards towards retirement (38). It is widely reported that athletes who identify themselves strongly and exclusively with their athletic identity, experience more adjustment difficulties than athlete's who have less 'self-narrowing' of their identity (8,9,12). This is due to the adjustment challenges of reorganising one's personal and social goals once sport is longer the main 'priority' in their lives. Any psychological problems faced by athletes

after retirement, either through forced or unforced retirement, are believed to be heightened according to the degree to which an athlete associates their self-identity with the athletic version of themselves (8). Athlete's who associate themselves strongly with their sporting identity in this way undergo an initial stage of shock and a grieving process that represents an experience comparable to a bereavement of their former selves (9,11). Due to this, it is important for athletes to better balance their interests outside of the sporting world in order to safeguard themselves from the potential issues associated with exclusively identifying with themselves as 'the athlete' (13). For those that do not do this, they will need to prepare for redefining their identity, to help restore and maintain a positive self-image which may be important to reduce the negative external influences that can occur.

Sense of Personal Control

The highly structured nature of elite sports may also limit the athletes sense of control outside of the sporting world as their daily routines, behaviours and decision making are often made by coaches or sports associations (7). This lack of personal control may cause problems for the athlete when adjusting to their non-sporting identity after retirement due to the loss of structure, routine and discipline that they were previously accustomed to (4,7). Indeed, the intensive and enduring training schedules that athletes adhere to and enjoy during their careers are also commonly difficult to duplicate outside of sport (39). Many athletes report that being excluded from the social practices of their sport as well as the loss of camaraderie with teammates and the joy of competition were key parts of their sporting life which they struggled to replace after retirement (6,9). It has also been reported that the loss of identity and prestige of being an elite athlete can lead to problems with an athletes sense of personal control (8,9). However, many athletes are happy to be free from the stresses of high performance and look forward to their life after sport (8). Teammates, coaches and sport organisations can play a key role in discussing their feelings about the athlete's looming retirement and help them to plan accordingly. This can give retiring athletes a greater sense of personal control over the transition.

Occupational Adjustments

One of the primary challenges associated with the early retirement age of former elite athletes is how and whether they need, to transition into a new career (1,5,14). A unique consideration for athletes during this process is that some may have to retrain for a new occupation whilst other athletes may have the financial security to not work (3,10,14). There are potential issues with either route as the athletes undertaking a new career have to reconstruct a new sense of self while the financially secure athlete has to fill the times and routines of their previous sporting schedule (5,14). A lack of formal qualifications for many former athletes have been shown to be a problem that is encountered during their transition into a new career and poor financial advice has led to issues for athletes who were wealthy enough to not work (14,15). It is important to note that although problems are experienced by a substantial number of athletes when starting a new career that many athletes use the skills and experiences developed during their sporting life to flourish in other roles (14). Therefore, it is important for sport organisations to offer mentoring opportunities and life skills education during athletes' careers to help athletes to develop a stronger understanding of how their skills in sport can be transferred in to other vocations, which will smooth the transition in to retirement (3).

Medical and Lifestyle Self Management

The demands of training at an elite level over an extended period of time puts an athlete at an increased risk of sustaining a musculoskeletal injury (16). In particular, musculoskeletal injuries to the the upper and lower limbs are largely reported in elite athletes (17,18). During a sports career, these injuries might be recurrent and may lead to surgical treatments and long-lasting rehabilitation programmes (19,20). The injuries sustained during a sporting career have a lifelong effect with elite athletes being shown to have an increased risk of osteoarthritis compared to the general population and other occupational sectors (16,21). In later life 65% of former athletes with osteoarthritis have reported being in pain during activities of daily living and 37% reported having anxiety or depression due to this (16). Furthermore, contact sports that involve repeated collisions to the head put athletes at the risk of sustaining repeated concussion and this is associated with a potential risk of acquiring neurological conditions such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, dementia and depression post-retirement (22,23,24,25). As well as any medical issues encountered during retirement, athletes also report experiencing problems managing their

physical condition and nutritional practices after they have finished competing (26). Furthermore, athletes receive limited support with these issues when they leave the high performance system which can be a further source of psychological stress (4,5). Due to this, governing bodies should consider a medical consultation as part of athlete exit strategies from sport to increase awareness of the appropriate medical options for managing their long term health.

