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Abstract

Objectives: To examine planning age of the athletic retirement of elite athletes in the United Kingdom, short-term athletes' plans in terms of a balance between sports and other activities, and long-term athletes' plans in regard to their activities after sports career termination.

Design and Methods: Participants were 561 elite-level athletes (mean age = 26.0 years) who completed a self-administered postal survey. A total of 37 individual and team sports were represented.

Results: One-way analysis of variance procedures indicated that the age at which participants planned on retiring from sport varied significantly across sports, among male and female athletes, and among able and disabled athletes. A series of chi-square procedures revealed significant differences in the short-term plans of athletes in terms of increasing training, plans to start education and plans to find a job over the next twelve months.

Conclusions: These appears to be an unwillingness among younger athletes and those who perceive themselves to have a significant amount of time before they retire to develop concrete plans about their future career prior to their retirement. It is recommended that further research be conducted in order to assess the career development needs of elite athletes across Europe.

An Investigation of Potential Users of Career Transitions Services in the United Kingdom

Helping athletes cope with career transitions is one of the most commonly encountered issues for applied sport psychologists (Murphy, 1995). Although one of the only inevitabilities in high-performance sport is that every competitor will have to terminate their sporting career at the elite level, some individuals experience adjustment difficulties when faced with retirement. As a result, several career transition programs have been developed by governing bodies and sport institutes around the world during the last 20 years (Anderson & Morris, 2000).

The Olympic Athlete Career Centre in Canada designed one of the first transition programs in 1985 in order to assist elite-level athletes in their preparation for retirement (Olympic Athlete Career Centre, 1991). The United States Olympic Committee later initiated the Career Assistance Program for Athletes in 1988 to provide support to retiring athletes during the career transition process (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). Since 1991, the Olympic Job Opportunities Program has assisted Olympic-calibre athletes in Australia, South Africa and the United States who are committed to developing a professional career as well as achieving their sport-related goals (Olympic Job Opportunities Program, 1996). The Athlete Career and Education (ACE) Program has been developed to provide career transition services for Australia's elite athletes (Anderson & Morris, 2000), and the United Kingdom Sports Institute has also developed its own version of the ACE Program, entitled the ACE UK Program.

The ACE UK program was established in 1999 to provide elite athletes across the UK with career, education and personal development guidance. This program is based on the notion that athletes with a balanced lifestyle are more likely to achieve their sporting goals, cope better with problems such as injury and retirement and have more confidence in their

future after sport (UK Sport, 1999). The ACE UK program is currently provided as just one of a number of specific services for athletes through the United Kingdom Sports Institute.

ACE UK service delivery begins with an Individual Athlete Assessment, which is used to determine the educational, career and personal development needs of each athlete. Athletes may then access any of following program elements depending upon their circumstance and needs: (1) Personal Development Courses are offered on topics such as personal finance planning, media training, and job seeking skills; (2) Education Guidance offers advice and support concerning access to education at all levels; (3) Career Planning offers advice and support on career options, planning and job suitability; (4) Career Transition Support offers advice and support for athletes undergoing personal and sporting changes such as coping with injury and retirement from sport; and (5) Olympic and Paralympic Employment Network (OPEN) offers to match athletes with meaningful career paths and flexible working arrangements. Since its inception in 1999, the ACE UK program has had a relatively high level of usage amongst the elite UK athlete population. Three-fifths of athletes (61%) had undertaken an athlete assessment, and nearly a third of athletes (31%) had used at least one of the specific ACE UK program elements (UK Sport, 2001).

In order to assess how career transition programs can be more effective, Gorely, Lavalley, Bruce, Teale and Lavalley (2001) have recently investigated potential users of the Australian ACE program. In this study, it was found that although more than 86% of the 878 active elite athletes (across 48 sports) were aware of the program and 70% had used one of its services within a 12-month timeframe, career transition services were used by less than one percent (0.7%) of the those surveyed. The low use of career transition services was also reflected in the low importance (1.6 on a 5 point scale) being placed on retirement issues when athletes were asked about their current perceived needs.

The purpose of the present study was to further assess how career transition programs can be more effective by investigating potential users of the ACE UK program that are still active elite athletes. The specific aims of the study were to examine (a) planning age of the athletic retirement of elite athletes in the United Kingdom (representatives of different sports, genders, as well as able-bodied and disabled athletes), (b) short-term athletes' plans in terms of a balance between sports and other activities and (3) long-term athletes' plans in regard to their activities after sports career termination. The results described in this short report have been extracted from a larger study that assessed elite athletes' education and working patterns and their experiences of, and opinions on, the ACE UK program (UK Sport, 2001).

