

# Restoring the Balance: Women's Experiences of Retiring from Elite Sport

Majella J. Albion (albionm@usq.edu.au)

Department of Psychology

University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350 Australia

## Abstract

Being an elite athlete requires single-minded determination, commitment, and focus on sport. These can have a detrimental effect on long-term career plans, with decisions and preparations for life after sport being put on hold for a time, or being given a lower priority. In order to assist athletes take a longer-term and more holistic view of their life goals, the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program was developed through the Australian Institute of Sport. This paper presents a brief overview of a 5-year longitudinal study which was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the ACE program and looks specifically at the sport and retirement experiences of four female elite-level athletes: three netballers, and a gymnast.

## Introduction

International and national research over the past few decades has indicated that due to the high level of determination and commitment associated with involvement in sport at an elite level, athletes experience many difficulties with career planning, identity foreclosure, and transition away from sport. Much of the research into the personal and psychological development of athletes has focused on two main issues. The first is the concept of "athletic identity", which has been defined as the extent to which one labels oneself as an athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), and the second relates to concerns that athletes face in making the transition away from sport.

These two issues have often been linked, with studies (e.g., Brewer, Selby, Britton, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998) demonstrating that a strong adherence to an athletic identity was significantly related to retirement and adjustment difficulties. While athletic identity has favourable associations with greater sport involvement and motivation, it has generally been viewed as having a preponderance of negative outcomes, such as increased risk of emotional disturbance following injury, and excessive training that might jeopardise good health (Brewer et al., 1999); and limited socialisation, a devaluing of education, and lack of career maturity (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Smallman & Sowa, 1996).

Identity formation is a life-long process which occurs as individuals heed and internalise the appraisals of people whose opinions they value (Harter, 1996). It is integral to healthy and adaptive development. Self-concept or self-identity is seen as multidimensional (Bracken, 1992) and is represented as a diverse set of images and conceptions about the self (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986). These many and varied identities each has the potential to motivate and direct behaviour (Cantor et al.).

Webb et al. (1998) suggested that the reason for the detrimental impact of the athletic identity was that it differed from other role identities in significant ways. They noted that identity as an athlete is often formed and internalised much earlier than other identities. Many of those who have risen to the elite level in their sport have shown talent and participated in their sport from a very early age. This can lead to identity foreclosure, which is the premature adoption of a personal or career identity. Webb et al. also noted that because of the kudos associated with sporting excellence, sporting identity is likely to dominate and subsume all other identities. They said that athletic identity is also different from other identities in that it often has a public dimension, and is defined by performance pressure, and the high level of status and esteem which it provides is unlikely to be achieved through other means.

The extensive amount of time spent in sporting pursuits limits exposure to other roles and to non-sporting social contact (Brown et al., 2000), and can leave identity foreclosed athletes ill-prepared for a future beyond sport. Early research into athlete identity (McPherson, 1980) found that many problems faced by athletes were a result of their being focused in the present, and not developing post-sporting career options. Their success and high profile leads to a high level of ego-involvement in their sporting identity, which means their self-esteem is largely based on their continued performance (Webb et al., 1998), and also leads to high, and for many, unrealistic expectations of playing at professional levels (Weichman & Williams, 1997). Kornspan and Etzel (2001) also warned that if an individual's self-concept is based on athletic ability, he or she may lack confidence in other areas.

## **Transition out of Sport**

The associated problems relating to transition away from sport have also been the subject of much research. Webb et al. (1998) noted that athletic retirement was different from other retirements due to the unique characteristics and problems associated with the athletic identity, and the special circumstances of early and forced retirements. They found that the reason for retirement was significant in predicting post-retirement adjustment. Those athletes who had control over the timing and circumstances of their retirement fared better than those who were forced to retire due to injury or deselection. Webb et al. found that adjustment problems were greatest for those who had retired due to injury, and that most of them regarded the injury as an unexpected or unforeseeable event. This again tends to indicate a present-centred focus and an unrealistic approach to future planning.

Other negative outcomes associated with forced retirement include loss of identity, lack of perceived control, financial issues, and loss of social support (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999). Whether retirement is forced or unforced, transition will also be more difficult for those who have not developed post-career transition plans.

