

Does High-Performance Sport have an Obligation to Help Former Athletes with their Career and Life Transition?

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The popular press is filled with articles chronicling the challenges that many elite athletes encounter while adapting to life after completing their playing days. Do their organizations and leagues owe them a duty of care and help to ensure they can transfer effectively to a different life and career once their competing days are finished? This paper reviews the literature surrounding this transition. The authors examine the recent literature surrounding high-performance athletes' challenges during and after their sporting careers end. In addition to documenting the potentially adverse experiences, and in the spirit of providing contextual balance, the authors highlight some of the positive outcomes related to high-performance sport involvement and the leadership qualities that can be honed and tempered through the experience. The authors conclude the paper with a series of recommendations to assist future players, team and league officials, and players unions to help reduce the problem.

Keywords: *high-performance sport, career and life transitions*

Introduction

Transitions are universal experiences that have been analyzed in various contexts (Hart and Swenty 2016). Regardless of the gender or industry, transition to retirement must be effectively managed, or it can result in detrimental effects on a person's mental health and well-being (Leonard and Schimmel 2016, Wheaton 1990). This is especially true in elite sport given its high profile, media attention and public notoriety, coupled with the fact that the transition occurs at a much earlier stage of life for elite athletes (Pearson and Petipas 1990, Wylleman et al. 2004). Some male and female elite athletes adapt seamlessly, but the majority (Werthner and Orlick 1986, Wylleman et al. 2004) find it a challenging and emotionally-distressing experience (Dewenter and Giessing 2015, Douglas and Carless 2009, Gilmore 2008, Moesch et al. 2012, Stambulova et al. 2009).

Retirement from elite sport has been conceptualized as a role transition whereby athletes disengage from some activities and relationships to seek others (Coakley 1983). Typically, transitions entail complex processes that ultimately result in significant life changes and redefinition of oneself (Hart and Swenty 2016). Transitions from elite sport are commonly regarded as stressors resulting in undue pressure on an individual to adjust (Wheaton 1990). The training and competition schedules leave little time for anything else. According to Douglas and Carless (2009) and Werthner and Orlick (1986), a high proportion of female and male athletes struggle with this transition stage. Is this fair to the athletes,

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especially given the years that they have ahead of them? Do their host teams and organizations that have profited from the athletes' services have any responsibility for helping prepare these athletes for work and life following their playing days? Many women and men need assistance with this transition.

Three overriding questions guide this manuscript:

1. Do professional sport organizations and the players' unions have a responsibility to help prepare athletes for their life after athletics?
2. Can retiring athletes successfully transition on their own, or should their former employers/organizations provide resources to help during the process?
3. What programs and services might alleviate the problems?

Leadership Development through Sport

Researchers have established that sport participation can provide invaluable lessons such as understanding teamwork, developing discipline, overcoming adversity, and building resiliency (Gould 2016). Effective team leaders can impact social cohesion and facilitate team success (Carron and Eys 2012). Male and female athletes develop leadership characteristics through sport, especially when the experiences are accompanied by extensive coaching/mentoring (Day et al. 2004, Solansky 2010). Developing these skills may help facilitate athletes transitioning from elite or professional sport into a new career (Sauer et al. 2013).

Beard and Weese (2020) studied leadership development in men and women resulting from collegiate sport participation. Beard and Weese (2020) interviewed former collegiate athletes 50 years after they last competed and following their formal retirement from their professional careers outside sport. They reported that the sport environment allowed them to experience leadership and develop skill sets that served them well in their lives and careers. Many participants discussed how the challenges they faced in sport (e.g., making the team, getting playing time, facing a stronger opponent) gave them first-hand experience in addressing some of the challenges they met later in their personal and professional lives. Upon reflection, participants mentioned that team sports and organizational life are very similar (i.e., a group of people pursuing a common goal). They felt that they developed positive, lifelong social relationships with their teammates and created a special bond with these individuals. The male and female respondents both recalled that interacting with their teammates away from the locker room helped develop their interpersonal communication skills. These were invaluable opportunities for the athletes to build meaningful relationships. They discussed the importance of pursuing excellence as individuals and, more specifically, as team members. They felt that being part of a sports team: (a) forced them to challenge their assumptions about their abilities; (b) led them to believe in themselves and their abilities, and; (c) helped them raise their expectations for performance and achievement (Beard and Weese 2020).

