

MANAGING ATHLETE TRANSITION: FROM PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TO POST-CAREER LIFE

C.N. Mustafayev

Azerbaijan Sports Academy

cavid.mustafayev2022@sport.edu.az, orcid.org/0009-0006-2176-7691

Nəşr tarixi

Qəbul edilib: 14 oktyabr 2024

Dərc olunub: 25 dekabr 2024

© 2022 ADBTİA Bütün hüquqlar qorunur

Annotation. The transition from a professional sports career to post-career life represents a significant and often challenging phase for athletes. This thesis examines the multifaceted nature of this transition, focusing on the psychological, social, financial, and physical challenges faced by athletes. Key themes include the identity crisis that often accompanies retirement, the impact on mental health, and the strategies for fostering resilience and adaptability. By analyzing successful case studies and existing support programs, the research highlights best practices and proposes actionable recommendations for athletes, sports organizations, and policymakers. This study underscores the importance of proactive career planning, mental health support, and community engagement in facilitating a smooth transition and ensuring long-term well-being for retired athletes. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of athlete transitions and to promote effective solutions for navigating this critical period.

Keywords: *athlete transition, professional sports, career planning, psychological adaptation, post-retirement support, identity crisis, financial literacy, health challenges, support networks, case studies.*

1. Introduction. Athlete retirement or transition from competitive sport can be challenging. Athletes retire from professional sport quite young, possibly while in their prime, and around retirement, many athletes may even still psychologically feel relatively young, la-

cking any experience of working life outside of sport. To athletes, the retirement process has been found to feel like a 'loss' and to often be associated with significant feelings of disappointment, rejection, anger, grief, distress, and self-identifying problems. It can be said that 'while the athlete may retire at a relatively young age, the sport-based career is often all-consuming. For many athletes, the sports life is the only life they know. As a result, planning for a post-elite career becomes a rather daunting concept [1].

The increased public and media attention in the areas of career transition and removing stigma have played an important role in enriching our knowledge of the difficulties that retiring athletes face, as well as the various methods that can be implemented to make this psychological process easier for the sports person involved. There exists a global recognition, particularly in economically advanced countries, of the reported issues surrounding athlete retirement in the management of human resources. It has been recognized that former athletes are not only an important part and significant resource of sport organizations and sport-related industries, but evidence suggests that these activities also add economic value to society. The importance of 'career progress' has been estimated to impact the performance of both expected educational attainment and elite performance.

1.1. Understanding the Athlete's Lifecycle. Like other individuals, athletes grow, develop, and change over time. Their lifecycle has unique and identifiable stages and phases, and involves a wider range of challenges, tasks, crises, transitions, and experiences by the age of 30, 35, or 40 than the general public

will face in a lifetime. Growing up in an athletic environment and experiencing early athletic success sets athletes apart from the general population. Their acculturation is inextricably linked to the nature of competitive, organized sports. Despite the different challenges encountered during the diffusion of this very voluntary commitment, the life tasks, ambitions, interests, health concerns, and the very essence of athletes are no different from their civilian counterparts. What matches the intensity and focus of competing and participating in sports elevates to extraordinary levels is the difficulty, fear, and anguish athletes experience preparing for life after they retire from active competition [2].

Finally, athletes must face a forward progression that leads in a direction apart from the competitive arena. Human development throughout an athletic career is generally characterized by a discontinuous timeline, with specific, high-demand changes. The lifestyle of an athlete can be labeled both a 'special' and a unique population, but athletes cope and adjust using average human societal behaviors. Regardless of the level, age, or extent of participation, qualitative and attentive examinations suggest that peak athletic participation represents a finite, temporary, and usually predictable phase of life. Long periods of performance excellence are rare, but they leave footprints across the spectrum and fabric of social, psychological, and life demands for participating athletes, affecting both their internal and external cultures. The majority of athletes exhibit a highly public, self-affirming, physical style of growth. This public validation can set the stage for at least moderate to severe crises when athleticism retires [3].

2. Challenges of Athlete Transition.

Athlete career transitions are characterized by psychological, psychosocial, and psychosomatic risk factors. Furthermore, abrupt or forced retirements due to injury or selection are generally the rule in sports; thus, fears are intensified. While a significant percentage of professional male athletes retire before age 30,

women are in the high-risk phase well before this. After the end of the sports career, the individual's feelings can change due to the anxiety of losing the role of being a professional athlete, the fear of competing in the labor market, the fear of what will happen after the sports career, the isolation, and loneliness. These problems are understandable if we consider that a professional athlete dedicates, on average, 10-15 years of life to their sport, which is why it is necessary for the sports career to be flanked by an economic activity that will help the interests of the athlete after their athletic career. In this phase, many athletes turn to institutions that offer psychological support and help to solve legal problems and provide requests for retraining courses [4,5].