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Employing a census approach, all 988 athletes who were registered in the ACE UK program up to June 2000 were sent an introductory letter, questionnaire, and reply paid envelope for instrument return. The introductory letter explained the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality and anonymity. Respondents were invited to return completed questionnaires to an independent agency.

Sample

A total of 561 valid and completed questionnaires were returned by the athletes (response rate = 57%). There were slightly more males (54%) than females (46%) in the sample, and more able-bodied athletes (83%) than athletes with disabilities (17%). The average age of the overall sample was 26.0 years old. A total of 37 individual and team sports were represented. In the individual sports, 20% of athletes reported that their current performance levels were in the World top 3, 24% in the World top 10 and only 9% suggested they were outside the World top 100. In the team sports, 29% reported that their team's current performance levels were in the

World top 3, 46% in the World top 10 and only 8% suggested they were outside the World top 20.

Instrument

The main data collection instrument used in the research was a self-administered postal questionnaire. This instrument was developed by considering information collected through a number of face-to-face pilot interviews conducted with elite athletes in the UK, as well as a review of the extant literature. The questionnaire was four pages long and consisted primarily of closed questions focusing on such topics as athletes' expected years until career termination, short-term plans, and plans about life after sport. Some open-ended questions (e.g., "If you have made plans, what are they?") were also included to allow athletes to expand on issues related to their post-sporting career.

Analyses

One-way analysis of variance was employed to test for differences in the planning retirement age across sports, among male and female, and among abled and disabled athletes. Chi-square procedures were used to test for differences in the short-term plans of athletes in terms of increasing training, plans to start education, and plans to find a job over the next twelve months.

Results

Planning Retirement Age

As outlined in Table 1, the athletes in this study intended to retire from competitive sport at the average age of 34 (SD=7.84). Using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the average retirement age was found to vary significantly across sports [$F(36, 469)=13.20$, $p<.001$]. ANOVA procedures also revealed that females athletes intended to retire significantly earlier than males [$F(1, 473)=4.02$, $p<.05$], and able-bodied athletes intended to retire significantly earlier than disabled athletes [$F(1, 459)=21.30$, $p<.001$].

A number of particular ages at which athletes in the sample were planning to retire from sport were also identified. As demonstrated in Figure 1, athletes' retirement from sport first starts to occur at 25 years. Percentage peaks also appears around the ages 30, 35 and 40 years, suggesting that athletes may plan their sport and post-sport careers around 5-year periods.

When the number of years before the athletes were expected to retire was examined in more detail, the results showed that 13% were considering retiring from competitive sport in the next 1-2 years. Just under a third of athletes (30%) were planning to retire in the next 3-5 years and the majority (57%) were not planning to retire for another six years at least. Overall, the athletes in the sample were eight years away from retiring. From this it may be inferred that in any one year approximately 5-7% of competitive athletes in the UK are thinking about retiring from sport in that year.

The Short-term Plans

Analysis of the athletes' plans for the twelve months immediately following the study suggested that the most important issue was increasing the amount of time they spend training and competing. Over half of the respondents (56%) revealed they would increase the amount of time they spend sport training over the next twelve months, 28% intended to enter education in the next twelve months, and 21% stated that finding work was a priority.

Short-term plans were found to vary significantly for the athletes across the following four age categories: under 21 years ($n=115$); 21-24 years ($n=121$); 25-29 years ($n=118$); and over 30 years ($n=118$). A series of chi-square procedures found significant difference across the four age categories for plans to increase sport training ($X^2=43.98$, $df=9$, $p<.001$), plans to enter education ($X^2=36.73$, $df=9$, $p<.001$), and plans to find a job ($X^2=18.48$, $df=9$, $p<.03$). In terms of specific differences, younger athletes were more likely to state that they would increase the amount of time they spend sport training than older athletes (e.g., 72% of athletes aged under 21 said they would increase sport training compared to 43% of athletes aged 30

and over). Younger athletes were also the most likely to suggest that they would be entering education (45% of the under 21 years category), while older athletes were most likely to suggest that they would be looking for work (32% of 25-29 years age group).

The length of time before athletes plan to retire from sport (i.e., next 1-2 years, next 3-5 years, and 6 years or more) was also found to be influential on their plans over the next twelve months. Chi-squares tests identified significant differences across these three lengths of time for plans to increase training ($X^2=57.80$, $df=6$, $p<.001$) and plans to start education ($X^2=19.76$, $df=6$, $p<.003$), whereas plans to find a job were insignificant ($X^2=9.73$, $df=6$, $p=.136$). In terms of specific differences, athletes who suggested that they intended to retire from sport in the next one or two years were much less likely than average to suggest that they were going to increase the amount of time devoted to sports training over the next year (27%) and were more likely to be trying to find work (31%). Athletes who suggested that they did not intend to retire from sport for six years or more were very likely to be increasing the amount of time they spend on training (72%), were more likely than average to be looking to enter education (31%) and were less likely to be looking for work (20%).

