



## Exercise attitudes and behaviours among retired female collegiate athletes



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 6 September 2016

Received in revised form

3 January 2017

Accepted 4 January 2017

Available online 5 January 2017

#### Keywords:

Sport

Career transition

Health

Physical activity

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The present study explored exercise attitudes and behaviours among retired female collegiate athletes.

**Design:** A survey design incorporating both closed and open-ended questions was adopted.

**Method:** A total of 218 former NCAA Division I female athletes ( $n = 144$  gymnastics;  $n = 74$  swimming/diving) provided details on their current exercise behaviours and their thoughts regarding exercise since retiring from collegiate sport.

**Results:** No relations were found between years since retirement and athletes' current exercise frequency, types of exercise activities, and reasons for exercising. Despite reporting activity levels consistent with recommendations (5 days/week, 1 h per session), retired athletes remained dissatisfied with their activity levels and struggled to integrate exercise alongside occupational, academic and social demands.

**Conclusions:** Athletes may require support in adapting to an independent and less intense exercise regime on retirement. Future research may look to explore exercise attitudes and behaviours among retired athletes from a longitudinal perspective.

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### 1. Introduction

Retirement from sport can be a difficult period for athletes, and significant reductions in self-esteem, physical self-worth, and perceived physical attractiveness are common (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003a, b). The transition is often characterised by an initial period of crisis and uncertainty, followed by the construction of a new identity and improved psychological well-being (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Although clear time frames for this transition have yet to be established, existing evidence suggests that adjusting to life beyond sport becomes easier as time since retirement lengthens (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Lally, 2007). Other factors such as not solely identifying as an athlete, retiring voluntarily and having a supportive social network can also ease the transition (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013).

Athletes also experience challenging physical changes on retirement from sport. Notably, retirement has been linked to weight gain and reduced muscle mass (Marquet et al., 2013;

Stirling, Cruz, & Kerr, 2012), which can be ascribed to reductions in physical activity and changes in food intake (Weiler, Aggio, Hamer, Taylor, & Kumar, 2015). Some retired athletes report engaging in compensatory exercise behaviours, such as rigid or driven exercise, to cope with these bodily changes (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stirling et al., 2012). In contrast, other athletes relate more positively to exercise, citing the benefits of recreational activity to reduce their decline in fitness and to help maintain a routine after the cessation of formal sport training (Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Knowles, 2015; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). During their competitive careers, collegiate athletes engage in highly structured and externally regulated training with their teammates, with performance improvement a primary goal (Theberge, 2007). On retirement, athletes must make the transition towards exercising independently, which includes making decisions about the type and quantity of exercise performed, as well as finding new motivations for exercise.

Maintaining an active lifestyle beyond the end of a competitive sport career can be beneficial to physical and psychological health (Witkowski & Spangenburg, 2008). At present there is conflicting evidence around the exercise attitudes and behaviours of former athletes and a limited understanding of how athletes make sense of

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exercise into retirement. Questions remain about what happens to activity levels among athletes once they are no longer involved in competitive sport. What physical activities do athletes engage in, and for what reasons are they exercising or not? Further, do such exercise attitudes and behaviours vary based on years since retirement? In this brief report we aimed to (a) determine if there was a relation between years since retirement and athletes' current exercise frequency, types of exercise activities, and reasons for exercising, and (b) to explore athletes' perspectives towards exercise since retiring from collegiate sport.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ( $n = 325$ ), who represented all regions of the United States, were invited to participate in a follow up study exploring the well-being of retired female collegiate athletes, six years after the baseline study (Anderson, Petrie & Neumann, 2012). A total of 218 athletes took part (response rate = 67.1%). Participants had previously competed in gymnastics ( $n = 144$ ) or swimming/diving ( $n = 74$ ) at the NCAA Division I level. Athletes had been retired from collegiate sport for 2–3 years ( $n = 53$ ), 4 years ( $n = 52$ ), 5 years ( $n = 61$ ), and 6 years ( $n = 51$ ). Athletes retired from their sport due to completing their NCAA eligibility ( $n = 176$ ; 76.6%), injury ( $n = 32$ ; 14.7%), no longer wanting to train/compete anymore ( $n = 8$ ; 3.7%), removal from team by coaching staff ( $n = 2$ ; 0.9%), and “other” ( $n = 9$ ; 4.2%). Mean age and BMI were 25.72 years ( $SD = 1.19$ ) and 22.31 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ( $SD = 2.72$ ), respectively. The majority were White/NonHispanic ( $n = 192$ ; 88.1%) and married or in a romantic relationship ( $n = 165$ ; 75.8%). Ethical approval was granted by the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board. Athletes received a \$25 gift-card for participation; responses were only identified by a unique code. Data were collected across the entire calendar year of 2015.