Resiliency is another transferable skill that can be learned through a sport experience. Athletes continually manage injuries, trades and relocations, constant

fear of being replaced, and performance slumps (Fletcher and Sarkar 2012, Galli and Vealey 2008). Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) conducted a study on the psychological resilience in elite sport performers. They found that Olympic gold medalists experienced many stressors, ranging from daily demands, such as balancing work and training, to significant life events (e.g., death of a family member). Researchers like Fletcher et al. (2006) have suggested that competitive stressors are environmental demands associated primarily and directly with competitive performance.

In elite sport, peak performance requires high levels of preparation, injury avoidance, rest, ability to perform under pressure, and self-confidence (Sarkar and Fletcher 2014). If embraced and overcome, challenges like these can often enrich an athlete's development (Collins et al. 2016, Sarkar et al. 2015). These skills are also valuable in organizational life. An agile organizational leader must embrace adversity and adjust accordingly to achieve great results (Trepanier and Nordgren 2017). Additionally, agile organizational leaders must cope with ambiguity and change, implement decisions quickly, and lead confidently (Trepanier and Nordgren 2017). Sport performers and organizational leaders must rely on previous training and experiences to make the decision-making process instinctual. Years of training, sacrifice, and dedication have helped develop intangible skills in elite athletes that could be transferable to other post-sport career endeavours. High-performance athletes may have the profile and skill sets that make them highly marketable in the eyes of potential employers. With life and career coaching, athletes could seamlessly transfer these desirable skills to post-career roles in society.

Transitioning from Elite Sport to Civilian Life and Work

Elite athletes have a high social profile and distinct identity due to their sport accomplishments and media coverage (Yao et al. 2020). An athlete's identity as an elite performer can become synonymous with the individual's identity after years of sport participation. Researchers have agreed that identities are not fixed, but instead, they have multiple aspects that are continuously altered or renegotiated (Hickey and Roderick 2017). Lally (2007) defined identity as a multidimensional view of oneself that is both lasting and dynamic. Over time, people may claim an identity with which they strongly associate, that can be influenced by social and environmental factors (Hickey and Roderick 2017, Lally 2007).

Additionally, an individual's identity can comprise several features, although one aspect can become dominant or preferred. Brewer et al. (1993) defined athletic identity as the degree to which an individual thinks and feels like an athlete. Additionally, athletic identity has been referred to as the degree to which an individual defines himself about the athlete role (Grove et al. 1997). Athletic identity has been positively associated with athletic performance and is consequently a desirable quality for athletes to possess (Werthner and Orlick 1986). Nevertheless, athletic identity is a significant factor that can impact an athletes' personal and psychological development (Martin et al. 2014).

Hockey Hall of Fame member Ken Dryden was a goaltender for the Montreal

Canadiens of the National Hockey League (NHL) from 1970 through 1979, winning six Stanley Cups. On five occasions, Dryden was named the league's top goaltender throughout his stellar hockey career. As impressive as his performances were on the ice, the most remarkable aspect of Dryden's account was his preparation for life after sport. He pursued challenges outside of hockey to prepare for his inevitable transition from professional sport. While playing, Dryden attended law school at McGill University. He retired from hockey in the prime of his career to pursue a law career. Dryden is an example of a professional athlete who effectively transitioned to a new career. He became an accomplished lawyer, a proficient politician, a renowned author and was named a member of the Order of Canada. He published a book entitled *The Game*, which recounted his decision to retire from hockey in his prime, and he detailed the thought processes that guided his decision (Dryden 2013). In this book, Dryden expanded on some of the challenges he and some of his teammates faced while transitioning from elite sport. Dryden concluded that retiring could be the same experience for people regardless of age, a statement supported in the sport transition literature (Leonard and Schimmel 2016).

A Departure from the Structure

During the retirement process, an elite athlete leaves something that they have successfully participated in for most of their life. Whether it is the rink or the field, the locker room or the lounge, in the gym or in treatment, athletes have become familiar with the environments and processes of their daily routine. Their schedule generally includes daily workouts, practices, and treatments. They become accustomed to the lifestyle of preparing their body for the next game or event. Athletes are fortunate to have these experiences and live that way of life for a brief period; however, it can be especially challenging for athletes to leave this lifestyle behind upon retirement.

Dryden (2013) discussed how sport could provide an elite athlete satisfaction and a place to fit in. Sport often provides athletes with a sense of use and purpose. When athletes are forced to leave the sport at a relatively young age, they still desire satisfaction with their life endeavours while also feeling needed and appreciated. Professional athletes become experts in their craft and utilize their skills to entertain others. These physical skills and attributes have been cultivated over many years.

