

THE RESEARCH FOCUS

The area of research undertaken is the “Forced Retirement of NZ Elite Athletes”. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the forced retirement experiences of a selection of elite NZ athletes, and to investigate how each athlete coped with the transition and the extent to which they felt prepared for their forced retirement, and the support strategies that were in place for them prior to, during and following their transition from elite sport.

Forced retirement is a relatively frequent occurrence for athletes, and one which ACE advisors are required to support. However there has been very little study done on the situations that such athletes find themselves in - especially in the New Zealand context. This research project was undertaken with the intention of contributing to the body of knowledge on these situations.

Findings from this project have the potential to assist ACE advisors and will certainly be of immediate value to career practitioners working with elite athletes. ACE advisors may benefit from gaining greater understanding about premature and unplanned elite athlete retirement and transition. They may also benefit from increased awareness of the support strategies elite athletes experiencing forced transition have found most and least helpful at the time; as well as the strategies they believe might have better prepared them for a premature and unplanned retirement.

DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Each of the elite five athletes interviewed had been athletes excelling in a variety of sport/s at a young age. They were either on their way to the top or at the top of their sport when they were forced to retire, and all had enjoyed significant careers in their sport ie a minimum of five years.

The five athletes were “forced” to retire – but for different reasons: injury, sport politics, and personal reasons. None were forced into retirement as a result of ‘poor performance’. Each had similar experiences both prior to, and for a period of four to eighteen months following their involuntary retirement. None of the athletes were prepared for their transition out of sport, for a variety of reasons:

- ✚ They did not make a conscious decision to retire voluntarily
- ✚ They had prepared in part for a life outside of sport, but were ill-prepared for what that might mean (in reality)
- ✚ They lacked the professional resources and support services to support them after they were ‘forced’ to retire
- ✚ They were not consciously aware of the skills they needed to cope with change
- ✚ They experienced a huge sense of frustration, loss, grief, anger, depression, and self-esteem
- ✚ They needed an extended period of time to adjust to the change

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the experiences of these athletes, reinforced by the relevant literature around athlete retirement, leads to a number of conclusions:

Athletes who experience an involuntary retirement from sport are more likely to encounter transition difficulties (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This has been evident from this research on five elite NZ athletes, who all clearly indicated difficulties during the transition process. All experienced significant grief, and all indicated they would have benefited from support to help them “move on”. This would suggest the need for sporting bodies to make available additional and timely support services, namely, counselling, and appropriate and timely career planning including, in-depth transition planning. While the argument could be had that these athletes are made aware of the support services available during their sporting career; when they are faced with forced retirement that may not be a conscious thought and/or they are very angry, and bitter, and may not want to have anything to do with the very people who were there to support them during their sporting successes. Therefore, the resources and support required may vary depending on the extent of the feelings/emotions, and the capacity of the athlete to deal with these; and their ability to transfer the positive skills and experiences from their athlete career into a new future. Access to personal evaluation and counselling sessions was considered beneficial by the athletes who utilized them at the time of their termination, which suggests that similar support services should be made available to athletes through the national sporting bodies. This is evident in the literature by Pearson and Petitpas (1990) and Danish et al. (1993) who write about “the timing of the events” and suggest if the event is “off-time”, that is, it is either premature, or a completely unexpected event, coping with the event may become extremely difficult for the athlete.

What the study findings suggest is the need for an integrated preparatory and post-retirement strategy for elite athletes, whereby the ACE management team works alongside the sporting bodies and partners/families to look at an integrated and holistic service ie a case management approach - one that involves the coaches, administration/management team, the ACE Advisor, and sports psychologist, to ensure the programmes are in place at appropriate and timely stages throughout each athlete’s sporting career, including the athlete’s post sport career. This may enhance the connectedness of all the different personnel involved in the sport, and ensure that everyone has the best interest of the athlete at heart, for example, transition planning will be an important part of all elite athlete programmes.

Nancy Schlossberg, 1984, who writes about transition (change), believes life usually has a crisis in some form or another, and that normalizing is the key. Therefore, it would be prudent when working with athletes during their transition, to ensure that they understand how ‘normal’ it is to feel as they do, and draw parallels to other similarities, for example: death, redundancy, people in tragic accidents which leave them permanently disabled. Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000, p 60, also note that “the introduction of life skill programmes for athletes early on in their careers can protect them from the anxiety about their futures ...”. It would be important also to build into these programmes practical information and demonstration about the grief cycle, and the relevance and similarities to involuntary retirement. Not all transition programmes will be effective if they assume that all athletes want the same services. As (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000, p 140), indicate, “effective transition programmes are those that provide services based on athlete needs”, therefore support services will

need to ensure that each athlete in transition will have his/her individual needs identified and supported accordingly. Schlossberg (1981) identifies three major sets of factors that need to be taken into consideration when working with athletes who are forced to retire ie the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, the perception of the particular transition, and the characteristics of the pre transition and post transition environments. The internal support systems and structures that are available to the athlete may differ, ie the sporting body's role and responsibility in the process would also be of importance, depending on the role they played in the involuntary transition for a particular athlete. Kubler-Ross's parallels to the "stages of dying" model would also prove helpful when working through the transition stages with athletes. In terms of a 'professional ear' it would be important at this stage to ensure that the referral process was understood by the support services, and the sporting bodies involved.

