

Transitions Out of Competitive Sport for Athletes with Disabilities

Jeffrey J. Martin

Sport psychology researchers have recently started to examine how athletes experience transitions out of sport (Baille & Danish, 1992; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993a; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993b). However, almost all of this research has examined athletes leaving able bodied sport. The purpose of this paper is to discuss sport transitions for athletes with disabilities. Because of the dearth of research examining this population, research on able bodied sport withdrawal is surveyed. First, a conceptual overview of sport withdrawal and the application of transition theory to sport transitions is discussed. Second, factors associated with successful sport transitions are examined. Third, suggestions for how therapeutic recreation specialists and other sport figures (e.g., coach, sport psychologist) can assist athletes making the transition out of sport are presented. Finally, future research directions are briefly highlighted.

KEY WORDS: *Sport Transition, Disabled Sport, Therapeutic Recreation, Sport Psychology*

Sport science researchers studying athletes with disabilities have examined diverse performance related topics such as adapted sport equipment, physiological characteristics of successful athletes, and psychological skills (Sherrill, 1993; DePauw & Gavron, 1995). This research has focused on athletes currently participating in sport. However, few investigations have focused on how athletes with disabilities adjust to leaving sport (Wheeler, Malone, Steadward, 1995a; Wheeler, Malone,

Steadward, 1995b). Numerous writers have suggested that leaving sport can often be a difficult process and thus warrants attention (Baille & Danish, 1992; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Furthermore, because disability sport socialization is significantly different from able bodied athletes' socialization experiences, it is important to examine how athletes with disabilities may experience sport withdrawal (Williams, 1994).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to

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examine how athletes with disabilities make "transitions" out of sport. A transition is "an event or nonevent resulting in change." (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 43). A variety of research from able bodied sport is discussed because research examining transitions out of disabled sport is almost non-existent (Wheeler et al., 1995a, 1995b). Psycho-social research on athletes with disabilities will also be presented to highlight the unique social psychological dynamics of leaving sport for this population.

First, an overview of research examining sport transitions will be presented. This section will also present transition theory and its application to sport. Second, factors associated with successful sport transitions will be discussed. Third, applied recommendations to assist therapeutic recreation (TR) professionals prevent and ease difficult transitions are offered. The paper concludes with a section on future research directions.

Conceptual Overview of Transitions out of Sport

Initial work on sport transitions has conceptualized leaving sport as retirement. However, Coakley (1983) and Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) believe viewing sport withdrawal as retirement is inappropriate for a number of reasons. First, leaving sport is substantially different from the common understanding of job retirement. For example, athletes leaving sport are often quite young. Furthermore, leaving sport usually involves a period of transition and should be considered a process (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). For instance, ex-professional hockey players indicated that they often remained involved in sport through administration or coaching (Curtis & Ennis, 1988). Research with collegiate athletes suggested that sport gradually diminishes in importance as other activities gain value (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Additionally, Coakley (1983) suggests that viewing withdrawal from sport as "retirement" has erroneously painted it as a negative life event.

Coakley (1983) also suggests that the emotional difficulties athletes experience upon leaving competitive sport are overstated. He argued that sport withdrawal is similar to other life transitions, and may offer an opportunity for rebirth and growth. Coakley (1983) indicated that sport is simply the "scene" for adjustment rather than the cause of emotional difficulties.

In summary, both Coakley (1983) and Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) suggested that viewing sport cessation as "retirement," and as largely negative, is inappropriate. Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) suggested that future investigations should be conducted from a transition framework; their recommendation has been followed (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993a; Pearson & Petipas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Transition Theory

Life transition models emphasize a developmental approach and have been used in examining both sport and disability (Baille & Danish, 1992; Cohn, 1961; Power, Hershenson, & Schlossberg, 1985; Wheeler et al., 1995a; 1995b). Schlossberg's (1984) work provides a useful framework for understanding the nature and dynamics of transitions and is the framework used in the limited research examining disabled sport transitions (Wheeler et al.).