Experiencing a Loss of Identity

When an athlete retires, the feeling of loss surrounding one's skills and expertise may set in. Most athletes have spent immeasurable time and energy on their craft but have yet to perfect any other aspect of their life. Athletes enjoy being exceptional at something that most others cannot accomplish. During their playing career, athletes may feel exhausted from the training and travelling;

however, it is not until that lifestyle is concluded that athletes appreciate it. They grow fond of those patterns of professional sport. It might not even be the sport itself, but rather the subsidiaries resulting from it. The friendships, the locker room, the road trips, the triumphs, the challenges, the pain, the wins and losses, the laughs, and cries are what athletes miss the most about the game. It is not the game itself but everything that comes with playing it. In professional sport, remuneration may simply be a bonus for playing the sport, but the fundamental components the athletes will miss are the memories.

Dryden (personal communication, April 25, 2019) reiterated this phenomenon by noting that many of his former teammates do not miss the money; instead, they miss the feeling of being important to a team, community, and family. This may prove to be the most challenging aspect of retiring from sport. There is a significant void in an athlete's life once their playing days are completed. The question remains, how will the athlete fill that void? Will they find a way to move into a career that will be fulfilling and make them feel important again? Those who cannot find something meaningful and fulfilling will often live in the past glory of when they felt successful, influential, and thriving. Whether an athlete's retirement is planned or unplanned, the attention that follows the athlete gradually disappears, and people generally become less interested in the individual.

Transitioning from high-performance athletics can prompt various psychological and emotional issues, including depression, eating disorders, decreased self-confidence, and heightened drug and alcohol abuse (Grove et al. 1997, Lally 2007). Proactive treatment for these specialized individuals' mental health may prove to be a powerful tool. If sport organizations were required to provide resources to help balance the dominant narrative of performance and results, athletes would have the opportunity to take ownership of their mental state before transitioning from sport. Athletes need to discover something fulfilling in retirement to feel like they are making significant contributions in their lives. Lencioni (2007) cited that anonymity and irrelevance in the workplace are significant reasons people feel miserable at work (Lencioni 2007). Individuals want to know that they still matter. Retiring from sport can leave an athlete feeling irrelevant in their new career endeavours. Dryden (2013) revealed that some of his former teammates got into coaching and, as a result, felt valued and connected to a group.

Disengagement from high-performance sport generally occurs during the athlete's early adult years. Researchers have suggested that the typical age of disengagement from elite sport ranges from 26 to 34 years old (Erpic et al. 2004). This is usually much younger than most occupations. Typically, an elite athlete has devoted most of their life to intense training and competition. This often includes sacrificing other aspects of their lifestyle, including preparation for a career beyond sport (Shahnasarian 1992, Swain 1991). Researchers have contended that achieving excellence in one endeavour, such as sport, often prevents the development of post-career skills, a stented opportunity to explore alternative roles, and the sacrifice of meaningful relationships (Holt and Dunn 2004, Warriner and Lavalley 2008). Narrowing one's identity has typically been acknowledged as beneficial for the dominant role; however, this often jeopardizes the exploration of and investment in other appropriate or available roles (Lally 2007). The neglect of other roles due

to the preeminence of a single role may expose an individual to ensuing identity issues.

An athlete's identity often becomes foreclosed or constructed around their ability to perform in their athletic career (Carless and Douglas 2013, Warriner and Lavallee 2008). The literature surrounding identity in sport frequently examines the characterization of elite-level athletes in one-dimensional terms: solely an athlete (Hickey and Roderick 2017). At the expense of other social roles, this attachment to the athletic identity can invoke a consuming commitment to maintaining professional status (Lally 2007). Transitioning professional athletes are often examples of this rigid, distinctive individual who experiences various adjustment difficulties due to their attachment to a single identity (Lavallee and Robinson 2007). Thus, when an elite athlete is forced to leave high-performance sport, the retirement may affect not only one's athletic identity but one's overall sense of self (Lally 2007).

