

Position statements - 3. Sports career transitions, 1997

FEPSAC Position Statement # 3

Sports career transitions

'Sports career' (SC) is a term for the multiyear sports activities of the individual aimed at high level sport achievements and self-improvement in sport. The effects of SC can be considered from the two viewpoints: the narrow view considers only sport achievements (records, places in competitions, sport titles etc.), whereas the broad view also considers the athletes' personal development.

The SC can be divided into several stages, with each stage characterised by a set of specific demands, requiring adjustments by the athletes. The success of the athlete's transition from one SC stage to another depends not only on his/her success at a given stage, but throughout the SC as a whole.

Sports Career Transitions

Research has shown that several SC transitions can be identified:

- **The beginning of sports specialisation** is characterised by adjustments to the demands of the sport, coach, sport group, and new lifestyle. Young athletes must ensure the right choice of sport and show abilities to learn sport techniques.
- In **the Transition to intensive training in the chosen kind of sport**, athletes should adjust themselves to the new regime of training loads, improve their techniques and tactical skills, and attempt to achieve stable results in competition.
- **Transition to high-achievement sports and adult sports** is marked by the athlete attempting to find his/her individual way in sport, to cope with the pressure of selection to important competitions, gaining respect of a team, opponents, officials, and other sports professionals. It is critical for the athlete to change his/her lifestyle at this point and make it work in favour of sport achievement.
- **Transition from amateur sports to professional sport** is marked by adaptation to the specialised requirements and pressures of professional sports, to competitions with equally strong opponents, independent training.
- **Transition from the culmination to the end of SC** is characterised by the necessity to search for additional self-resources in order to maintain high levels of achievement and preparation to leaving sport.
- **The termination of SC** is marked by leaving sport and a transition to some other career, as well as adjustments to new status, lifestyle, and social networks.

Positive Transitions and Crisis-Transitions

Positive transitions take place when an athlete makes a relatively quick and easy adjustment to the demands of a given SC stage. It usually happens in cases when the necessary preconditions (e.g. theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc.) have been created during the previous stage. Other factors that can ease the course of transition are: athletes' giftedness; high motivation; positive attitude towards training, competitions, and SC as a whole active coping with difficulties; trust in coach; and positive psychological climate.

Crisis-transitions take place when the athlete has to make a special effort to successfully adapt to the new requirements. Inability to adjust creates symptoms of crisis-transition such as lowered self-esteem, emotional discomfort (e.g. doubts, anxiety, fear), increased sensitivity to failure, disorientation in decision making, and confusion. Psychological assistance can prevent such negative outcomes, as well as drop out from sport.

Recommendations

Since SC transitions are predictable in the course of the SC, knowledge of peculiarities of each transition is extremely important. The following recommendations should be taken into account not only by sport

psychologists, but also coaches, parents, and all other people and organisations (e.g. Sport Federations, National Olympic Committees) involved in competitive sport.

1. **Beginning Stage.** Inform young athletes about the specifics of training in a given sport; create a comfortable supportive atmosphere in the sport group; use developmentally appropriate methods of training, enhance young athletes' interest encourage them regardless of success or failure, reward effort; give social support in competition, especially in cases of failure.
2. **Transition to intensive training in the chosen kind of sport.** Do not force the training process. Move forward gradually and smoothly, to prevent injuries and overtraining. Teach athletes the basics of psychological preparation to competition, help them to find the optimal regime to combine sports, school, and other activities.
3. **Transition to high-achievement and adult sport.** This is the most difficult one for an athlete, since it is linked not only to the sport maturity of an athlete, but also to his/her psychological maturity. The main focus for the sport psychologist here is co-operation with the athlete. Coaches and sport psychologists should advise the athlete, but give him/her the opportunity for independent decision making. The psychological assistance during **the transition from amateur sports to professional sports** is similar in nature to that just described.
4. **Transition from the culmination to the end of SC.** The athlete becomes more reserved and anxious, and may need social support, expert advice, and counselling, including assistance in searching for a new career.
5. **Termination of SC.** This should involve helping an athlete into a new career and surroundings. Support of sport organisations for their athletes play an important role.
6. The particular methods of psychological assistance to an athlete in the different SC transitions vary, including psychodiagnostics, psychological prevention, mental training, and others. However, their effectiveness is dependent on taking into account the specifics of the sport event, SC stage, athlete's age, gender, and his/her individual traits.
7. Sport psychologists should study the ways in which athletes experience and cope with different SC transitions and then assist in educating the athletes and coaches in providing positive transitions in order to make the athletes' career in sport longer, more successful and more enjoyable.