Characteristics of Transitions. According to Schlossberg (1984), understanding the meaning of a transition involves recognizing three transition characteristics. The first characteristic, type of transition, refers to whether or not the transition is anticipated or unexpected. For example, a sudden and unanticipated career ending injury can make sport transition difficult. A second type of transition, an event which did not occur although it was anticipated, is defined as a nonevent. Not making the Paralympic team, if expected, would constitute a nonevent. Lastly, a chronic hassle transition describes an event that is pervasive or continuous. A chronic or recurring injury could be viewed

as a chronic hassle. Work in able bodied sport has shown that athletes who do not anticipate a transition, due to a sudden injury for example, had difficulty adjusting (Baille & Danish, 1994). Wheeler et al. (1995b) also reported that chronic injuries coupled with a lack of sport success was associated with post-sport life dissatisfaction in athletes with disabilities.

A second characteristic of transitions is context. The context refers to the setting in which the transition occurs. Leaving sport has ramifications in personal, interpersonal and community level "settings". For example, sport is a setting for mastery experiences. Athletes leaving sport will lose this highly personal benefit. The potential for losing close friends by leaving a team represents an interpersonal loss. Finally, athletes leaving a team may miss being part of the "disabled sport community."

The third characteristic of transitions is the impact the transition has on an individual. Impact refers to how strongly one's day-to-day life is disrupted. Many athletes are used to strict training programs, important nutritional and sleep requirements, and frequent travel. Wheeler et al. (1995a) reported that retired athletes with disabilities expressed a loss of friends, travel opportunities, and health benefits.

Schlossberg (1984) cited seven other factors to consider in describing transitions. Four of these factors include the cause or trigger of the transition, the timing of the transition in relation to other important life functions, the source of the transition and implications for perceptions of control, and the stability of the transition (e.g., temporary or permanent). Three more variables to consider include how individuals' social roles may change as the result of the transition, the impact of other simultaneous stressors, and previous reactions to similar transitions. See Schlossberg (1984) for a greater elaboration of these additional factors.

Process of Transition. Transitions are also dynamic processes. According to Schlossberg

(1994), transitions are "reactions over time for better or worse" (p. 55), and can result in both positive and negative consequences. Although early research emphasized the negative implications of sport transitions, more recent research has supported the benefits of sport transitions.

In an investigation of 20 able bodied retired professional tennis players, half expressed relief upon retirement because they saw retirement as an opportunity to establish a normal lifestyle (Allison & Meyer, 1988). A study of internationally competitive Canadian athletes indicated that most felt that retirement had positively changed their lives (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Schlossberg (1984) described two components of the transition process: (a) phases of assimilation, and (b) appraisal. The three phases of assimilation include introduction, disruption, and integration. *Introduction* refers to the initial occurrence of the transition when people are often consumed by thoughts and feelings related to the transition. For instance, a career ending injury may result in pervasive feelings of disbelief, anger, and shock. *Disruption* refers to a sense of disequilibrium due to changes in feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Disruptions in athletic identity, training behaviors, and personal relationships exemplify how athletes' lives can be disrupted. *Integration* occurs in the form of renewal, acceptance, or deterioration. All three aspects are influenced by the impact or importance of the transition, and by the consequences of the transition. For instance, athletes who perceive leaving sport as an opportunity to grow and develop in other areas will exhibit signs of renewal during the integration stage. In contrast, deterioration during the integration phase would refer to athletes who view leaving sport as negative and have difficulty assimilating the transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

To determine if assimilation is occurring, an individual's appraisal of the transition must be understood. Primary appraisal of the transition as positive or negative is critical to

successful transitions. For example, athletes perceiving their transition as a loss will react much differently than those who see it as an opportunity for personal growth in other areas of life. Primary appraisals influence secondary appraisals. These secondary appraisals involve an examination of personal and social resources, and potential outcomes of the transition. Secondary appraisals are dynamic, occur over time, and are vital to assimilation (Schlossberg, 1984). Athletes who initially view sport withdrawal as positive in their primary appraisal may subsequently experience a loss of physical fitness. This loss promotes a more negative secondary appraisal which leads to a lack of acceptance during the integration stage.

