



Olympic athletes back to retirement: A qualitative longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: In this qualitative longitudinal study we assess the retirement process of Olympic athletes. We aim to evaluate the influence that following a dual career or being exclusively focused on sport can have in this process. We compare athletes' prospective views before retirement (Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004) with their retrospective accounts ten years later. This allows us to assess athletes' accuracy in predicting the process and its outcomes in relation to the trajectory followed.

Design: We designed a qualitative longitudinal study (Epstein, 2002) conducting semi-structured interviews.

Method: Fifteen Olympic athletes were interviewed twice. Thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative data comparing prospective views and retrospective accounts of: (a) retirement planning, (b) voluntary termination, (c), multiple personal identities, (d) availability of social support, and (e) active coping strategies.

Results: Ten athletes reported positive transitions related to their favorable approach to the five categories above. Most athletes reporting positive transitions followed dual careers (i.e., parallel or convergent trajectories). Five out of fifteen athletes reported unexpected difficulties in the transition. Four of these followed a linear trajectory during their sporting career. A clear view of retirement in the prospective interviews also facilitated retirement for an athlete following a linear trajectory. While a diffuse view of retirement in the prospective interview signaled future difficulties.

Conclusion: Results from this qualitative longitudinal study suggest that promoting dual careers in elite sport and working on the prospective view of retirement can facilitate retirement from elite sport and the transition to an alternative professional career.

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Introduction

Exploring retirement from sport has been a subject of interest in sport psychology from pioneering work in the late sixties (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968) to current times (e.g., Park, Tod, & Lavallee, 2012). Indeed, studies on career termination, and more generally on career development and transitions, have increased substantially both in quantity and quality since the end of the 1980s (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). However, according to Park, Lavallee and Tod (2012) in their systematic review, avenues for research still remain. In particular, these authors propose that, as retirement occurs over time, employing longitudinal designs could minimize the limitations of cross-sectional studies. In this

vein, this work presents a qualitative longitudinal study of retirement, providing a unique insight into the dynamics of retirement as a process. Here we focus on a group of 15 elite athletes, complementing their prospective view on sport retirement given in the early 2000s (Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente & Cruz, 2004), with their retrospective accounts of the same process ten years later. This approach enables us to comment on factors conditioning both the fulfillment of athletes' initial expectations regarding retirement and the effectiveness of initial strategies and decisions taken, from a long term retrospective position. In particular, by taking into account different trajectories in terms of athletes' career compatibilization, we could study the way in which following dual careers can affect the retirement process.

Retirement from competitive elite sport

Factors involved in athletic career termination have been extensively discussed by Stambulova et al. (2009), in the ISSP

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Position Stand on career development and transitions. In this comprehensive review, these authors pointed out three major shifts in stance concerning athletes' career transitions: (a) transition being interpreted now as a coping process rather than as a phenomenon; (b) other transitions being included, instead of focusing almost exclusively on athletic retirement; and (c) a shift from considering athletes' transitions exclusively in their sporting career to a "whole person" lifespan perspective. Stambulova et al. draw 6 conclusions concerning key features of the transition process: (a) the multi-causality of career termination, (b) the great inter-individual differences in the reactions to career termination, (c) the key role of the subjective feeling of voluntariness in the process of adaptation, (d) the importance of making timely plans for life after an athletic career, (e) the importance of the resources available for athletes, and (f) the fact that approximately 15–20% of elite retired athletes need psychological assistance. As a consequence, in their statements and recommendations the authors emphasize that retirement planning, voluntary termination, multiple personal identities, availability of social support and active coping strategies facilitate athletes' adaptation to post-career life. These are aspects we have taken into account in our longitudinal study. Note also that failure in coping with retirement is often followed by negative consequences such as psychological pathologies or alcohol and drug abuse (McPherson, 1980; Wylleman, Rosier, & De Knop, 2015). The quality of adaptation to a post-sport career determines its success and we explore the relevant issues involved. We next present key findings from our initial prospective study and background on models of trajectories to contextualize the work.