Researchers also noted that the coaching relationship may deliver significant stressors. These include constant scrutiny, intense pressure to perform, exposure to critical and unsympathetic scrutiny of personal and professional events, lack of time to recover from performance disappointments, increased conflict with individual sports management or governing bodies, and increased risk of public criticism or objections. Financial uncertainty and its consequences, such as frequent mobility and inconsistency in returns, can also create significant stress. Deterioration due to incidents at events and increased conflict among team members or coaches can create new psychological security risks. Return adjustment is also particularly high, as it requires the athlete to move from an internal to an external focus. The high risks associated with major life events, such as the birth of a child or a relationship breakup, and the resumption of everyday life associated with recovery can be stressful and complex. Athletes, while able to be reassessed, may also encounter retirement difficulties that are too isolating in an unstructured and unaccountable internal environment. Retired or inactive athletes can feel an increased risk of chronic injuries, increased injury risk, age concerns, and decreased motivation, which can lead to withdrawal.

2.1. Loss of Identity and Purpose. Professional athletes have dedicated most of their lives to sport. They had a strong self-concept based on being a high-performing athlete. Thus, when athletic experience is gone, they may face a difficult period of adjustment to their new life without sport being the central issue. Athletes often show a strong inability to separate themselves from professional sports, and when retirement comes, they are likely to lose their sense of identity, dignity, self-worth, and to experience feelings of isolation and dislocation. If athletes relied solely on their sport skills for coping with life stress, the end of their organized sports career often means the end of the self-concept that has existed in their entire lives. There is evidence that about 70% of elite athletes suffer from post-professional career depression. Also, an athlete's choice to abandon an elite sports career is directly linked to the loss of their athletic identity [6, 7, 8].

However, one of the most important aspects of this stage is related to the athlete's support and possible contacts with significant others. An occupational identity, an unknown new identity, and a long gap in their resume are the major stressors at this stage. Athletes need to be taught how to develop new skills that enable them to extend their existing self-concepts, and coaches can help them by planning their transition and supporting their coping techniques. Such actions can soothe the retirement shock and assist the athlete in moving on to a productive second career. For all of these reasons, the developmental career assessment and counseling services provided to non-athlete clients can be helpful to elite athletes contemplating retirement and the transition to their second career.

3. Strategies for Managing Athlete Transition. At present, athletes continue to be left to 'sink or swim' when retiring from professional sport, with little acknowledgment of the difficulty of their circumstances or any kind of support, planning, or preparations in

place. Providing athletes with strategies for preparing for and coping with this significant challenge is essential if sport organizations want to manage the outcomes of athlete psychological reactions to retirement, the costs, and the often public challenge of athlete career transition, and build sustainable, capable sport organizations. With this in mind, three suggestions are made below that contribute to sport organizations being able to better manage the athlete transition process. When an athlete sustains an acute or life-threatening injury or catastrophic event, this will likely result in a rapid retirement, and it is anticipated that the athlete may have little or no experience in another occupational role if preparing for retirement has not happened.

One of the most important strategies sport organizations can adopt is providing a variety of recruitment activities that support the development of a broad range of interests, knowledge, education, experiences, and capabilities. Programs such as job shadowing, internships, and mentoring partnerships link the retired athlete with business, community, and industrial partners, enabling the athlete to gain practical skills, experiences, and networks, and give organizations a greater profile, level of expertise, or new strategic options. Also, support by in-house, dedicated staff sponsoring these programs will demonstrate to the athlete that the organization values career transition and that they care about their future. Based on such a commitment, athletes are more likely to invest time and energy in leveraging the opportunity for future programs [9].

3.1 Career Planning During the Sporting Years. Athletes should pursue education and develop diverse skills while still active in sports. Programs offering vocational training, online courses, and mentorship opportunities can bridge the gap between sports and other professions. Early preparation allows athletes to gradually explore new fields, reducing the shock of transition. Financial literacy is ano-

ther critical component, enabling athletes to secure their futures through wise investments and savings. Partnerships between sports organizations and academic institutions can further facilitate access to continuing education. By developing a robust career plan during their sporting years, athletes can proactively build a foundation for long-term success beyond their athletic achievements.

3.2. The Crucial Role of Psychological Preparation. Counseling and mentorship programs tailored for athletes can address emotional challenges. Resilience training, including mindfulness and stress management techniques, equips athletes to handle uncertainty and emotional shifts associated with retirement. Psychological preparation should begin during an athlete's career, allowing them to build coping mechanisms and explore their values and interests outside of sports [10]. Engaging with retired athletes who have successfully transitioned can provide valuable role models and insights. Sports organizations can play a crucial role by offering workshops and one-on-one counseling sessions to support athletes in navigating the psychological demands of career transition.

