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Citation:

Gledhill, A (2022) How do we get ready for when the last final whistle blows? The Sport and Exercise Scientist (73). p. 15.

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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First published in The Sport and Exercise Scientist, issue 73, Autumn 2022. Published by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences - [www.bases.org.uk](http://www.bases.org.uk)

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How do we get ready for when the last final whistle blows?

Dr Adam Gledhill FBASES discusses strategies to support athletes' transitions into retirement

Arguably, there are only two certainties in any sporting career: (1) the career will start and (2) the career will end. Quite rightly, as sport and exercise scientists, we often spend much of our time working between those two points, with a view to helping athletes achieve optimal health and performance. However, when retirement hits, it is often one of the most difficult challenges for many athletes. This challenge can be made even harder if the retirement is involuntary (e.g., due to severe injury) and can result in lower levels of health-related quality of life, life satisfaction, decreased self-esteem, loss of identity, and potential concerns over future finances (see Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021 for a discussion). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss strategies we can use to support athletes in preparing for their retirement.

Amongst the many potential strategies to support an athlete's transitions into retirement and hopefully enhance these retirement experiences, there are four strategies that appear relatively consistently within the literature (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021): (1) planning for retirement; (2) social support provision; (3) involving the athlete in retirement decisions if possible; and (4) athletes remaining physically post-retirement.

### **Planning for retirement**

Planning for retirement from early in the career can be one of the most helpful aspects in supporting the transition into retirement (e.g., Carapinheira *et al.*, 2018). This retirement planning could include financial planning, education, further career planning, insurances (e.g., Arvinen-Barrow *et al.*, 2019; Carapinheira *et al.*, 2018), although education is potentially less effective at supporting retirement transitions unless it forms part of wider career planning.

Of the suggestions mentioned above, financial planning and appropriate insurances could be particularly important for professional athletes. For some athletes, financial insecurity or instability after retirement is a significant life stressor (Mannes *et al.*, 2019) and there are examples of previously wealthy athletes filing for bankruptcy (e.g., Carlson *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, having the means to achieve financial stability post-retirement (e.g., by being employed) is negatively associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Gouttebauge *et al.*, 2016).

### **Social support**

As with most aspects of an athlete's life, the perceived availability and quality of social support can impact on an athlete's retirement experiences (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). However, unfortunately, there remains a stigma attached to social support seeking (Brown *et al.*, 2018). So, we as practitioners may need to consider the support needs of athletes and facilitate that social support provision.

Whilst there is a widespread acceptance of the importance of receiving social support, there is an emerging body of evidence suggesting that providing social support can also benefit athletes during retirement. Being a social support provider to other athletes can help to mitigate against some of the more negative consequences of retirement, with being

a support providers suggested to help athletes reappraise and redefine their sense of self, and to experience a sense of growth during their retirement (Brown et al., 2018).

### **Involving the athlete with retirement decisions**

If an athlete is injured, one of the major challenges can come around the decision to retire. Even if an injury necessitates retirement, it is possible to involve the athlete in the retirement decision in ways that can benefit them (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). We can show trust in athletes by asking for their opinion about their injury and their body. We can educate the athlete about their injury, how it occurred, any associated long-term health risks. We can discuss any options available to them. These strategies can all help the athlete to feel at the centre of, and understand, the retirement decision-making process, which can help athletes feel a sense of control during the process.

### **Staying physically active**

Athletes who are physically active during retirement can experience benefits in overall health and wellbeing (Mannes et al., 2019), including reducing in the risk of depression and anxiety. Despite this, there are instances when athletes may require support with their physical activity choices. For example, if an athlete has retired due to sports injury, they may require support with physical activity choices and any adaptations to activity that may be required because of their injury. Some considerations for practitioners here include that athletes who have retired due to injury may have elevated fear of movement associated with the injury, may have elevated perceptions of pain, and may have a greater tendency to protect the previously injured area, all of which may impact on their perceived ability to remain physically active post-retirement.

### **Summary**

Retirement from a sporting career is something that all athletes will need to navigate at some point, and many often find challenging. The suggestions above are opportunities that we as practitioners can consider as ways to support athletes transitioning into retired life.

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