

Psychological aspects of Olympic athletes' sport career termination and post-sport life

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Abstract:

The chapter is dedicated to psychological aspects linked to sport career termination by high-performance athletes, the level of which is expressed by e.g.: Olympic successes. In the first part, the path of development of the interest in the transition issue occurring in the course of sport career was presented. The second part is dedicated to an overview of the most important research reports concerning the circumstances of career termination by Olympic athletes as well as the course of their further development (after professional career termination). In the last part, suggestions and recommendations on the development of competences which facilitate the process of coping during and after the termination of the last transition phase in sport career are presented.

Key words: Olympic athletes, sport career termination, athletic retirement, post-sport life, retirement planning.

Development of interest in the issue of sport-career transition

One of the anecdotes about the famous Japanese ski jumper - Noriakim Kasai - goes that when he was asked a question about how long he intended to jump, he answered: "Forever". When following his uncommonly long and greatly successful career (e.g. seven-time Olympic athlete, three-time medallist of the Olympic Games), it is difficult to think of any other answer. Maintaining peak physical fitness late in life - referring to a high-level professional athletes - and maintain a positive attitude towards life, let him break Guinness records time and time again, and allowed him to gain popularity and affection of fans all around the world. Without a doubt, he is a remarkable figure in sport, in general, not only when it comes to ski jumping. Nevertheless, regardless of the successes, however great they are, every career, special as it is, will come to its natural end. No matter what the circumstances of the career termination (planned vs. unplanned), it is always connected with changes whose course and nature have influence on the way that athlete functions in successive stages of life.

Research on the issue of *career development and transitions of athletes* fall into the category of issues which are said to have a long past but a short history. They attracted interest in the 50s, when studies were conducted in the fields of thanatological psychology and social gerontology [Taylor, Ogilvie, 1994]. The first, well-known example is the study published in the Bookbinder's paper in 1955. The subject of the study was

types of difficulties baseball players had to face during their professional career [after: Lavalley et al., 2012]. In the successive decade, research on athletes (mainly male, most often boxers) who reported alcohol problems, low mood and symptoms of depression, occurring in relation to career termination, was approached [cf.: Hallden, 1965; Hare, 1971].

In the 70s reports, which showed that transition connected with career termination did not necessarily have to be linked with unpleasant experiences or stress, appeared [cf.: Haerle, 1975; Sands, 1978; Snyder, Barber, 1979].

The 80s was a time of rapid development of sport psychology, within which researchers started to be interested in the problem of transition, i.e.: the period of career termination and the search for mechanisms conditioning adaptation to changes [Coakley, 1983; Werthner, Orlick, 1986]. While in the 80s the number of publications related to the subject of the course of sport career reached about 20, in following 30 years, it increased to more than 500 [cited in: Lavalley et al. 2012].

Since 2000, studies have been focused on narrower issues, e.g.: the influence of transition on the quality of athletes' lives [Stephan et al., 2003; Wylleman, Lavalley, 2004] and the reaction of significant people (e.g.: family) to the changes connected with professional development and sport career of athletes [Lally and Kerr, 2008]. Moreover, the studies include discrepancies related to the specification of certain groups, e.g.: ethnic groups [Harrison, Lawrence, 2003; Alfermann et al., 2004], groups defined by gender [Harrison, Lawrence, 2004], or groups characterised by different levels of athletic performance [Pawlak, 2000; Bruner et al.,

2008]. What is more, researchers are interested in the issue of the course of sport career within the context of cross-cultural comparisons [Wylleman et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007; Stambulova, Ryba, 2013]. A separate trend is delineated by studies aiming at designing tools meant to examine athletes terminating their professional career, e.g.: *Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory* [Fernandez et al., 2006], *Retirement Sport Survey* [Alferman et al., 2004], *British Athletes Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career Transition Inventory - BALANCE Scale* [Lavallo and Wylleman, 1999].