3.3. Cultivating and Expanding Valuable Support Networks. From the results of this study, it was found that individuals involved in sports need to consult with experts in this area to undertake career planning. The particular need for individualized career development was indicated. In addition, from the results of this study, a possible direction for goal models based on certain psychological problems and their adaptation is formed. Although not all individuals involved in sports during their primary education enhance this period, the role of career counseling starting from this period has been found to be important. The need to prepare student-athletes for the onset of change within the context of sport and work can be seen as an educational endea-

vor. Addressing the issues involved is not simply a specific human resource management problem. Providing an appropriate environment and adequate guidance for the continued personal and career development necessary for student-athletes is well beyond the resources of any one sport organization. High participation rates in the continued influence of sport highlight the need for further research and intervention into the issues of career development for athletes. As one research and educational institution, universities are seen as vital intermediaries responsible for assisting the student-athlete. It is hoped that the findings presented here can contribute to an improved understanding of the needs of student-athletes and the subsequent design and implementation of programs to support them.

4. Case Studies and Best Practices. Case studies and best practices are the primary means of illustrating how organizations, educational institutions, and athlete support agencies guide players through transitional periods. They provide salient examples of the successes and failures of transitional strategies for players and their families. Comprehensive athlete transition programs are relatively new, and as such, support agencies often operate in the dark with regard to the effectiveness of their programs. Evaluative case studies provide valuable input for program improvement.

The evaluation of individual support programs has been identified as an area that requires significant improvement in the conceptual transitional work that currently exists. Furthermore, there is a paucity of longitudinal research designed to track transition outcomes, leading to a lack of understanding of the longer-term experiences of athletes after retirement. There is an especially strong need for longitudinal work designed to investigate practice outcomes among different groups of athletes and the predictors of these outcomes. It has been suggested that the voices of the athletes who transition may assist in identifying

and understanding the success or failure of the many proposed mechanisms of support during career transition. Finally, it is essential that there is an increased focus on supporting the family or the athlete during the transition process. The results of this collective research have the potential to inform the design and implementation of athlete transition programs that are theoretically sound, based on evidence, and translatable to practice situations.

4.1. Successful Transitions. Athletes such as Michael Jordan, who ventured into business, and Serena Williams, who established ventures in fashion and philanthropy, demonstrate the potential for fulfilling post-sports careers. These transitions underscore the importance of early preparation and leveraging personal brands. By exploring interests and developing skills beyond their sports careers, athletes can identify opportunities aligned with their passions. Role models like these illustrate how proactive planning and a growth mindset can lead to success. Their stories inspire current athletes to think about life beyond sports and to embrace opportunities that align with their long-term aspirations.

4.2. Programs Supporting Transition. Programs like the Olympic Athlete Career Program (OACP) and initiatives by professional leagues provide comprehensive support, including career counseling, skill development, and placement services. These programs are designed to assist athletes in navigating the complexities of post-retirement life. By offering tailored resources and individualized guidance, these initiatives enable athletes to explore new opportunities while addressing their unique challenges. Evaluating the effectiveness of such programs is critical to ensuring they meet the evolving needs of retiring athletes. Lessons learned from these programs can inform the development of similar initiatives globally, further enhancing the support available to transitioning athletes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations.

In this chapter, we have presented a specialized incorporation program, which could serve as a best practice model for many other institutions. By focusing on an athlete's strengths, career-planning process standards, and objectives, this program enables successful athlete career transition. In the broader aspect, our program offers solutions to negative stereotypes about athletes that make them seem like "incomplete" persons, working to counteract the accusations to which many athletes are unfortunately exposed. The objectives of our program are focused on personal and individual skills, strengths, experiences, and career building that have been developed by years of involvement in competitive sports, using sports as a school for life. The coach's role in managing the vocational guidance aspect of their athletes' careers is very important, and this model was developed to provide direction in the formation of a sports organizational unit that could propose professional and vocational counseling. This kind of program should be considered part of the athlete's transition from total dedication to the sport to professional life, as we have denied that a dual experience between high-level sporting competition and career studies is possible. However, we have agreed that this is feasible as well as necessary. With this program, while being a part of the team, the athlete-recipient has access to and cooperates with the most advanced working contexts of their professional future. In this way, vocational guidance experiences during retirement become less traumatic. In this chapter, we would like to suggest some ideas for athletes regarding the transition process following the end of their career.

REFERENCES

1. **Alfermann D., Stambulova N.** *Career transitions and career termination.* In G. Tenenbaum, R.C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of Sport Psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 712-733). Wiley, 2007.