Just as retirement from work is ordinary for most individuals, all athletes inevitably leave high-performance sport (North and Lavallee 2004). An athlete's identity and attributes dramatically change when the end of their career comes earlier than expected or is forced on the athlete (Yao et al. 2020). Most former athletes will encounter changes in their identity, physique, emotions, and everyday behaviours as they accept a non-athletic way of life (Yao et al. 2020). Fernandez et al. (2006) suggested that an elite athlete's career has two primary components. First, reaching the highest level of sport requires a total physical and emotional commitment, relegating other interests in life to a secondary position. In contrast to other occupations, athletes generally leave their careers earlier, and career termination does not usually mean an easy transfer to a related occupational endeavour.

Transition Challenges

The possession of a strong and exclusive athletic identity has been associated with adjustment difficulties following retirement from sport, social isolation, and delays in career maturity (Martin et al. 2014). In addition, high-performance athletes are confronted with several financial, emotional, social, and occupational adjustments during the career transition process (Grove et al. 1997). Individuals with a strong and exclusive athletic identity may be susceptible to various emotional and social adjustment difficulties upon career termination (Baillie and Danish 1992, Brewer et al. 1993). One of the most significant issues for athletes who firmly dedicate themselves to the athlete role is that they may be less likely to plan for post-athletic career opportunities before their transition from sport (Grove et al. 1997, Pearson and Petitpas 1990).

One's commitment to high-performance sport may be at the expense of planning for future career endeavours, resulting in "zeteophobia", a term that Krumboltz (1992) coined to describe the anxiety people experience around career decisions. Like many young professionals today, athletes face the challenge of establishing and realizing a long-term career plan once their playing days are

finished. Researchers have suggested that a retiring elite athlete may have a more formidable challenge due to their focused efforts on athletics (Grove et al. 1997, Pearson and Petitpas, 1990).

Dryden (2013) commented on the challenges that high-performance athletes often face when transitioning from sport to the real world. Adjusting to the changes brought on by athletic career transition can transpire over several months or years, and in the most challenging cases, difficulties adapting can evolve into long-term mental health issues (Cosh et al. 2015, Fernandez et al. 2006). Mental health-related issues during the career of elite male athletes have been a topic of much public interest and attention in recent years (Doherty et al. 2016). Reardon and Factor (2010) suggested that the general public's tendency to idealize elite athletes has led people, including some within the healthcare industry, to assume a low prevalence of mental health issues in athletes. Additionally, researchers claim that elite athletes may negatively perceive help-seeking practices and often accept pain while minimizing signs of weakness (Sinden 2010, Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt 2012). Therefore, high-performance athletes may be less likely to willingly seek help from mental health professionals for support related to psychological distress during and after their playing careers (Doherty et al. 2016).

Investing in all areas of an athlete's health and well-being is an essential responsibility for sports organizations. Professional sports organizations hire coaches and other resources to teach their athletes technical and tactical strategies. They also employ staff to care for an athlete's physical health in Athletic Therapists, Strength and Conditioning Coaches, Doctors, Chiropractors, Massage Therapists and more. Each of these components is important to an athlete's preparation for competition. Arguably, the most critical component of an athlete's health and well-being that helps in his or her preparation is the state of their mental health. Through all the challenges that athletes endure due to their elite sport participation, sport organizations must consider their athletes' mental well-being. The expectation of elite performance should be complemented with an undeniable support network that can bring the most out of an athlete. This may include hiring a mental performance coach or sport psychologist to assist athletes and coaches in the process of winning.

Athletic injuries usually cause an immediate change in an athletic career and lead to negative emotional responses, loss of confidence, and performance decrements (Samuel et al. 2015). The inability to recover from injuries and perform at previous levels is one of the leading causes of premature retirement. The challenge of being injured can be detrimental to an athlete's mental health and well-being; however, actively coping with this forced change is within the athlete's control (Samuel et al. 2015). An athlete's decision to seek positive coping strategies reflects a conscious commitment to rehabilitate and return to full activity while managing the associated pain, frustration, and anxiety which often accompany the recovery process (Tracey 2003). This decision is influenced by the type of therapeutic technique involved in rehabilitation, the athlete's capacity for change, and the psychological support available to the athlete (Samuel et al. 2015).

