

# GUIDANCE NOTE

## Personal development and welfare

This information has been taken from a document produced by the Professional Cricketers' Association. It highlights the importance of personal development and welfare amongst elite athletes and supports the case that professional sports organisations have a duty of care to ensure that high level performers have access to appropriate career advice and support.

### SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

#### **Athlete identity:**

The narrowing of an athlete's life-focus toward achieving sporting excellence can have a negative effect on the individual's personal and psychological development. Athletes who are over-engaged in their athletic identities limit the opportunities available to them to explore alternative career paths, maximise educational opportunities and form rounded social identities.

A lack of coping mechanisms can lead to destructive behaviour patterns.

#### **Career termination:**

Over-commitment to the role of 'athlete' puts the individual under greater risk of experiencing transitional issues upon career termination.

Studies show that the majority of athletes will finish their careers involuntarily before they consider themselves ready.

Non-voluntary career termination has been shown to lead to many psychological issues, including identity disruption, low self-esteem, anger issues, anxiety, depression and a loss of self-worth.

Many athletes will experience a drop in income upon career termination.

Career termination is best planned for as a process, rather than a singular event.

#### **Career transitioning:**

Those athletes who give more consideration to their lives as a whole and maintain a balanced outlook are more likely to be better equipped to cope with career termination. By assisting athletes in preparing for that transition to leave sport, they can stay in sport longer and perform without the baggage of worrying about what's next.

## FULL DOCUMENT

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### INTRODUCTION

A career in professional sport is often considered to be a privileged lifestyle but for the participants involved, personal achievement and success can often be sporadic, turbulent and short-lived with much of this success set against moments of both physical and mental strain and duress.

*Nesti, 2006*

It is fair to assume then that for some, the relentless pursuit of performance comes at the detriment of developing other areas of what could be considered 'normal life'.

*Douglas and Carless, 2005*

The nature of sport at an elite level leaves athletes susceptible to becoming over-absorbed and engrossed in an often closeted and impractical lifestyle.

*Cockerill and Tribe, 2002*

This over-narrowing of an athlete's life-focus can have a significant effect on identity development leading to what **Marcia, 1966** termed 'foreclosed identities' where the athlete over-identifies with the role of 'athlete' to the extent of it becoming detrimental to their psychological and sociological development and well-being.

*Baillie and Danish, 1992, McKnight et al, 2009*

**Mcpherson, 1980, Ogilvie and Howe, 1982 and Fortunate and Marchant, 1999** highlight the danger of a lack of coping mechanisms amongst athletes leading to destructive behaviour patterns such as, depression, eating disorders, divorce, substance abuse and suicide developing around stressful life-events in both pre, and post, athletic life.

*Cowan, 2011, Pryor, 2006*

The following sections will attempt to lay out some causal factors behind the development of these issues amongst athletes and prompt consideration and discussion on what preventative measures could be available to implement.

### ATHLETIC IDENTITY

**Brewer et al, 1993** define athletic identity as the level to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete.

**Danish et al, 1993** see a strong athletic identity as having considerable advantages for performance, though this is seen as problematic when set alongside the position of **Miller and Kerr, 2002** who consider the challenges such an identity formation can cause when the athlete disengages from their sport.

This narrowing of an athlete's life-focus toward achieving sporting excellence can have a negative effect on the individual's personal and psychological development.

*Brewer et al, 1993*

This is supported by **Chamilidis, 1995** who found in studying retired French and Greek athletes that a narrow pursuit of athletic excellence had prevented them from engaging in the exploration of the various roles and behaviours associated with identity formation. This over-commitment to the role of 'athlete' led to the formation of strong and narrow athletic identities putting the individual under greater risk of experiencing transitional issues upon career termination.

*Chamilidis, 1995*

Following this, research suggests that coaches, managers and owners of teams and organisations encourage this level of focus from their athletes and can be unsupportive of anything which could be labelled as a distraction from their pursuit of sporting excellence.