Mental Health

Due to the multiple changes that occur in both the athlete's lifestyle and their self-identity during the retirement process, this places retiring athletes at a relatively high risk of developing a mental health problem (6,27,31). Failure to cope with retirement can lead to psychological pathologies, substance abuse and financial problems (9,13). This can manifest itself as conditions such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder and can have a significant impact on the athlete and their family's quality of life (13). It is important to note these issues are not only limited to the athletic world and a substantial proportion of mental health problems are related to employment (34). Employment and meaningful occupation is seen as a necessary component of good health where many of our fundamental psychological needs are met (32). As such, people who experience redundancy or unemployment display a 50% increase in the risk of developing psychological problems in comparison to individuals in employment (33). Although no comparison between mental health problems between athletes and people in general employment is currently available, Hughes and Leavey (31) argue that elite athletes are placed under a unique combination of stressors that may compromise their wellbeing and therefore require more support from governing bodies. This problem is evidenced by Grove et al (9) who reported that 20% of athletes experienced a distressful psychological reaction during the process of retirement. However, a recent State of Sport Survey in the UK reported that 50% of former athletes had concerns over their mental and emotional wellbeing and did not feel in control of their lives within two years of finishing their careers (28). In response to this a 'Mental Health and Elite Sport Action Plan' has been devised by the United Kingdom government that requires all elite sport groups to have mental health procedures embedded in their performance plans by the year 2024 (29).

Effective Strategies for Athletes

Not all athletes experience distressful reactions during their transition into retirement, but there are numerous potential problems that athletes need to be made aware of and prepared for. Various strategies have been suggested in the literature in order to ease the elite athlete's transition into retirement. Lally et al (6) suggest investing time in other dimensions of their identity by pursuing educational, social and occupational interests outside of the sporting world. This is consistent with recommendations by other studies who reported that athletes who decreased the prominence of their athletic identity and developed a new focus prior to retirement made smoother transitions (6,8,13). Although support is extremely varied depending on the country an athlete is from and the sport they competed in, it is recommended that athletes enquire with their sporting governing body whether they have a retirement transition programme (5). Athletes may be able to undertake an end of career health consultation to enable self-management of any issues identified and also gain an understanding of any career services on offer (4,8). It is also advised that athletes should talk to other former athletes, team mates and coaches about how they handled their transition into retirement (4,5). In addition to this, many former athletes also use coaching as a way to stay involved with their previous sport and maintain their social relationships (5,11,13). For a variety of reasons, retiring athletes can feel a loss of social functioning, isolation and sometimes ostracism during the remaining time involved in sport prior to retirement. Therefore, it is important to encourage athletes to start exploring and identify a new focus, as well as encouraging the seeking of informational and emotional support inside and outside of the sport. Finally, athletes who are experiencing psychological difficulties during their transition into retirement can also seek interventions with a sport psychologist (30).

Existing Programmes

Due to the issues discussed throughout this article, sporting governing bodies are beginning to increase the support they provide to athletes. This includes a range of services from welfare staff being employed in organisations, career transition seminars and access to hardship and medical grants (28,36,37,38). UK Sport, the English Institute of Sport, the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association offer a collective programme termed Athlete Futures in order to provide career and lifestyle support to athletes. The programme began in September 2017 and is open to past and current members of UK Sport's World Class Programme, dating

back to 1997 (36). The Professional Footballers Association provides advice and support to members for a range of issues including the transition into retirement. Their services include paying 50% of the costs for accredited training courses to support the career development of its members. As well as this, they also provide early access to pension funds and financial support during times of hardship or medical need (37). A similar service is offered by the Rugby Players Association where there is support available from personal development managers who proactively work with players to prepare them for the transition into retirement. In addition to that they also have an open access helpline and support network for lifestyle related issues including career transitions and mental health. Finally, the Professional Cricketers' Association has six regional personal development managers who work full-time from academy level through to former players (40). They provide support to players for a range of lifestyle related issues and also host regular career transition seminars to help players recently leaving the game.

Practical Applications

- Educate athletes on the potential difficulties that may occur during the transition into retirement.
- Encourage strategies to be developed that enable athletes to self-manage their previous injuries and lifestyle when they are outside of the high performance system.
- Aim to increase understanding and discussion of these issues throughout the high performance team and through this filter down to benefit athletes.
- Raise awareness for governing bodies to improve the post-retirement support of athletes.
- Encourage athletes to use their 'down-time' effectively during their careers, optimising the development of a broader range of social identities outside of sport, to provide a stronger social support network before and during retirement.
- Develop life skills and lifestyle management within sport organisations throughout the athletic career.
- Find ways to keep previously retired athletes in the sport system, because of the knowledge and skillset that they have. Coaching and ad-hoc mentoring are viable options that sport organisations could fund.

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