The athletic career is a dynamic process consisting of various transitions (Samuel et al. 2015). Facing adverse situations may facilitate career transitions,

requiring athletes to apply effective coping strategies to maintain a meaningful athletic engagement (Samuel et al. 2015, Sauer et al. 2013). Athletes often internalize some of the feelings they regularly face, impacting their health, well-being, and athletic performance. Conferring with a mental performance consultant provides an athlete with the opportunity to express some of his or her thoughts, concerns, fears, dreams. All professional sport organizations should invest in mental performance professionals to help their athletes deal with these situations and emotions. Although not all athletes may take advantage of this available resource, it may significantly help the mental health and well-being of athletes seeking help. Incorporating mental performance consultants into the culture of high-performance sport could help eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health for future generations of elite athletes. This is something that players' unions should insist be a standardized practice for their members. Providing resources for players during their careers might help reduce some of the challenges players face when they inevitably encounter the transition process. Furthermore, mental health/performance consultants may help protect athletes from harmful coping strategies during or after their playing career.

Researchers have suggested that the quality of an athlete's adjustment to their post-sport life is imminent if athletic identity decreases (Cecic Erpic et al. 2004, Grove et al. 1997, Webb et al. 1998). Lally (2007) explored this further by recording the changes in identity that took place during pre-retirement and post-retirement for student-athletes. Employing various coping strategies, such as involvement in other physical and academic pursuits, helps student-athletes with identity issues and helps prepare them for life after sport. As a result, athletes developed a post-retirement identity and reported a smoother transition to retirement (Lally 2007). The authors acknowledge that employing this type of research involving professional athletes may be difficult since there are differences between student-athletes and elite/professional athletes. Nonetheless, the literature suggests that when transitioning from sport is accompanied by a decrease in athletic identity, athletes have experienced greater social adjustment (Martin et al. 2014).

Researchers have expressed that the changes an athlete experiences during transition can present significant challenges as they aspire to address a variety of complex emotions, overcome a shift in their identity, and handle the disruption in their social networks (Brown et al. 2018, Park et al. 2013). However, researchers have determined that one of the most critical characteristics that impact the quality of an athletes' transition from sport is the voluntariness to retire (Kuettel et al. 2017, Martin et al. 2014). Athletes who retire voluntarily have reported increased life satisfaction after they retired from sport (Martin et al. 2014). Furthermore, a voluntary decision to retire from elite sport has proven to be more beneficial, as athletes feel more in control of their transition process (Kuettel et al. 2017). These findings support the need for career education programs that emphasize independence and career planning during the athletic career transition process (Martin et al. 2014). Hence, if an athlete establishes a conclusive plan for their post-playing career prior to their inevitable retirement, the transition process may be more favourable.

The Athlete's Role in Effectively Transitioning

Athletes' challenging transition experiences out of high-performance sport have been well documented. Less is known about an athlete's family members' experience during the transition process (Brown et al. 2019). Indeed, research has shown that athletes have reported hardship from various mental health issues following retirement, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse. However, significant transitions in life can be instigated, influenced, and resolved by the relationships that individuals share with others (Brown et al. 2019, Gouttebauge et al. 2015). Bianco and Eklund (2001) refer to social support as the social interactions to induce positive outcomes. A strong support network is vital for any individual during adverse situations. Research surrounding retirement from work found that people with higher-quality relationships were more satisfied with retirement and found it easier to adjust to transitional changes when they left work (Sherry et al. 2017). An athlete's closest family members, most notably parents and partners, are often the most critical source of support during the transition process (Brown et al. 2019).

Support from friends, teammates, coaches, administrators, and sport psychology professionals can, and likely do, help athletes during their transition from high-performance sport; however, they are only one component of the process. Athletes who genuinely feel supported by parents and partners during their career transition have found it easier to adapt to the changes that they experience (Brown et al. 2019, Park et al. 2013). This could result from an athlete feeling like he/she has let his/her family down by retiring from sport. Parents and partners have sacrificed much of their time, energy, money, and emotional support to help propel their loved ones in the pursuit of success in sport. Often, they have seen the athletes develop within their sport and supported them for years leading up to their professional or elite sporting opportunities.

Sport can become synonymous with the lives of the individual and his/her supporting company. Therefore, when an athlete involuntarily retires from sport, they may suffer from guilt and feel as though he/she has let their family down. Knowing the amount of time, money, and effort parents and partners have invested in pursuing a successful sport journey can weigh on the athlete's mental well-being during the transition process. It can be challenging for an athlete to face the people that have helped him/her get so far in the journey and express to them that they are no longer participating in elite sport. Involuntarily leaving sport due to injury, decreased performance, or de-selection can cause many athletes to feel they have failed themselves and their families. Park et al. (2013) determined that the extent to which athletes control their decision to leave high-performance sport influences their subsequent adjustment to retirement. Thus, those who are forced to retire for unplanned reasons such as de-selection or as a result of injury are at a greater risk of encountering difficulties during the transition process (Park et al. 2013).

