

Position statements - 5. Sports career termination, 1999

FEPSAC Position Statement # 5

Sports career termination

Sports career termination is a transition that requires former athletes' adjustment in occupational, financial, psychological and social spheres of life. Typically high-level athletes retire from sports due to factors such as de-selection, new interests, psychological fatigue, difficulties with coaching staff, declining results, injuries/health problems, a sense of accomplishment, new professional priorities, and interrelationships within their family. These varied reasons reflect different types of sport career (SC) termination, such as drop-out (premature SC termination before athletes feel they have reached their full potential), burnout (feelings of emotional exhaustion leading to the inability to continue in sport), or attrition (a slower process of physical and psychological exhaustion).

Although SC termination offers a challenge for the re-evaluation of one's future and the opportunity to set new goals, a number of studies show that retiring athletes encounter problems and conflicts, sometimes in a traumatic way. SC termination can be experienced as a positive or negative crisis transition. However, there are only few professional structures to help athletes work through and cope with their existing dilemmas posed by career termination. Sport psychologists can help athletes integrate the preparation of their post-athletic career into the planning processes during the SC and provide consultation during and after SC termination.

Transitional Issues and Coping

Athletic identity (as defined through both the strength and exclusivity of an individual's identification with sport) is strengthened by the reinforcement that accompanies their sport career, such as athletic and economic success, and social recognition. By terminating their athletic career, athletes lose an important part of themselves. This loss of physical and social status can be painful and becomes the "Achilles' heel" of the athletes' identity. The degree to which athletes derive their identity from their athletic roles often determines the intensity of the identity crisis they face at the end of their sport career.

A main reason of such problems in retiring from sport is that some athletes neglect other possible sources of identification, indispensable for maintaining personal balance during and after the career end. The athlete's negligence of other spheres in life is reinforced in certain cases by coaches, managers and family members who are often more interested in the athlete's success rather than his/her personal growth. In this environment, the athletes are cared for and relieved of many responsibilities and realities, creating the illusion that their notoriety will resolve all of their problems. Consequently, those athletes who neglect other spheres in life, such as professional training and fields of interest, risk feeling neglected during termination of their sport career. Cases in which athletes feel ignored, used, forgotten, and discarded (e.g. by their sports federation or club) are not rare. Successful SC termination demands certain processes, such as seeking personal autonomy during the athletic career and actively preparing and thinking about disinvestment, separation, and reinvestment.

The necessity for a quick adaptation to the status of former athlete and the formation of a new social status can be based on a new professional career. Thus, reconstruction of the self and reformation of self-esteem can be realised through other activities unconnected with sport. These changes can be used as tools for coping with identity problems and contributing to the former athlete's satisfaction and personal growth. A large number of retired athletes believe that the ability to identify transferable skills (being competitive, setting new goals, etc.) enabled them to gain more confidence in their abilities to find success in other careers.

Other important aspects of athletes' retirement are exercise addiction, physical transformations and bodily preoccupation. The change from intensive physical activity to less or no activity at all may preoccupy athletes because of physical and psychological transformations they experience such as gaining weight, the loss of muscular mass, or increased anxiety. Excellent physical condition becomes a nostalgic memory affecting the athlete's identity. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "What am I doing now?" often arise during this period of identity wavering. Former athletes who continue to be physically active feel more comfortable than those who become sedentary.

Recommendations

1. Successfully passing through the stage of SC termination depends on athletes adopting more elaborate and active ways of coping. Athletes are encouraged to experience areas outside sport where their partners and friends consider them through other aspects and qualities than those linked to their athletic career.
2. Former athletes should remain physically active to have a healthy life-style and provide a positive image of retired athletes.
3. The responsibility of parents and coaches includes assuming and facilitating the passage from dependence to autonomy. Reinvestment might be facilitated through a supportive environment (family, work, social networks) that will allow the former athlete to switch roles, e.g. parenthood, new professional identity.
4. Sport psychologists should be trained to help athletes before, during and after SC termination. Tools such as personal, in-depth interviews and questionnaires on SC termination are useful in detecting and evaluating specific needs of retiring athletes in order to create and provide services.
5. A smooth career transition requires the sport psychologist to operate
 - a) individual sessions allowing the analysis of personal issues and conflicts and those dealing with career termination in particular;
 - b) workshops with future and/or present retired athletes in order to develop capacities for sharing questions and difficulties.
 1. Sport psychology consultants are needed to help athletes identify their transferable skills and to teach athletes how to use these skills in non-sport domains.
 2. Coaches, managers and sports organisations should be supportive towards a post-athletic career. The following types of services are useful in preparing a positive transition to the life after SC: information on job and educational opportunities, partnerships with sponsors, providing professional training services, athletes (active and retired) participating in decision-making committees