## **Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program**

In response to these issues, the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program was set up to provide an integrated program of support for Australia's elite athletes. The National ACE program was developed in 1994 and implemented in 1995. It operates in all states and territories and is available to all athletes on scholarship with the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra and with all the various Academies or Institutes of Sport across Australia. Its strategies include individual athlete assessment; personal development training; career and education guidance, transition services; business, community, and education support; program development; and program integration.

In 2002, a research team at USQ was funded by the Australian Sports Commission to conduct a 5-year longitudinal study of the ACE program. A survey of athletes on scholarship was conducted at the beginning of each of the 5 years of the study. The final data collection for the project was completed earlier this year. The overall results indicated that athletes held the ACE program in very high regard with athletes reporting satisfaction levels of 81% in 2003 rising to 92% in 2007. They also indicated that they considered ACE services to be relevant, accessible, and available when they needed them. The

study also showed that those athletes who used ACE services were more motivated to make career decisions. While as expected, all athletes who responded had high levels of athletic identity, it was encouraging to note that very few showed evidence of identity foreclosure as an athlete. Most were considering a range of post sporting career options. Female athletes were more motivated to make a career decision than were male athletes, and were less likely to display signs of identity foreclosure.

## **Interviews**

In addition to the surveys, interviews were also carried out at various stages during the project in order to add some qualitative data to the evaluation project, particularly relating to retirement/transition issues. The survey data had indicated that even though ACE provided transition services as part of its suite of programs and activities, there were a number of athletes who were not aware that these services were available. We decided to interview a number of athletes who were in the process of transitioning out of elite sport, in order to explore in more depth their decision-making process and adjustment issues, if any. Below is a summary of the responses of three elite netballers and a gymnast who had recently made the decision to retire from their sport.

## **Reasons for Retiring**

Two of the athletes had retired due to injury or physical deterioration, and one indicated that she had difficulty coming to terms with her enforced retirement.

It wasn't actually a decision I made. I had to make it in the end, but I had advice from my surgeon. I had my sixth knee operation.... (I was) really disappointed because I had envisaged playing until I was about 30...(but I knew that after a 2 year break to recuperate) I wouldn't be as fast or as fit as I had been, at the age that I was.

However, the enforced break due to injury made the final decision to retire easier for one.

It was easy for me (to decide). I'd had a full knee reconstruction...and in that period of time I had off, I decided there was more to life.... I found other interests in my year off...and I sort of lost a bit of the passion.... I really needed to make a decision to go ahead with my career or to stick with netball. And earning some money won out.

In the case above, the decision was also made easier by the fact that the athlete was in the final year of her university degree, and had been offered a good job with a law firm.

The gymnast retired after failing to gain selection in the Olympic team. She has rekindled those hopes by changing to track and field. This decision to continue

pursuing the dream indicates the powerful motivating influence of achieving sporting excellence (“*the passion*”).

It was quite difficult (to decide) because you are always deciding whether or not you want to concentrate on your studies or other aspects of life. ...It’s always in the back of your mind, and you never really think about going through with it. The injuries were the sign as well. But also people, family, even coaches suggesting that your body won’t take it. (Not getting to the Olympics) was a disappointment, but I’m trying to get there in another way.

This powerful drive to compete and perform was also evidenced in one of the netballers who said that she had retired a number of times, but always came back. The habit and social ties were too hard to break.

I was supposed to play for Melbourne one year but didn’t end up playing, so that was last year when I retired. I had also retired the season before that. I said I wasn’t going to play. But then the team was selected, they started training, just about all my friends, my flatmate was going to training, but I wasn’t, and I thought “Oh, I’ll just play.

Only the gymnast reported any pressure from others in relation to their decision to retire.

Different coaches have different ideas.

One of the netballers summed up the majority view: I don’t think anyone would have dared try to tell me not to. They know the response they would have got. So, no, it was solely my decision.

### **Ongoing Involvement in their Sport**

Athletes showing identity foreclosure are likely to find it difficult to make the adjustment away from sport. For one of the athletes interviewed whose retirement had been imposed on medical grounds, her first reaction to a question about her ongoing involvement was to say that she wanted some time away from the sport.

Because I was so disappointed to start with,...I just wanted a break from it. I really needed to get away from it to know where I wanted to head. Then just recently, a couple of weeks ago, I’ve just been appointed assistant coach to the (State team)... I’m thrilled, and I’m happy that I’ll be involved at a level that I’ve devoted so much time to.