*O'Donoghue, 1999, Brown and Potrac, 2009*

**Miron, 2010** considers that athletes who are over-engaged in their athletic identities limit the opportunities available to them to explore alternative career paths, maximise educational opportunities and form rounded social identities.

Similarly **Lavallee and Robinson, 2007** in looking at research over the last 15 years found that relentless pursuit of sporting excellence has led to a jeopardizing of an individual's chances of

achieving holistic personal contentment and future employment. This danger of focusing too much on one area to the detriment of others is regarded by **Marcia, 1966** as creating a foreclosed identity.

Further to this, **Krane et al, 1997** in studying American Gymnasts found that due to the early age at which the internalisation of their sporting identity occurred, they struggled to tackle issues relating to their emotional, social, personal and psychological development **Carr and Bauman, 1996**. **Lally, 2007**, later found similar issues:

Retired gymnasts drifted in a `Nowhere Land` where they experienced feelings of disorientation, identity loss and confusion for years following their departure from elite gymnastics.

*Lally, 2007, pp.85-89*

In relation to elite level sport **Petitpas et al, 1992** suggest that the demands put upon athletes are increasing as the sports themselves pursue higher standards of performance. Potential star athletes are being identified at an increasingly early age and are required to sacrifice considerable amounts of time, energy and focus to hone their talents.

*Hughes and Coakley, 1991, Krane et al, 1997*

This concern was previously noted by **Erikson, 1968** in highlighting the vulnerability of identity foreclosure developing through adolescence where identity development is at its most critical and malleable.

These foreclosed identities can lead to athletes at all ranges of their career cycle abandoning academic qualifications, employment opportunities or emotional relationships in pursuit of sporting success.

*Murcia, 1966, Baille and Danish 1992, Brewer et al, 1993*

Such a profound identification with the athletic role can leave the athlete unprepared for, and fearful of, a life away from their sport where the loss of their personal identity and premier life focus can be traumatic.

*Baille and Danish, 1992, McKnight et al, 2009, Heyman and Anderson, 1998*

### **CAREER TERMINATION**

While the concept of career termination was once considered an overlooked area of research **Baille and Danish 1992** the work of scholars such as **Lavallee and Wylleman, 2000, McKnight et al, 2009 Wylleman et al, 2004 and Strambulova et al, 2009** during the last decade has brought it into focus as an emerging area of interest.

**Alfermann et al, 2004** view career termination as being both normative and non-normative. Retirement freely taken as a considered option by an athlete would constitute a normative process, as would a career naturally expiring due to age. Non-normative reasons could consist of career termination through injury, deselection, and decline in athletic performance, suspension or contract expiry.

*Fortunato and Marchant, 1999, Murphy 1999*

The level of predictability of how an athlete's career finishes has a significant impact on the ability to adapt to life after an athletic career

*Alferman et al, 2004, Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994*

The normative level of the termination allows for greater scope to prepare for this transition away from sport. While less predictable, non-normative causes, have been highlighted to show a greater risk of athletes struggling to cope with the negative effects of non-voluntary career termination.

*Mihovilovic, 1968, Svoboda and Vanek, 1982, Fortunado and Marchant, 1999*

Studies show that the majority of athletes will finish their careers involuntarily before they consider themselves ready. This was highlighted by an early study by **Mihovilovic, 1968** who on studying former Yugoslavian footballers found that 95% finished their careers involuntarily.

Non-voluntary career termination has been shown to lead to many psychological issues, including identity disruption, low self-esteem, anger issues, anxiety, depression and a loss of self-worth.

*Svoboda and Vanek, 1982*

The development of such issues may not be surprising as the ending of a sporting career at any stage throws up a variety of issues to contend with. The age at which an athlete's career may be terminated is often opposed with the position of their contemporaries outside of the sporting domain who may be at a stage where they are seeking to advance their careers.