There is clear evidence that suggests parents and partners play an essential role in the process of athletic career transition (Brown et al. 2018). However, there is little research outlining the experience that parents and partners go through during their loved one's ultimate transition from sport. Goldsmith (1992) suggested

that people providing social support to others frequently face challenges such as feeling anxious about their role and support of the retired athlete. Those providing support can also enter a depressed state as they adapt to the retired athlete's new reality and struggles (Brown et al. 2019, Coyne et al. 1990). The challenges and difficulties faced by the athlete often negatively impact parents and partners. Family members of transitioning athletes experience their own transitions. Parents and partners have felt that their relationship with the athlete was distant or detached, with each member of the relationship experiencing a comparable, but distinctly different transition (Brown et al. 2019). Often, parents and partners are interconnected with an athlete's sporting endeavours by participating in their experiences and providing support during their athletic journey. This situation may include travelling to watch events, taking part in team activities, and relishing the experience of watching their loved one participate in competitive sport. Family members can become deeply emotionally invested in the athlete's career. They enjoy the athlete's experience during their career, and they feel part of that success; sport can become a significant component of their own identity (Brown et al. 2019). When an athlete ultimately leaves his/her competitive sport career, family members experience a transition of their own.

Making the Transition a Shared Experience

This transition from sport can be a shared experience for both the athlete and their support network. One of the most challenging issues for parents and partners has been identifying the appropriate type and amount of support to provide (Brown et al. 2019). Adequate balance between being supportive and caring while remaining honest and realistic about the uncertainty of the transition process can be challenging for athletes' family members. Emotional support has been the most common type of support parents and partners provide for athletes, especially in the early stages of transition (Brown et al. 2019). This type of support is particularly extended to help athletes deal with the shock, anger, and sense of loss that they experienced. Athletes have reported difficulty in asking for help from others, even when they are encountering significant psychological distress (Brown et al. 2018).

Another common challenge that athletes experience during transition is a loss of self-esteem, which appears to be related to uncertainty around their sense of self and potential loss of identity (Brown et al. 2019). Not seeking help can make these challenges much more daunting for athletes to overcome. Parents and partners also reflected these feelings of loss, which reiterates the theme that transition from elite sport is a shared experience. In particular, parents have reported feelings of loss during the early stages of retirement from sport (Brown et al. 2019). Lally and Kerr (2008) found that the parents of former competitive gymnasts struggled to fill the void that their daughter's retirement left in their life years after she retired. Parents and partners have also described athletes' concerns with money and their uncertainty with what they could do to earn a living as a significant source of stress. As previously mentioned, athletes who have developed a robust athletic identity may have neglected the pursuit of other career endeavours. This diminished

identity can be a mounting challenge for not only the athletes but potentially their families as the athlete may have retained the majority of the household's income. Parents and partners can offer advice on career options and help an athlete in the process of looking for work.

An athlete's support network is critical during the career transition process. The sources and types of social support that athletes receive during the transition out of sport have been documented. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider how an athlete perceives, deploys, and regulates the provided support (Brown et al. 2018, Brown et al. 2019). Brown and colleagues (2018) conducted a study that examined athletes' experiences of social support during their transition out of elite sport. The study involved interviews with eight (four male and four female) international level athletes (seven of whom participated in the Olympic Games). At the time the research interviews were conducted, the former athletes had been retired from elite sport between 2 and 12 years. Participants described the period immediately following their retirement as emotionally discomfoting, feeling lost, confused, and uncertain about the future. The participants needed to feel valued and understood by family, mentors, peers, and the sport community. Additionally, the former athletes needed the skills and confidence to ask for support and access social networks. Every respondent confirmed that the support that they received from their respective sport organizations was limited (Fernandez et al. 2006). Some of the participants reported difficulties dealing with the perceived disappearance of their "elite" status. One participant decided to pursue a career in coaching, which helped the participant feel a greater connection to the sport while establishing new social ties. Coaching prompted the former athlete to see himself as a leader of what he perceived to be a high-status group. Furthermore, the former athlete utilized leadership skills he developed through his sport experience and applied them to a new setting. One of the essential components of the participants' experiences as they advanced through their transition from sport, was their involvement in supporting others. Many former athletes characterized themselves as selfish during their sporting career and thought that selfishness was a necessary characteristic of elite athletics. The former athletes who adjusted effectively were able to reclaim their sense of self-worth by re-establishing their identity and sought to help others while they had transitioned from elite sport.