The athletes who had more control over their retirement were more open to ongoing participation, albeit at a lower level.

I’m coaching a bit, but not at the same level. It’s only recreational.

### **Positive Effect of Sport**

All four athletes were readily able to identify many ways in which their sporting career had helped in their non-sporting career and with life in general. The ACE program offers advice on preparing resumes and job applications. The athletes indicated that they had

consciously called upon the skills they acquired through sport in job interviews or in their work.

So when they say (in an interview), ‘When have you had to be a leader?’ and you say, ‘Well, I’ve been captain of the national netball team in Queensland for 3 years.’ ... It’s really easy for me to come up with examples. I spent 2 years at AIS in Canberra, and you’ve just travelled all around the world with them, and you get those sort of experiences that a lot of people wouldn’t have, and I think it makes you stand out in an interview process.

One thing I think especially playing in a team sport, it teaches you how to be a team member in many different environments, especially working environments. I’m a teacher now, and as a teacher, you’re a team member. (Playing team sport) teaches you how to work with people. The biggest thing I find though is that it taught me time management. ...Being an elite netballer, you don’t get paid as a professional, although you train professional hours. So you have to work at least part time. I always worked full time during my playing career, so my time management had to be absolutely spot on, so I think that’s one of the big things, especially being a teacher.

It also gives you confidence. It helps you to believe in your own ability. I think it had a really positive effect on me. It helps you set goals so that you can reach them.”

“I think it gives you stronger will power. Yeah, I just think it prepares you for a harder life. I mean, you’ve already experienced it from a young age.

### **Negative Effect on Non-sporting Career**

Despite the positives indicated above, all were also adamant that their sporting career had left them behind their non-sporting peers, both financially and career-wise. The circumstances of these four athletes are typical of the great majority of elite Australian athletes, but would of course differ from those who were able to glean larger financial rewards from their sport. Most had put their study or career on hold or had spread their career preparation over a longer period in order to fit them in with their sporting commitments.

I think that sometimes you are limited in the career path that you can choose – just for that period of time. I mean, to play at the national level, you have to be able to travel. (If you don’t have an employer who can give you that time off, then obviously they won’t employ you. It might be the perfect job for you career-wise, but if they’re not going to give you the time off, you obviously can’t choose that direction.

I’ve spent the last five years with no money, because I couldn’t have a job and play netball as well. I’ve done the full subject load every semester, but I finished later because I took 2 years off to go to the AIS.

I did one year of uni full time, and that was fine, and since then it’s been disrupted, totally disrupted. ...I’ve

done some part time. I've done some full time. I've had some where I've done nothing in a semester. Netball has always been the top priority. ..I have failed a couple of subjects. One when I went to New Zealand, because I didn't go to a single lecture and came back and just failed. Financially I have close to nothing. I have more debt because I've been a student throughout most of my netball career, and I mean it takes up a lot of time. We train professionally. We put in as many hours as other professional sports do but we don't get the financial rewards.

If you stay in the sport longer, it could delay certain study. ...You don't get a normal childhood. It definitely (had an impact on my studies). Like the grounding - I missed out on a lot of the early years of high school - a lot of key aspects, and you just have to jump that bit and get into the hard stuff.

### **Life after Sport**

Each athlete listed a number of ways in which their life was different following their retirement from sport. Just as they were able to identify positive and negative impacts on their careers, they were also able to say ways in which their lives would be better as well as reflecting on a number of things that they would miss. Generally, the positives were associated with no longer having to adhere to the strict constraints of their training and competition regimen.

I have more time at home, which I really like. More time for myself. I mean I joined my own gym and I go to yoga and I do Pilates and that sort of stuff that I never did before. And I probably have dedicated a lot more time to my study. ...With my degree, your GPA determines whether you get Honours, so I've sort of had a few goals there that I've tried to achieve or am trying to achieve, and I've really focussed on that. I feel like I've been able to do a few things for myself. ...As much as I've gained from my sport, I did sacrifice a lot of my own time and freedom to participate.

Oh, a lot more laid back. You can do other stuff, have more of a social life just in general. You're not as tense. A lot of people have said I'm a lot happier.