The findings from this study also suggest that athletes are aware that they should plan for their athletic retirement, but due to a lack of encouragement and/or an inability to focus beyond their sport (especially if they are experiencing considerable success); they often fail to do so. While this may be a fault on the part of the individual athlete, if services were provided at appropriate times, and encouragement and emphasis was given to utilize those services, athletes may be more proactive in planning for their athletic retirement. Well known role models who have experienced 'forced retirement' themselves could also add value to career planning programmes by telling their story, and offer a range of proactive strategies for the athletes. Gordon (1995) suggests "the influence of coaches, who are often prone to operate as ideologists and focus on winning rather than as educators promoting discussions about career transition issues, may be the most significant determinant of the effectiveness of available pre-retirement programmes". (p 486)

Generally, (and this is often dependent on the particular sport the athlete undertakes) study or work appears to be tackled half-heartedly due to the pressures of commitment to elite sport. Typically, athletes see sport as their career and for some this is all they can concentrate on. They don't see a problem in putting off work or in not gaining qualifications because they see their sport as their whole life. This may not be an issue unless/until their career is prematurely ended. Therefore, during the athlete's sporting career it would be helpful for coaches, ACE advisors, and sports psychologists to encourage them to remain involved in activities outside of their sport, encouraging them to be thinking proactively about their future career. Research has suggested that encouraging athletes to remain involved in other activities outside of sport will facilitate preparations for retirement planning in that other life roles and pursuits are not neglected (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001). This will not only reinforce the fact that retirement from competitive sport is inevitable but it may also help to provide athletes with a sense of direction and control over their lives.

Lack of formal qualifications was not seen by the athletes in this study as a negative factor, because they all had a conscious knowledge of the life skills that they had developed as a result of their participation in competitive sport. However, being able to access the Prime Minister's Scholarships and study part/full time was seen as helpful to those whose sport could allow that to happen. What would also be important to some athletes and in some sports would be the opportunity to put their

Prime Ministers Scholarship “on hold”, or to have available through tertiary providers scholarships that are available to athletes once they have retired from sport. This would add value to supporting the athlete’s future aspirations, and would demonstrate that the sport was interested in an athlete’s life after their commitment to sport has finished.

While each of the athletes interviewed had refocused their energies and future directions, they acknowledged they now had some time to spend on activities that were ‘given up’ during their sporting career. The athletes welcomed this extra time to pursue other activities, seeing the time as an opportunity to invest energy into their future. These results support the contention by several researchers (Ballie & Danish, 1992; Lavalley & Andersen, 2001; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) that the development of a new focus after athletic retirement can help to decrease retirement difficulties. It further highlights the need for athletes who are approaching their athletic retirement to look at developing a new focus outside of their competitive sport. The retirement period can offer athletes more time to invest in those interests, without necessarily having to develop a completely new focus. However, discussions around this issue should be integrated into a transition programme. This is in part about acquiring a degree of balance, and also about being exposed to learning and opportunities which help to diversify the athlete’s skills and awareness.

It is worth examining what the athletes in this study identified as the important transferable and life skills which they acquired through sport. Several spoke about how success at sport builds confidence and the belief that they can do better and can achieve the goals they set for themselves. Indeed, goal setting and achievement were the most frequently identified skills. This further highlights the need to teach athletes the importance and worth of the skills that they develop through their sporting careers. When an athlete retires from their sporting career, they are still at an age when will they have anywhere from 30-45 years before they experience career retirement. Time can fruitfully be invested into helping athletes establish a career that interests them and that is in an area in which they want to work. S.M. Murphy (1995) has suggested that many athletes believe that planning for another career during their sporting career actually decreases their anxiety in contemplating life after sport.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACE ADVISORS AND SPORTING BODIES

The findings from this research project suggest a range of actions which ACE advisors and sports bodies could take to ensure higher levels of support for athletes who experience forced retirement.

Recommendations to enhance elite athlete preparatory and post retirement services provided by ACE advisors:

- i) Be prepared as advisors to deal with the issues (ie have an enhanced understanding of career transition theories, as well as drawing upon the strategies advocated by practitioners who have published in this area eg Gelatt and Krumboltz). Advisors should also ensure that they have well developed micro-counselling skills, necessary for understanding and supporting athletes through the crisis of transition, should it occur.