Research on the determinants of the transition process of Olympic athletes' professional career termination

During the last three decades, there has been rapid development in the area of studies focused on the determinants of the transition process of professional career termination. They provided much interesting and valuable information on the subject of various predictors and prompted specialists addressing the issue to prepare thorough reviews and summaries [Park, Lavallo, Tod, 2013]. Publications, which appeared between 1968 and 2010 were taken into account. Eventually, 126 studies were considered. *Elite-Olympic level athletes* took part in 50 of them. The researchers were able to define 15 key correlations connected with the quality of experiences characteristic of the stage of the transition process and 4 factors related to available resources considered significant in dealing with changes connected with sport *career transition*. Among the most important variables which had negative influence on the quality of experiences and the adaptation process after the termination of professional careers were, e.g.: identity, which was strongly tied to sport activity, and young age (the feeling of premature career termination). Aspects which have positive influence on the transition process of career termination include: significant sport achievements, higher level of competition, social and financial status as well as marital status (presence of a life partner). Moreover, it was shown that the level of athlete's autonomy, the degree to which the athlete controlled the situation, and if the decision regarding athletic retirement was their own, were of significant importance. If they feel that they were "forced" to resign from their professional career, then they are more vulnerable to unpleasant experiences and negative emotions such as: anxiety, feeling of being betrayed and socially excluded, loss of identity [ibid.] (cf.: CeciĆ-Erpi, Wylleman, Zupan i, 2004).

When analysing 11 studies regarding the relevance of injuries and other health problems incurred during athletic career, it happens that they have negative influence on the quality of life after termination of professional sport activity, i.e. athletes complain about various physical issues more often.

The group of the most significant factors negatively influencing the quality of life after the termination of professional career comprise: poor financial situation, unsatisfactory level of education and professional development, bad relationships and conflicts with the coach, changes in habits and discomfort caused by leaving professional athletic lifestyle which mainly consists of training and competitions.

In contrast, among factors which correlate positively with the quality of life, the following should be listed: positive perception of one's own body, self-esteem, self-confidence, maintaining healthy balance between sport life and life outside sport during professional career, and time factor (i.e. the more time passes from the moment of professional career termination, the lesser discomfort connected with the event of retiring).

Regarding the four most significant factors referring to available resources which were considered important when coping with changes occurring during sport career, the following were listed: the application of effective *coping strategies*, *pre-retirement planning*, psycho-social support and benefiting from programmes focused on the development of skills needed in post-sport life [Park et al., 2013]. The analysis process of the research results related to the coping strategies employed by athletes do not provide grounds for identifying strategies which could be considered more efficient than others. The exception are the strategies targeted at looking for new ways of professional development and new interests. It was also observed that during the transition period, athletes who were active and busy (i.e. they feel their time is filled), coped better than athletes who were passive or those exhibiting some addictive behaviours, e.g.: addiction to alcohol, nicotine or other substances.

Pre-retirement planning includes: psychological preparation for the changes and setting a clear goal for the post-sport life. It occurs that this factor has significant influence on the athlete's sense of comfort and promotes better professional adaptation [Stambulova et al., 2009]. A qualitative study involving 18 Olympic athletes showed that the process of preparation for the termination of athletic career is a long one and it takes place in phases [Torregrosa et al., 2004]. In the first and second phase of athletic career, when development is very intense, athletes do not think about their career termination. They are mainly focused on monitoring their progress in mastering skills and achieving results. Since many young athletes do not choose other paths of professional careers than sport, the lack of ideas about career termination at the first phase is natural and entirely justified [Côté, Baker, Abernethy, 2007]. The first and maybe a little "blurred" ideas appear only in the third phase, when sport becomes dominant activity, when athletes start achieving desired sport goals (e.g.: participation in Olympic Games, medals received at the highest-level sport events) and when they experience some kind of physical injury and rehabilitation. One of the symptoms of thinking about ath-

letic retirement is paying more attention to one's own education and professional development. A clear idea about the termination of athletic career appears when the level of achievements does not change or declines. A trigger stimulus can also be reminding oneself about family, friends and other close people [Torregrosa et al., 2004]. What is more, research showed that athletes who seem to be surprised by the fact that their career came to an end and who are in a weaker financial situation, are more prone to experience negative emotions than those who are in better financial position and who gradually prepared themselves to move on to the next phase - a post-sport life. In other words, the more gradual and gentle the vision of career termination is, the calmer the termination itself becomes.