### 2.2. Procedure

Through a secure website, athletes provided demographic information (e.g., age, weight) and reported on their current exercise activities. First, over the past month, participants reported the average number of days per week they exercised and the length (in minutes) of each session. Second, from a list of seven categories (i.e., aerobic/endurance, strength/resistance, exercise classes such as Zumba, core strength activities such as yoga/pilates, playing team sports, cross-fit, and “other”), participants indicated the percent of exercise time spent in each activity each week; percentages had to equal 100 across the categories. Third, participants rated each of 10 reasons for exercise (e.g., socialize, improve physical health, improve strength/muscularity) on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*extremely important*).

Participants also indicated whether they perceived their physical activity levels to have changed since retiring from sport. Positive responders completed two additional, open-ended questions: (a) “Please describe the changes that have occurred in your physical activity levels AND how you have felt about these changes;” and (b) “Please describe how you have coped with these changes in your physical activity levels.” Open-ended surveys are valuable for ascertaining qualitative data from large samples, and have previously been used for investigating athletes' attitudes and experiences (Beals, 2003; Kerr, Berman, & De Souza, 2006). Participants could write as much as they wanted to and there was no time restriction.

### 2.3. Data analysis

To address the first aim, we used the number of years since retirement as the independent variable (four levels, i.e., 2–3 years, 4 years, 5 years, and 6 years) and the athletes' overall days per week spent exercising, minutes per exercise session, percentage of time spent in each exercise activity, and reasons for exercising as the dependent variables. Specifically, we used separate ANOVAs to examine the relation of time in retirement to days per week exercising and then to minutes spent in each exercise session. We used separate MANOVAs to test how time since retirement related to percentage of time spent in each of the seven specified exercises and to importance the athletes gave to the 10 different reasons for exercising. Alpha was set at 0.05 for each analysis. Means, SDs, and frequencies (%) were used to describe the data.

Our inductive analysis of responses to the open-ended questions followed Braun, Clarke and Weate's (2016) rigorous stages of thematic analysis. First, multiple readings of the data facilitated familiarisation; next, the data were systematically coded and grouped into potential themes. In accordance with suggestions from Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016), coding was driven by the salience of the response as opposed to the length or frequency of responses. In line with our descriptive approach, coding was predominately explicit – focussing on overt meaning – rather than implicit. Labels for the themes were then generated, and representative data extracts identified. Themes were given broad names to allow for nuance and variability of experience. Discussions took place within the research team throughout the analysis process; not to promote consensus but rather to ensure diligent consideration of alternative interpretations (see Yardley, 2014). This flexible analytical approach (Braun et al., 2016) comes without allegiance to a particular theoretical lens and without stipulations regarding how data should be collected. As such, it can be useful for making sense of data when the aim is to be primarily descriptive rather than interpretive. This said, the descriptive approach here does not beget a commitment to a realist thematic analysis; we are of the position that participants' perspectives are not indicative of a fixed, objective Truth but rather are mind-dependent constructions. Our analytical claims fall in line with these relativistic assumptions by emphasising what was “reported” and “described” rather than what was “found” or “discovered” (see Smith & Deemer, 2000).

## 3. Results

The ANOVAs and MANOVAs across the four dependent variables were nonsignificant in relation to the athletes' years since retirement (all  $p$ 's > 0.53), thus we present the athletes' exercise activities and reasons based on the full sample. The retired athletes reported exercising almost five days a week ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) and for approximately one hour per session ( $M = 55.45$  min,  $SD = 27.80$ ). The percentage of time spent in each of the seven exercise activities differed significantly, Wilks' Lambda = 0.234,  $F(6, 211) = 115.264$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.77$ . The athletes spent most of their exercise time engaging in cardiorespiratory/endurance activities (e.g., running, swimming, biking) and strength or resistance training (e.g., free weights, kettle bells). Playing sports was the least frequent activity (Table 1).

The reasons that the athletes gave for exercising differed significantly in terms of their level of importance, Wilks' Lambda = 0.124,  $F(9, 208) = 163.99$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.87$ . The most important reasons for exercising were to improve physical health and self-worth/concept. Improvements to mood and physical appearance were also rated as important. Preventing illness/injury, socializing to make friends, preparing for sport competitions, and meeting potential romantic partners were less

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