Transition theory describes a variety of factors important to understanding transitions. The type, context, and impact of transitions are important for understanding the transition process. The transition process should also be examined in light of the phases of assimilation, and how individuals perceive or appraise the event, its impact, and their resources. Models of transition, such as Schlossberg's (1984) provide appropriate frameworks for understanding sport transitions (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Sinclair & Orlick, 1986; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wheeler et al., 1995a, 1995b).

Factors Influencing Adjustment to Leaving Competitive Sport

The following section examines factors that influence athletes' transitions. Research with athletes in able bodied sport will be presented with inferences and applications made to disabled sport.

Identity

Sport is often viewed as promoting positive social-psychological development (Duda, 1992; Walling & Duda, 1995). Athletes with disabilities are thought to develop enhanced self-referent cognitions (e.g., sport-efficacy,

self-esteem) through sport mastery experiences (Sherrill, 1986; Martin, Mushett, & Smith, 1995).

However, some research has suggested that athletes who have self-schemas heavily and exclusively dependent on their identity as athletes may experience difficulty during transitions (Brewer, Boin, & Petitpas, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Adolescent swimmers with disabilities who reported strong exclusive identities indicated that if unable to participate in athletics they would experience strong negative affect (Martin et al., 1995). If athletes' self-concept is heavily dependent on their athletic prowess, once they are no longer able to demonstrate that prowess a sense of loss may follow (Brewer et al., 1993b; Martin et al., 1995).

The above pattern is heightened for elite sport participation. In order to achieve elite status, athletes often believe it is important to become single minded about their sport (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993a; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Elite athletes with disabilities may be particularly susceptible to developing exclusive athletic identities due to reduced social contact and opportunity for career related mastery experiences. For example, the United States Bureau of Census estimates that almost two-thirds of individuals with severe disabilities are unemployed or underemployed (McNeil, 1993). Furthermore, they are thought to engage in much less social activity compared to nondisabled individuals (McNeil, 1993; Zoerink, 1992). Finally, individuals with disabilities are often challenged to define or redefine their self-concept in a society that values appearance and independence (Weinberg, 1984). Reductions in fitness levels (e.g., muscle strength, max VO_2) and physiological changes (e.g., increased body fat, reduced muscle mass), due to decreased training, may hasten the need for athletes to redefine their self-concept with less reliance on an athletic self-identity.

Control

Perceptions of control also influence athletes' adjustment (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Murphy, 1995; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993b; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Athletes who voluntarily choose to leave sport are likely to have an easier transition as opposed to athletes who are forced out. Many athletes cease to participate in sport due to injury, deselection, or loss of ability due to age. Clearly, athletes who wish to continue to compete and cannot may have difficulty accepting their sport transition.

One indicator of successful transitions is life satisfaction. Suffering a career ending injury has been found to be negatively related to life satisfaction among elite collegiate athletes (Kleiber, Greendorfer, Blinde, & Samdahl, 1987). A follow-up study indicated that athletes who were injured and had a strong professional orientation (i.e., interested in playing professional sport) reported the lowest life satisfaction five years later (Kleiber & Brock, 1992). This result suggests that athletes with disabilities who are forced to leave sport due to a chronic injury may have difficulty adjusting.

On the other hand, perceptions of control over one's life can also be restored by sport cessation. For instance, 13 of 18 elite Canadian athletes who reported little control over their lives while in high level sport, indicated increased life control upon leaving sport (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Thus, it is important to understand athletes' perceptions of their transition experience.