Whilst the foregoing suggests some specific knowledge and skill that ACE advisors should have, this knowledge and skill merely complements the broad range of skills, knowledge and experiences which career practitioners would typically be required to have. Elite athletes, like others, face numerous points of indecision in their careers and nothing in this research suggests that the ACE advisor should in this regard do other than adopt the usual practices of the career development profession.

ii) Be knowledgeable about the issues which may arise for the athlete at the time of forced retirement, for example:

- ✚ Understanding the grief cycle and how to be effective when assisting an athlete through this
- ✚ Being there for the athlete and lending that ‘professional ear’
- ✚ Appreciating the need for the athlete to have ‘time’ to refocus and redirect energies
- ✚ Utilising the “Change Model” approach – deny and resist (past) – commit and explore (future)
- ✚ Knowing how to help the athlete find purpose and meaning by exploring the past (before elite sport existed), as well as an expansion of self-identity
- ✚ Understanding Bandura’s theory on self-efficacy ie the perception of one’s ability to perform a task successfully (concept of confidence and expectation)
- ✚ Understanding the world of work/21st century principles ie multiple careers, lifelong learning, employability and enterprise principles, and know how these principles can assist the athlete
- ✚ Being aware of “At Risk” and “Referral” policy and processes – knowing when to refer eg to a sports psychologist (educational, clinical), psychiatrist, nutritionist, or counsellor, as appropriate to the situation – looking for signs and symptoms is vital
- ✚ Working proactively with the sporting bodies and coaches to make constructive suggestions as to processes for de-selection and/or to support athletes through transition pre and post retirement.
- ✚ Working with the partners/families of athletes to ensure they understand and can assist/support their partner/family member of the issues that may arise through transition pre and post retirement

iii) Be clear about what needs to be achieved by the athlete during the transition period.

What is important is that the athlete gain back a sense of control, a sense of identity and his/her self-esteem. The role of an ACE advisor is to assist athlete’s recapture what they believe they have lost. Three needs are paramount, and if these needs are understood by the advisor then more effective support is likely.

Firstly, one of the deepest needs people have is to have control over their lives. Therefore it is understandable that the feeling of powerlessness, of being unable to do anything about their forced transition can be painful. Some of the needs that lead to a sense of control include:

- ✚ A sense of certainty
- ✚ Completion of outstanding things, so we don’t have to worry about them
- ✚ Understanding of how things work
- ✚ Being able to predict what will happen

✚ That people (including ourselves) and things are consistent.

Secondly, the need for a sense of identity – people are deeply driven by who they are. Descartes said “I think, therefore I am”. Many social theories are to do with creating or preserving our sense of identity. When athletes leave their sport they not only leave behind their sense of athletic identity, they leave behind a group identity ie the people and the organization with which they have identified themselves for so long. As well it is going from ‘me’ to ‘us’ ie having to be ready to put others ahead of our own interests. Athletes are very focused and self-centred whilst an elite; they need to be in order to win. They are used to being surrounded by a group of specialists, all working together to enhance the athlete’s sporting performance. It is important that the athlete recaptures their sense of who they are, ie the whole person, as well as the athlete.

Thirdly, is for athletes to feel good about themselves ie self-esteem. This is about both the internal (judging ourselves and finding ourselves worthy by our own defined standards), and the external (seeking social approval and esteem from other people, judging ourselves by what others think of us) feelings.

iv) Be proactive with anticipatory strategies which are known to be helpful if forced retirement occurs:

ACE advisors can take an instrumental role in instigating processes and strategies to assist their clients towards preparing for unexpected transitions and taking opportunities which present and which develop and reinforce this broader skill base. The athlete who possesses effective life skills will be better able to cope with the challenges of a career outside of sport than the athlete who lacks those skills. The self motivated athlete who is able to set effective goals, develop a career plan, consider a variety of options and work in a team setting is likely to establish a successful career in a new setting.

The data suggests that ACE advisors can help their clients by encouraging them to develop interests outside of their sport. Arguably, the most effective pursuit is some form of study towards a qualification. A key issue here though is to keep sight of the need for balance, ie sport is still the priority for most elite athletes and therefore should not be overtaken or compromised by attempting to achieve non-sporting goals too rapidly. For athletes, the typical cycle of leaving school, full time study and getting a job is not realistic. Thus, ACE advisors could play a greater role in encouraging an attitude of life long learning and integrating achievable learning with sporting demands.

A major focus for ACE advisors could be to assist athletes to establish a broad-based identity ie to see themselves as more than just an athlete. Advisors may be of more value to their athletes by coaching them how to enhance the quality of their lives and helping them to acquire broader attitudes and skills ie to be adaptable. It is this adaptability which makes it easier for athletes to participate effectively in the work or study role once their sporting career is over. People often think what makes them tick is what sport gave them.