Information gathered during research conducted by Torregrosa et al., allowed for designing a three-stage model of preparation for athletic retirement applied in sport counselling [ibid.]. A good example can be the approach proposed by Stambulova, according to whom psychological work with an athlete should incorporate not only aspects related to improvement of their performance but it should also consider holistic development regarding a longer lifespan perspective [2010]. On the basis of the conclusions drawn from 20-year-long research, long-time, international experience as a counselor in the field of athlete career planning, and as a teacher and supervisor of individuals working with athletes, she developed a counselling framework called the Five-Step Career Planning Strategy (5-SCP) which involves three time perspectives (past, present and future) and allows to look at athletic development within the context of other development areas [Stambulova, 1994; 2010; Stambulova et al, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Alferman, Stambulova]. The application of the strategy offers athletes better insight and a sense of effective control over current situations. It allows the use of previous experiences efficiently and a better understanding of changes coming along with the successive development stage [Stambulova, 2010; 2012].

Regarding social support, it relates to sources which are outside of sport (e.g.: a partner, family, friends and other significant people), as well as sources which are connected with sports activity (e.g.: coaches, team members) [Siekańska, 2015]. Research shows that athletes value their coaches as a source of help. It occurs that those athletes who, at the career termination stage, received informative support (*pre-retirement information*) from their coaches, are less often prone to experiencing negative emotions and difficulties connected with the transition when compared to those who did not receive such aid [Park et al., 2013]. Researchers underline that, in the future, it is worth drawing attention to the coach-athlete relationship as it can be one of the most significant factors influencing the stage of transition process as well as athlete's functioning in the next stage of life [ibid.].

According to athletes who terminated their professional career, skills which are valuable and useful in

post-sport life are those which facilitate professional development, e.g.: making decisions about the choice of career, looking for a job, preparing for a job interview, group leadership and management skills, effective planning (cf.: the Five-Step Career Planning Strategy by Stambulova [Stambulova, 2010]), and communication skills (assertive behaviour, negotiating, conflict resolution, etc.) [Lavalle, 2005].

Shaping competences facilitating coping mechanisms during and after the last transition stage of sport career termination

As the above-mentioned studies show, the reasons for sport career termination can be various. It seems that planned sport retirement, which occurs after fulfilling one's sport career along with knowing what the next step after its termination will be, is the most desirable. The termination of career might also be less spectacular - forced by aging processes and decline in sport competences. In a different case, sport career termination can be caused by the decision to give priority to other forms of activity. The situation in which an athlete suffers from physical injury (contusion), especially when they are in high athletic shape, is the most distressing.

An overwhelming majority of athletes who do competitive sports professionally (about 82%) [Łuszczynska, 2011], declare that they alone decide about the time of sport career termination. Planned and voluntary termination of a career fosters better social adaptation. Planning career termination contributes to fewer costs connected with adaptation to the new situation and building a new identity.

In each of the cases, it is necessary to adapt to a different social role, new tasks and new responsibilities, which may sometimes be overwhelming. Many years devoted to training and competitions, surrendered to training regime as well as emotions accompanying all those processes make being an athlete tightly connected with a certain sense of identity and life style. After all, an athlete is an athlete 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Moreover, what an athlete does after a training has tremendous influence on the results they achieve. Through the activity connected with sport, an athlete satisfies numerous basic, physiological needs, such as: the need for autonomy, competences and good relationships with others (relatedness). The need for autonomy is expressed by the internalisation of the sense of control and by the conviction about controlling one's own behaviour. Competence is understood as the sense of professionalism (proficiency and efficiency), and effectiveness in the field in which a person is involved. The need for relatedness refers to the sense of connection with other people and social groups. The above-mentioned needs are included in the theory of *self-determination*. Authors of the notion - Ryan and

Deci [2007] - believe that the listed needs are universal and cross-cultural, and fulfilling them is essential to feel full satisfaction with life. After career termination, some athletes can face problems with fulfilling those needs outside sport. It is connected with the fact that sport career termination is tied to changes in the structure of *athletic identity* which is self-identification as an athlete. Absolute engagement in and full identification with sport goals can limit development in other areas. Moreover, the image of one's own body: fit, well-shaped, here plays an important role. It has an influence on the acceptance and satisfaction with the image of "physical self". During a sport career, attachment to and a need for competition participation is formed. A certain demand for a specific amount of stimulation, including risk, is created. Doing sport, especially at a high professional level, is associated with specific psychophysical feelings defined as *flow* or *runner's ecstasy*, which provide unforgettable experiences. The flow is an optimal state of mind and the whole nervous system designed to do some activity. Attention is focused only on the information significant for performing the action; there is ideal information flow between the mind and the body. Things happen alone, automatically; an observer has the impression that an athlete performs sport activities without effort and with ease. Runner's ecstasy is associated with the increased release of endorphin (the so-called happiness hormone), which accompanies physical activity and competition. There is also a number of sport disciplines which are available only for those who achieved a specific level of performance, among which there are: ski jumping, diving or numerous sports which are commonly called extreme sports. All of the above make sport career termination a moment when an athlete is deprived of all the incredible feelings (available only for chosen ones), of the sense of security connected with an ordered and predictable lifestyle. A shift in goals, numerous changes in the area of "Self", in relationships with others, in one's own behaviour and habits follow. The feeling of emptiness and the question: "What now?" can occur. Often, there is a change in the level of income, the fear about maintaining the same level of life emerges. In the case of sport stars, a problem of lesser media interest or losing social position can appear.