Social Support

According to Baille and Danish (1992) social support may be the most important factor in adjustment to sport withdrawal. Social support systems can influence athletes' ability to cope in numerous ways. First, by leaving sport athletes may have less access to social support provided by their teammates. For example, elite British wheelchair athletes provided each other with support via

monthly training weekends, participating on the race circuit, and travelling to foreign races (Williams & Taylor, 1994). Because most elite wheelchair athletes lived substantial distances from each other, leaving sport would clearly reduce the social support given by teammates and competitors (Williams & Taylor, 1994). Second, by obtaining social support from their athletic participation, athletes may neglect developing a support system outside of sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Preliminary research indicated that athletes with cerebral palsy received support from their families and friends (Martin & Mushett, 1996) suggesting that leaving sport may not severely disrupt their social support networks. Athletes may also develop social skills specific to the athletic setting, and neglect the development of effective social skills applicable to non-athletic settings. Thus, athletes with disabilities should not neglect developing support systems outside of sport.

Goal Accomplishment

According to Werthner and Orlick (1986) athletes who were able to achieve their goals were likely to leave their sport with a sense of fulfillment which eased their transitions. In contrast, some athletes with disabilities who experienced a lack of sport success were dissatisfied with life after sport (Wheeler et al., 1995a). Athletes with disabilities who are able to "gain perspective" by recalling their significant sport accomplishments, and limit rumination about their perceived failures, should enhance their ability to adjust.

Post Athletic Preparation

Athletes who are prepared for transitions seem to adjust well (Murphy, 1995; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Wheeler et al. (1995a, 1995b) found that athletes with disabilities did not think of leaving sport while participating, nor did they prepare for retirement. Preparing for sport withdrawal likely leads to a variety of adaptive behaviors. First,

preparation should promote a sense of control and purpose. Second, awareness of sport withdrawal is a form of "anticipatory socialization" (Crook & Robertson, 1991) which should help buffer unexpected sport cessation (e.g., cut from team) which might otherwise cause mental distress.

Preparation for withdrawal includes career and educational planning. Athletes with a new goal to pursue reported easier transitions compared to those without alternative plans (Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Applied Recommendations for Adjustment to Sport Transitions for Athletes with Disabilities

The following recommendations are adapted from the writings of Sinclair and Orlick (1993), Baille and Danish (1992), Crook and Robertson (1991) and Ogilvie and Taylor (1993b). Specific implications for TR practice have been added.

Social Climate

While emphasizing athletic excellence, coaches, parents, and TR professionals should not neglect to communicate the importance of life outside of sport. Encouraging the exploration of educational, career, and social roles should help prevent unidimensional sport identities. Professionals can also help athletes with disabilities develop interest and skills in lifespan health related activities which can be enjoyed with family and friends (e.g., tennis, bicycling).

Mental Skills

Sport mental skills (e.g., goal setting, anxiety management) can be presented as life skills which extend beyond enhanced sport performance to more effective living in general. Helping professionals, such as those in TR, may wish to examine Danish's and colleagues' (1995) article which describes a life-span development model used for guiding their work with athletes with disabilities.

Murphy (1995) noted that athletes pos-

sess sport mental skills that are often useful in other areas of life. Unfortunately, many athletes fail to perceive their sport skills as "transferable skills." Thus, TR specialists could illustrate the connection between sport mental skills and life skills. Examples cited by Murphy (1995) included the ability to play well under pressure, adherence to schedules, and a competitive attitude. These three examples more broadly speak to the skills of anxiety management, goal setting, and motivation. Other transferable skills would include time management, emotional control, positive self-talk, and relaxation skills (Ogilvie, 1985). These life skills are often included in leisure education programs designed and implemented by TR specialists.