The Long-Term Plans

The athletes were asked whether they had developed any plans for their lives after competitive sport. Overall, the results revealed that 53% of the respondents had made plans, and 47% had not. When the data were analysed according to the time until their planned retirement, 79% of athletes who were retiring in the next one or two years had made plans compared to 45% who were not retiring for six years or over. However, 21% who were planning to retire in the next one or two years did not have an idea about what they were going to do after they finished competitive sport. These athletes (46 in total) included 22 individuals who were 30 years or over, 16 who were not in education or employment (i.e., they were full-time athletes), and six who had no work experience.

Those respondents who had made plans were also asked in more detail about what they intended to do after their sporting careers had ended. Developing a career was foremost in the athletes' minds (Figure 2), with just over four-fifths (81%) suggesting that they intended to start, or increase the amount of time devoted to, work. Moreover, 32% were working, or intended to work, in an area connected to sport after they retire.

Conclusion and Applications

The athletes' current thinking in relation to their retirement from sport was considered by specifically investigating their plans after their careers have ended, as well as their short-term plans. Results associated with planning retirement age highlight an unwillingness among younger athletes and those who perceive themselves to have a significant amount of time before they retire to develop concrete plans about their future career prior to their retirement, which supports previous research (e.g., Gorely et al., 2001). The data also imply that the age of retirement might be influenced by the type of sport an individual plays, gender differences, and/or whether an athlete is able-bodied or disabled. The findings on the influence of the type of sport and gender are not surprising, given previous research with samples of recently retired athletes (e.g., Lavallee, Gordon & Grove, 1996). The significant difference found between the age of able-bodied athletes and athletes with disabilities also addresses Martin's (2000) call for further information on the career transition experiences of these populations.

The particular ages at which athletes in this study were planning to retire, along with the data suggesting that 5-7% of competitive athletes in the UK annually retire, is useful information for applied sport psychologists, since it provides a general idea how much time they have to help athletes in particular sports before they prepare for retirement.

Results related to short-term and long-term planning suggest that work becomes increasingly important to athletes as they progress through their sporting careers. A lack of

work experience may be a particular problem for older athletes, since research shows that employers often value job-related experience and skills over qualifications (Spilsbury & Lane, 2000). Although this research did not explicitly seek to explore the issue, the evidence points to an enthusiasm for sport among the athletes which extends beyond their own training and competition. This passion with sport is observable in UK athletes' current commitment to increasing training and competition, as well as their work choices during and after their competitive career has ended. It is not surprising, therefore, that 32% of athletes who developed a plan were working or intended to work in an area connected to sport. However, the choice of sport as a future career may also suggest that some athletes have not developed skills, and not gained experience, in any other areas. Many may, therefore, be reliant on sport to provide a career that employs similar skills to those that they developed when competing (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000), although this may not be the most desirable outcome.

In conclusion, it appears that competitive athletes in the UK are increasing the amount of time they devote to training and competition. Based on the results of this study, it appears that most athletes are content with their balance between sport and non-sporting activities in relation to educational and career development. However, as the demands of the 'performance environment' increase the tendency to pursue sport in all its senses many also increase, affecting to a greater extent the younger athletes coming through the elite athlete system. This illustrates the need for career transition programs in providing athletes with a focus with which to consider their longer-term career development needs. It is for this reason that we recommend that research be conducted in order to assess the career development needs of competitive athletes across Europe.

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Table 1

Average Retirement Age

Sport	n	Mean	S.D.
Gymnastics	15	24	3.16
Diving	5	28	1.52
Swimming	78	28	5.36
Ice Skating	12	29	2.57
Judo	10	30	1.83
Modern Pentathlon	5	31	2.51
Badminton	19	31	2.69
Netball	8	31	2.96
Rowing	32	31	4.39
Canoeing	17	32	3.02
Hockey	54	32	3.26
Triathlon	14	32	3.26
Squash	13	33	2.75
Cycling	9	35	5.05
Athletics	69	36	5.53
Rugby Union	13	37	4.07
Curling	17	37	4.73
Basketball	7	38	2.76
Water Skiing	11	39	5.44
Sailing	12	41	8.06
Golf	13	49	16.38
Equestrian	9	53	10.71
Shooting	5	56	8.22
Total	475	34	7.84

Note: Sports are only included if there is a minimum of 5 cases

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Athletes' age and the age at which they expected to retire

Figure 2. Athletes' post-sport career plans