My boyfriend, his family is from the country, and we'd like to occasionally say 'Well, let's go down to your parents' place for the weekend. Oh, I can't do that because of netball!' You know you can do pretty much anything you like after you've (retired). You have no commitments, you can live your life like a normal person, which is nice.

The main thing that many of the athletes agreed that they would miss most was the camaraderie of being with their team mates.

I did miss the girls. You're training with them every day. They become nearly your best friends, your family, so I miss that a lot. I miss catching up with the girls.

Oh certainly you miss the team aspect. I mean with the team, I was with the (state team) from 2000 until 2003, so four seasons, and my group of closest friends were also in the team. I mean they're my friends who are my closest friends regardless of whether we're playing netball or not. And certainly going away every weekend with them was always lots of fun and you do miss that.

Other things that the athletes said they would miss included the physical activity and fitness, and being recognised and acknowledged for their performances.

I think you get a thrill out of doing all the skills and stuff. They feel so scary, but you actually get a thrill out of it. (My classmates) were really excited. They always ask 'How are you going?' and 'I could never do it', they say. That was good. I miss that a bit.

I did miss the training though. Because when I had to do it, I did it. ...but when I didn't have them there, I'd say 'Oh, I don't have to do that.' And I suppose I lost my fitness quite easily.

### **Making the Transition**

Those athletes who had already made the decision to retire had fewer difficulties making the transition. Emotionally and practically, they were prepared for the next phase of their life.

It was very smooth. I think I'd made up my mind even before the end of the netball season that this was it for me. I think I probably made the decision that I didn't want any more. And then I was doing really well at uni and I got myself a job in a law firm and I was working one day a week, and I said, 'Hey, I need to focus on this. I'm going to be getting out in the workforce', so that was it.

The transition was difficult if the athletes felt they did not feel in control of their decision or if they had unmet goals.

I had retired. That was supposed to be for good. But then I got a really good offer from the Melbourne team, who had won the grand final for a couple of years in a row and they wanted me to come down, and I thought, you know, I was going to finish, not on a bad note, but I haven't ever won a premiership, I haven't even been in a very successful national team, and if these opportunities were presenting themselves, why don't I just take it, so I took it.

### **Ways in which ACE Helped**

Most were aware that ACE services were available, and some had made good use of them. Most of the netballers said they did not really need assistance from ACE, as they knew that they had to develop their careers throughout their sporting careers.

ACE were really good actually. If I ever needed help, I'd go to them. But I never really had many problems. ACE did contact me and say if I ever needed anything, they'd just be there. But I found that I was able to deal with it by myself.

I still see (one of the ACE Advisors). I see him often at the netball, and we have a chat, and he's great, and I knew I could ring him any time, ... but I really haven't had the need. It wasn't as though I had dedicated my whole life to my sport and it had ended and I thought 'Oh, what am I going to do now?' So there's a big overlap in my transition, and it just turned out really smoothly for me, so... But I knew that I could ring (ACE) if I needed them.

ACE was great down (at the AIS). Sorting out education, they were really good. Sometimes they make themselves available to be utilised, but we just don't use them. But I knew that anything like that, you could probably go and see them.

While the four athletes whose views are presented in this report are not necessarily representative of other athletes, the issues they raised have many elements in common. However, there may be a number of other issues which may impact on the retirement experience of other elite athletes but which have not emerged in this group.

### Conclusions

All the athletes whose views are presented in this paper have had ACE services available to them. The low levels of identity foreclosure may at least in part be attributed to this program. All four have used at least some ACE services and while they generally reported that they did not need to access transition services, they were pleased to know that such services were available should they need them. The main transition issues raised by these female athletes were needing to deal with changed priorities; not having the team as support and as motivators; feeling as though they were behind their peers – financially and career-wise; and not experiencing the thrill and satisfaction associated with "excellence".

The athletes reported satisfaction with the assistance provided by ACE. Practical assistance with "moving on" was available throughout the athlete's career by helping them focus on education and long-term career goals. The athletes also indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to "chat" or talk through some of the other issues and feelings that were associated with the transition period.

On balance, all four athletes agreed that they had benefited from their time in sport. While they had made many sacrifices, and had given up a lot of their personal freedom in order to participate, they could look back on their sporting career with satisfaction. Successful transition would ensure that they will look forward to the next phases of their life with a similar amount of positive emotion.

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