Education

Often the largest gatherings of athletes with disabilities occur during competitions providing excellent educational opportunities for athletes. For instance, the 1995 International Symposium on Boccia was held with the 1995 Sherwood Forest Games (Nottingham, England) and featured a variety of educational topics. During these conferences, athletes can learn about effective coping strategies, how to seek social support, and ways in which to extend their sport involvement beyond the athlete role. Interested professionals can lend their expertise to these educational endeavors. For instance, TR professionals may be able to help athletes "see" the benefits of leaving sport (e.g., more time for other activities). In addition, ex-athletes with disabilities can serve as role models for novice athletes. For example, ex-athletes could present sport and fitness-related educational sessions focused on how they have maintained healthy lifestyles outside of competitive sport through recreation and leisure activities. Community based TR specialists can work with professionals in rehabilitation settings, as well as representatives of disabled sport organizations, to provide information about local sports and recreation programs.

Formal programs, such as the "Career Assessment Program for Athletes" (CAPA), serving elite U.S. amateur athletes (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) and the "Making the Jump Program" (MJP), which serves collegiate athletes (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), may be studied and replicated. Both programs provide models for developing similar programs, such as those with a leisure education emphasis, for athletes with disabilities. At present, some athletes with disabilities have indicated that they received little institutional support in the form of retirement advice (Wheeler et al., 1995b) although they supported institutional directives to assist in retirement (Wheeler et al., 1995a).

Opportunity

Former athletes with disabilities have valuable sport knowledge and an understanding of disability. This unique blend of experience and knowledge could be utilized at all administrative levels. Opportunities for former athletes to coach and manage teams, including those with a recreational rather than an elite focus, and provide administrative input should be extended by local, regional, national and international sport and recreation organizations. For example, former athletes with disabilities could act as peer models for athletes involved in local TR programs in both institutional and community settings. Because only 10% of U.S. coaches of athletes with disabilities have a disability themselves, and most of these coaches are male, there is a clear need for such involvement by athletes with disabilities, particularly females (DePauw & Gavron, 1991).

Few elite athletes with disabilities have participated in sport as children, or worked with coaches knowledgeable about both sport and disability. Thus, TR specialists can create awareness of the need for recreation opportunities for people with disabilities, and provide expertise on how to facilitate sport and recreation participation.

Volunteerism

Former athletes and those in various stages of transition can be encouraged by TR specialists to volunteer in local, state, national, and international sport and recreation events. Former athletes with disabilities may help organize and implement sporting events so that they are inclusive of people with disabilities. For example, athletes with disabilities could help organize the wheelchair division of a road race. Opportunities to develop new skills and leadership abilities may enhance the well-being of athletes in transition, and help to create a legacy of individuals committed to sport and recreation needs of individuals with disabilities.

Summary and Conclusion

Life transition models appear to be the most applicable to the study of sport disengagement (Baile & Danish, 1992; Coakley, 1983; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Factors associated with positive transitions out of sport include self identity, post career planning, sport goal achievement, voluntary withdrawal, and social support.

Helping professionals such as teachers, coaches, TR specialists, and sport psychologists are urged to create a sport atmosphere which emphasizes the "whole person" and further the transference of mental skills from sport to life. Sport and recreation organizations are encouraged to plan sport transition seminars discussing topics like those outlined in this paper. Additionally, sport and recreation organizations can provide opportunities for ex-athletes with disabilities to continue their sport involvement by coaching, managing, and becoming politically involved.

Future research questions are virtually endless. On a descriptive level, additional research is needed which documents the transition to life after sport for athletes with disabilities. Information concerning the influence of type of disability and classification, age, gender, ethnicity, and race on reac-

tions to sport transitions also needed. On an explanatory level, it is not known if the relationship of selected factors to sport transitions in non-disabled sport are equally applicable to athletes with disabilities. For example, is social support as important to athletes with disabilities as it is thought to be for athletes without disabilities? Last, intervention based research can examine the ways in which various disciplines and organizations (e.g., TR, sport organizations) can best help athletes with disabilities have positive transitions out of sport.

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