A Case for Teams, Leagues, and Unions Heightening Support for Athlete Transition

The recent emphasis on player health and safety in professional sport, including players' mental well-being has been evident in research and the media. Should sport organizations and the players' unions have a role and responsibility to support athletes transitioning from elite and professional sport? To answer this question, one must first consider the values of professional sport. At the university level, the values of sport are primarily based upon providing student-athletes with an opportunity to participate in sport because of the positive outcomes sport can provide. It provides student-athletes with an environment to facilitate growth and

development during the educational experience. Student-athletes are unpaid and are generally completing a degree that will translate into a future career.

Recently, many colleges and universities have taken the initiative in promoting greater health and well-being practices for students (Holm-Hadulla and Koutsoukou-Argyaki 2015). With the demands placed upon student-athletes to perform on the field of play and in the classroom, there has been significant attention focused on student-athlete mental health and well-being (Moreland et al. 2018). Educational institutions operate with student health and well-being in mind and invest in their resources accordingly. Professional sport is inherently different from collegiate athletics as it operates with a business model in mind. Sport organizations and professional leagues focus on profits and creating a competitive balance to ensure their product is appealing to consumers. The expression “it is good for the league” is frequently used when discussing parity of teams, close competition, and upset victories. Many professional leagues have entry or dispersal drafts to ensure player talent is spread fairly across the league. This process further emphasizes the commercial nature of professional sport.

Each professional sports league has a different business model, yet, the primary focus remains on the commercial element of sport. The athletes in professional sports are mere commodities of the product. Sport organizations and professional leagues generally do not address their athletes’ health and well-being specifically in the context of career transition. Professional sport organizations attempt to stay atop the league ranks by continually evaluating the athletes for their on-field performance. During this forward-thinking process, transitioning athletes can be disregarded and neglected. As presented in the research, athletes enduring the process of retiring from elite sport face some significant physical and psychological challenges (Grove et al. 1997, Lally 2007). Unlike educational institutions, it is not a core value of a professional sport organization to invest in their athletes’ mental well-being, especially when the individual is no longer part of the organization’s plans. The athletes are the ones that attract the fans and allow the business model to operate successfully; however, this does not prevent sport organizations from neglecting athletes’ mental well-being during their transition from elite competition.

The lead author of this manuscript played professional football and professional lacrosse. He knows that in the Canadian Football League, when an athlete suffers a career-ending injury during competition, the organization provides medical coverage for one year following the precise date of the injury. If the effects of the injury extend beyond this time frame, the athlete must personally pay for his treatment. In the National Lacrosse League, the resources are even more deficient. Athletes are offered no compensation or support if an injury is suffered in training camp. A career-ending injury will most certainly provoke many challenges upon the athlete due to the unpredictable nature of the transition identified throughout the literature. Moreover, the coverage supplied by the team covers expenses related to the physical injury, but not the mental health response resulting from the injury and the career termination. Coverage for mental health-related treatment during the transition process, such as mental performance consultants and sport psychologists, is to be covered by the athlete. Researchers claim that elite athletes often avoid seeking help and routinely accept pain to minimize signs of weakness (Sinden

2010, Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt 2012). Consequently, they may be less likely to willingly request support from mental health professionals related to psychological distress during their careers and retirement from sport (Doherty et al. 2016). If player unions and sport organizations mandated mental performance therapy and consultations during the retirement process, the stigma surrounding seeking support may subside. Therefore, the lasting effects of psychological challenges might be reduced for retiring athletes. Some may refuse the treatment initially; however, breaking the “showing no signs of vulnerability” narrative in elite sport with mental performance professionals may prove to be incredibly beneficial for elite athletes enduring career transitions.