Main results on the prospective view of retirement from elite athletes

In 2004 we interviewed 18 active Olympian athletes on their prospective view of retirement from competitive sport (Torregrosa et al., 2004). Using a grounded theory approach we identified three different stages along which active athletes gradually build an image of retirement from sport (i.e., initiation-training, maturity-performance and the anticipation of retirement). In addition we found that some of the aspects valued by retired athletes in other studies were also important for active athletes. These included the definition of retirement as a process rather than a moment, and a preparation period for retirement. The aspects we identified in our study are in line with those proposed by Stambulova et al. (2009) in the ISSP Position Stand, mentioned in the previous section (i.e., retirement planning, voluntary termination, multiple personal identities, availability of social support, and active coping strategies). These issues were revisited in the longitudinal study.

Models of trajectory and the concept of dual careers

A relevant indicator of potential problems during and after retirement from elite sport is an athlete being exclusively focused on sport, and having a strong and unidimensional athletic identity. This derives from anecdotal evidence on elite athletes having severe problems after retirement from elite sport and research in career transitions (see Park, Lavallee et al., 2012). Thus, policy makers on different parts of the world aim to provide preventive resources in order to balance an athletic career with education, work and other life skills (EU Expert Group, 2012; USOC, 2012). In Europe, the Expert Group promoted by the European Union proposed a set of guidelines to promote dual careers for talented athletes. The objective of the dual careers approach is to avoid situations in which the talented athlete is forced to choose between sport and education or work.

Related to the concept of dual careers, in the context of a semi-professional sport Pallarés, Azócar, Torregrosa, Selva, and Ramis (2011) proposed three different types of trajectories followed by Spanish elite water polo players during their sporting career. Based on content analysis of the interviews, they defined: (a) a *linear trajectory* when the athlete is only focused in his/her sporting career giving almost 100% dedication to sport and having an almost exclusive athletic identity; (b) a *convergent trajectory* in which sport is prioritized but is compatible with an alternative job or with education, resulting in a more balanced multi-personal identity; and (c) a *parallel trajectory* in which sport and higher education or work are almost equally prioritized and the athlete shows a balanced multi-personal identity. This proposal of trajectories has been explored later in other sports and cultures (e.g., Azócar, Pérez, Pallarés, & Torregrosa, 2013) providing a frame to interpret the quality of adaptation to career transitions. In the present study this model of trajectories has been used, with dual career illustrated by both the convergent and parallel trajectories. We have found the trajectory followed to be highly relevant in an athlete's handling of the retirement process.

Qualitative longitudinal studies

A distinct feature of this study is its longitudinal nature, including the prospective and retrospective view of retirement, spanning a period of ten years. Epstein (2002) proposed three types of approaches for qualitative longitudinal studies: (a) continuous research in the same small society, (b) periodic studies at regular or irregular intervals, and (c) return after a lengthy interval of time has elapsed since the original research (p.64). Our study follows the third approach and with a ten year gap between interviews, provides a particularly long term view of the retirement process. At the time of the second interview all athletes were retired from elite sport and had already passed through the adaptation process following the transition. The qualitative longitudinal approach has been used to study transitions in different life spheres such as educational research (e.g., Gordon & Lahelma, 2003), or the transition from education to work (Kuhn & Witzel, 2000). However it has been less used in sport psychology in general and in career transition research in particular. In a recent systematic review of 126 studies on athletes' career transition out of sport, Park, Lavallee, et al. (2012) identified 113 cross-sectional studies, but only 13 (10.3%) with a longitudinal design. Six are qualitative longitudinal studies assessing transition processes on small samples of different competitive levels, interviewed at least twice, four of them retrospective, and the longest, (Douglas & Carless, 2009), spanning six years. In this study we conduct a qualitative longitudinal study with a sample of high achieving Olympians over a longer period providing their prospective view of retirement before making the decision to retire and the retrospective view ten years later.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative longitudinal study is to evaluate the influence that following a dual career or being exclusively focused in sport can have in the retirement process of Olympians with excellent sporting achievements. The opportunity of having their prospective view of retirement investigated in our previous research (Torregrosa et al., 2004) allows us to assess their accuracy in predicting the process when we compare it with their retrospective accounts ten years later. This accuracy can be related to their trajectory, including pre-retirement attitudes to critical aspects which bear relevance to post-career life.

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