Moreover, the word 'responsibility' acquires different meaning. During sports career, it means intensive trainings, a sport lifestyle, while during the competition period, full engagement and fulfilment of goals. After career termination, athletes have to make their own decisions, take responsibility for their own life and the lives of those closest to them. This requires setting new goals and formulating plans for action with a sense of certainty that they have sufficient resources to their disposal to face the new reality.

Research shows [Łuszczynska, 2011] that a relatively small group of athletes demonstrate social mobility and assume high professional positions in fields outside sport. It was also shown [ibid.] that former

athletes demonstrated weaker preparation to perform professional roles and lesser determination to make efforts to gain academic success or to make difficult decisions about the future.

The above shows the importance of earlier preparation for career termination. It allows to plan what specific type of education to acquire, and to obtain support and information. Adaptation to new conditions is associated with gaining new skills, both professional and social. That is why, if possible, former athletes remain in the sport environment which is known to them, in which they feel comfortable, they feel no fear when navigating in it. They can feel competent there and fully maintain their autonomy. Sometimes, a former athlete stays in sport as a coach and has a great career making his/her name fill the media's space not at all to a lesser degree than when they were athletes. Some good examples can be excellent athletes who became equally brilliant coaches (in football, among others: Josep Guardiola, Zinedine Zidane or Johan Cruyff).

Years spent in professional competitive sport equip an athlete with numerous resources useful in other forms of activity, of which an athlete may not even be aware. Sport teaches perseverance in achieving goals, gratification delay, emotion control, availability, setting goals requiring utmost effort, effective performance in stressful situations, following the rules of *fair play*. Athletes should be aware of the potential they have and should be able to employ it in other fields of life. After all, the values of sport mastery are universal and that is in a way, the necessity of balance development of an athlete, which guarantees existence in sport and through sport.

There is a number of examples of athletes who after sport career termination, achieved quite significant (some of them outstanding) scientific, artistic successes, had a political career, or they are excellent journalists and managers. They were or are exceptional employees in various industries, they are able to cooperate with others and manage a group of people. They owe those successes mainly to the abilities and personality traits developed during the time when they were athletes. It is important to make a kind of secondary identification of one's own predispositions (talents) after career termination and choose a form of activity which allows for full self-realisation.

The consequences of performing sport go beyond the duration of the sports career period. This is mainly connected with the influence of the years spent on doing sport on the personality of an athlete. Certain needs and ways of meeting them are created. Developed habits and ways of problem solving are very persistent and they guarantee efficient functioning during a sports career, and what is more, they contribute to the development of the feeling of being an athlete – athletic identity. Those skills have considerable contribution to achieving successes during post-sport life.

Examples of athletes who cope well after career termination have not only individual meaning (good

adaptation in the next stage of life and rediscovering one's own professional role) but also a social one, because they show that values guiding sport career (e.g.: fair play rules, care for health, perseverance in achieving goals, willingness to share one's own experience with others) are of fundamental and universal nature. Irrespectively of whether further professional career is connected with sport or other areas of life, athletes can make use of their resources and potential to break barriers (e.g.: coping with limitations, looking for new possibilities) and mark out new directions (e.g.: gaining support and establishing cooperation producing the effect of synergy).

It is necessary to remember that those who seem lost after their career termination and are not able to navigate in the new reality also have abilities which, at times, are not conscious. Sometimes, those people lack a sense of self-efficacy, which is very characteristic for the time when they were active professional athletes. It is worth supporting them so that they regain self-confidence and self-belief, and as consequence, the abilities which are universal and developed as a result of performing sport can be used in new life circumstances.

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