While it is inevitable that an elite athlete’s playing career will come to an end, how it ends has a significant role in the athlete’s transition experience (Knights et al. 2016). Athletes who planned or voluntarily retired from sport experienced managed adaptation more effectively (Blinde and Stratta 1992, Taylor and Ogilvie 1994, 2001). Consequently, it would be valuable for future studies to investigate further the effects of unplanned retirement on elite athletes (Knights et al. 2016). Future research should focus on involuntary retirement and possible interventions to assist athletes through this life stage. Studies examining elite athletes during the initial phase of retirement could help provide a more extensive perspective of the transition cycle of an elite athlete. This type of research could result in the development of more tailored interventions aimed at improving the athlete’s mental health during the retirement process (Knights et al. 2016). It may also be beneficial to conduct comparison research between athletes from various sports and between genders as there may be a variety of factors that produce different transition experiences for athletes. These factors include the type of sport, level of participation, team sport versus individual sport, exposure, and salary (Knights et al. 2016). Dryden discussed some of the different challenges facing hockey players compared to football players. Additionally, the universal knowledge describing “elite athletes” seems restricted to explain the behaviour of athletes from different cultures and sports (Stambulova et al. 2009). Therefore, there is a greater need for more specific studies as it can be challenging to generalize transition from elite sport due to the variety of factors involved.

As previously mentioned, high-performance student-athletes are encouraged to utilize their college experience as an opportunity to formulate career plans outside of sport regardless of their potential of competing (Tyrance et al. 2013). For student-athletes, it should be emphasized more emphatically that finishing one’s educational journey prior to pursuing a professional career in sport may greatly benefit one’s post-playing career. When the individual’s inevitable retirement from sport occurs, the challenges of transitioning into a new career may be less strenuous. Most elite athletes’ “work” careers last considerably longer than their athletic endeavours (Tyrance et al. 2013). Completing their educational endeavours prior to or during their sports career is advisable and may translate into greater future professional success. Arranging a post-playing career pathway is essential for athletes to consider during their high-performance sport involvement.

Athletes, their teams and organizations, and their unions all have to take ownership of this situation and collectively make things better for retiring athletes.

The following list is a starting point for all parties committed to changing the channel on this persistent problem.

Recommendations for Athletes

1. Recognize that transitioning from sport is inevitable.
2. Be proactive and map out post-career ventures while playing.
3. Channel the discipline needed to excel in sport to the post-sport career.
4. Continue to earn educational degrees and credentials (Master's degree, certificate programs, additional credentials).
5. Network with industry leaders during the playing career.
6. Aim to specialize in an industry or role during the sporting career.

Recommendations for Teams/Leagues and Unions

1. Take responsibility for the athletes and their inevitable retirement seriously and ensure that they are set up for success following their playing days.
2. Provide life coach services to assist players with the career transition.
3. Mandate life coaching sessions for active and retired athletes.
4. Provide academic success counsellors to assist players in completing degree/certificate programs.
5. Create internship opportunities for retired athletes with corporate partners to help athletes gain the experience, contacts, and confidence necessary to efficiently transfer into a post-athletic career.
6. Provide tuition bursaries for former players wishing to complete degrees/certificate programs.
7. Provide financial planning consultants for former players.
8. Review pension and health benefit programs for former players and ensure that they meet the needs of retired players.
9. Schedule regular check-ins with former players to see how they adapt to life following their playing careers and provide the necessary support.

Conclusion

Professional and elite athletes have received less attention than transitioning student-athletes, yet it is still a concerning reality for elite sport performers. It is widely accepted that elite athletes face physical and psychological challenges during their careers and the ultimate transition phase from sport (Bruner et al. 2008). Gradually, the challenges associated with career transition in sport are being recognized; however, the narrative surrounding elite sport soliciting athletes to suppress signs of vulnerability must shift to accommodate the difficulties these athletes face during their retirement process. Sport organizations, administrators, coaches, and sport psychologists have begun to acknowledge the need for

educational and vocational training for retiring athletes at all levels of sport (Harrison and Lawrence 2004). Sport organizations and professional player associations must recognize the demanding obstacles that retiring athletes face, become involved in solving the issues and, in turn, provide adequate resources and support to accommodate athletes' transitions. Though resources must be available for athletes during the transition process, it is ultimately the athlete's responsibility to take advantage of provided support. Offering greater resources and support is feasible for sport organizations and player associations however, the retirement process must be further recognized by these parties as an essential matter that nearly all elite athletes encounter.

Transitioning from sport can be challenging for elite and professional athletes alike; however, their participation in sport has dramatically benefited their potential next career. This manuscript highlights that elite athletes develop leadership qualities sought after in sport and desired in other industries. Working as a team member and developing resiliency to overcome presented challenges are features that many high-performance athletes achieve during their sporting careers. These attributes will serve athletes well during the transition period and in their new career endeavours. The challenges and adversity that high-performance athletes face in sport shape their character and help prepare them for future success outside of sport. Nevertheless, the teams and leagues that have benefitted from their services have a responsibility to provide the necessary supports.

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