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The 7 Most Significant Factors in Athlete Transition to Alternative Careers

There are numerous emotional and practical challenges that people going through retirement from any career have to overcome. The objective of my research was to assess why some elite athletes seem to cope well with the transition while others struggle. Between them the athletes from six different sports had competed at 27 Olympic Games in total, winning 11 medals. They had been retired for up to seven years.



Loss of Identity

All the athletes struggled with a loss of identity and understanding who they were away from the sporting arena in retirement. They also struggled to find a career with the same sense of purpose that sport gave them.

TIP: The athletes who seemed to transition the most successfully were those that had a dual career whilst they were full-time athletes - either in education or part-time work.



Support Network

Friends and family were the most important source of support in transition. 75% valued their Performance Lifestyle advisor from a practical perspective but more psychological and emotional support was required.

TIP: There was a link between those who utilised psychological support and the apparent success of their transition.



Perceived Level of Success

Most used medals as a way of defining their career. Those who felt they had achieved what they wanted seemingly transitioned more smoothly.

TIP: A factor that eased the transition process was the feeling of having no regrets in terms of the effort expended during a sporting career.



Ability to ask for help

Many found that sport had inhibited their ability to ask for help as they had trained themselves not to show any signs of weakness. However, many had sought help to deal with their mental health.

TIP: For many, awareness early on that transition is hard made it easier to ask for help.



Freedom is a + and -

Freedom was found to be the most exciting part of retirement but this was quickly followed by a sense of it being the hardest thing to cope with due to the sudden lack of structure.

TIP: Maintain a routine and structure in retirement so that the freedom doesn't become overwhelming.



Maintain a link with sport

Maintaining a link and gradually transitioning out of sport was a significant factor in the subjective success of an athlete's transition.

TIP: Many found coaching or helping others helped their own transition.



Get a mentor

Talking to former athletes who had been through the process before was seemingly one of the most positive factors in athlete transition and helped normalise the process.

TIP: Talk to former athletes about their experiences of retirement. Everyone's transition is different.



Based on an MSc
dissertation of
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(Olympian)

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