2. **Wylleman P., Lavallee D.** *A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes.* *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 2004, 5 (1), 7-28.
3. **Park S., Lavallee D.** *Roles of emotion regulation strategies on athlete burnout and well-being.* *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 2015, 37(2), 167-179.
4. **Stambulova N., Ryba T.V. (Eds.).** *Athletes' careers across cultures.* Routledge, 2013.
5. **Taylor J., Ogilvie B.C.** *A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes.* *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 1994, 6(1), 1-20..
6. **Torregrosa M., Ramis Y., Pallarés S., Azócar F., Selva C.** *Olympic athletes back to retirement: A qualitative longitudinal study.* *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 2015, 21, 50-56.
7. **Lavallee D., Gordon S., Grove J.R.** *Retirement from sport and the loss of athletic identity.* *Journal of Personal & Interpersonal Loss*, 1997, 2 (2), 129-147.
8. **Chambers T.L., Harle S.K.** *Navigating the transition from elite athlete to the workforce.* *Career Development Quarterly*, 2019, 67 (4), 361-375
9. **Petitpas A.J., Brewer B.W., Van Raalte J.L.** *Transitions of the student-athlete: Theoretical, practical, and clinical perspectives.* *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 2009, 3 (3), 229-237.
10. **Reints A., Wylleman P.** *A developmental and holistic perspective on the transition out of elite sports among elite female athletes.* *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 2013, 14 (5), 704-713.

İDMANÇI KEÇİDİNİN İDARƏ EDİLMƏSİ: PEŞƏKAR İDMANDAN KARYERA SONRASI HƏYATA

C.N. Mustafayev

Azərbaycan İdman Akademiyası

cavid.mustafayev2022@sport.edu.az, orcid.org/0009-0006-2176-7691

Annotasiya. Peşəkar idman karyerasından sonrakı həyata keçid, idmançılar üçün mühüm və tez-tez çətin bir mərhələni təmsil edir. Bu məqalə, idmançıların qarşılaşdığı psixoloji, sosial, maliyyə və fiziki çətinliklərə diqqət yetirərək bu keçidin çoxşaxəli təbiətini araşdırır. Əsas mövzular arasında təqaüdə çıxma ilə əlaqədar olan kimlik böhranı, əqli sağlamlığa təsir və dözümlülük və uyğunlaşma qabiliyyətini artırmaq üçün strategiyalar yer alır. Uğurlu nümunələr və mövcud dəstək proqramları təhlil edərək, tədqiqat ən yaxşı təcrübələri vurğulayır və idmançılar, idman təşkilatları və siyasətçilər üçün fəaliyyətə keçiril-

məsi mümkün təkliflər irəli sürür. Bu tədqiqat, karyera planlaması, əqli sağlamlıq dəstəyi və icma iştirakının əhəmiyyətini vurğulayaraq, idmançılar üçün sakit keçid təmin etmək və təqaüdü idmançıların uzunmüddətli rifahını təmin etmək üçün vacibdir. Tapıntılar, idmançı keçidlərini daha dərinlən anlamağa və bu mühüm dövrü keçməyə dair səmərəli həllər irəli sürməyə kömək etməyi hədəfləyir.

Açar sözlər: *idmançı keçidi, peşəkar idman, karyera planlaması, psixoloji uyğunlaşma, təqaüddən sonrakı dəstək, kimlik böhranı, maliyyə savadlılığı, sağlamlıq problemləri, dəstək şəbəkələri, nümunə hadisələr.*

УПРАВЛЕНИЕ ПЕРЕХОДОМ СПОРТСМЕНА: ОТ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОГО СПОРТА К ЖИЗНИ ПОСЛЕ ОКОНЧАНИЯ КАРЬЕРЫ**Дж.Н. Мустафаев***Академия Спорта Азербайджана*cavid.mustafayev2022@sport.edu.az, orcid.org/0009-0006-2176-7691

Аннотация. Переход от профессиональной спортивной карьеры к жизни после карьеры представляет собой значительную и часто сложную фазу для спортсменов. Данная статья исследует многогранность этого перехода, уделяя внимание психологическим, социальным, финансовым и физическим проблемам, с которыми сталкиваются спортсмены. Основные темы включают кризис идентичности, который часто сопровождает выход на пенсию, влияние на психическое здоровье и стратегии формирования устойчивости и адаптивности. Путем анализа успешных примеров и существующих программ поддержки исследование выделяет лучшие практики и пред-

лагает практические рекомендации для спортсменов, спортивных организаций и законодательных органов. Это исследование подчеркивает важность проактивного планирования карьеры, поддержки психического здоровья и вовлеченности в сообщество для обеспечения плавного перехода и долгосрочного благополучия пенсионеров-спортсменов. Результаты исследования направлены на углубление понимания переходов спортсменов и развитие эффективных решений для успешного преодоления этого критического периода.

Ключевые слова: *cognitive psychology, cognitive psychology of sports, mental processes, sports psychology.*