*Blinde and Greendorfer, 1985*

There is also a financial strain to be borne by athletes as many will experience a drop in income upon career termination. The Welsh Rugby Union (2010) identified that many of its players would not receive a wage at any stage of their post athletic career which would match that of the height of their playing days. While also identifying that only 2% of their players were likely to gain employment within the elite performance element of the sport after their playing careers ended.

**Lavallee and Robinson, 2007** argue that athletes not only struggle to come to terms with the end of their role as an athlete but also in piecing together a new identity in the 'real world'. Further to this, they see career termination distress as a common phenomenon with large proportions of retiring athletes experiencing a degree of difficulty upon withdrawing from sport. Indeed athletes who have struggled to transition away from their sports upon career termination have fallen into alcohol and drug abuse, depression, criminal activities, eating disorders and even suicide.  
*Ogilvie, 1987, Ogilvie and Howe, 1982, Sinclair and Orlick, 1993, Mcpherson, 1980, Svoboda and Vanek, 1982*

**Wylleman et al, 2004** consider that early research focused on career termination as a singular event with the negative experiences being born out largely linked to the athlete no longer having a profession. These theoretical frameworks have since been considered inadequate by **Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994** who believe that a more holistic view be taken in order to provide a greater depth of analysis of the issues involved. This supports the shift in perspective that career termination is best planned for as a process rather than a singular event.  
*Torregrosa et al, 2004, Wylleman et al 2004*

## CAREER TRANSITIONS

In addition to career termination, transition has also been a focus area for research. **Schlossberg, 1981, (p.5)** defines a transition as: 'An event or non-event which results in change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in behaviour and relationships'.

While it has been identified that are not all career terminations are problematic **Koukouris, 1991, 1994, Coakley, 1983**, there is a body of research that suggests that enough suffer from some degree of distress or difficulty upon career termination to consider it a widespread phenomenon.  
*Lavallee and Robinson, 2007*

This correlates with the findings of **Werther and Orlick, 1986** who discovered on studying a sample of former Canadian Olympic standard athletes that 78% had encountered problematic transitions from their sport while 32% considered their experience to be traumatic.

**Nesti, 2006** identified that many of the issues facing athletes were removed from their athletic pursuits and were causal from more general difficulties in their lives. Over the past 20 years researchers have switched their attention from considering sporting transition as something triggered by the singular event of a career termination to view it from a more holistic, career-lifespan perspective.  
*Wylleman et al, 2004, Orlick, 2009*

This perspective allows athletes to be treated more as individuals and enables analysis and consideration to be given to the various stages of transition that occur while also considering their psycho-social development away from their athletic pursuits.  
*Strambulova, 2010*

**Cockerill and Tribe, 2002** consider the nature of sport at an elite level to make athletes prone to becoming engrossed in an impractical lifestyle where performance is constantly expected regardless of any other issues.  
*Douglas and Carless, 2005.*

**Svoboda and Vanek, 1982** highlight those athletes who give more consideration to their lives as a whole and maintain a balanced outlook are more likely to be better equipped to cope with career termination. A large basis of this balanced outlook should be the acceptance of the inevitability of a post athletic existence and pro-active approach to preparing for that eventuality.  
*Anderson and Morris, 2000*

This is a view widely supported amongst scholars that investment in non-sporting pursuits such as - alternative career paths, education, work experience, hobbies, financial planning and relationship development - will enable athletes to cultivate a more rounded identity better suited to a smoother transition out of sport.  
*North and Lavallee, 2004, Gordon, 1995, Crook and Robertson, 1991, Price et al, 2010, Strambulova et al, 2007, Petitpas et al, 1997.*

These views strongly support a study into former Belgian Olympic athletes by **Wylleman et al, 1993** that found that a lack of pre-retirement planning was the most significant factor attributed to the quality of the athlete transition into a post sporting existence. Prior to competing in the 2008 Olympic Games, **Romero, 2008** writes:

From my perspective, going into Beijing I had no life balance whatsoever, the danger is that doing sport becomes like being on a conveyor belt and you can't get off.

These issues had been earlier forwarded by **Gordon, 1995** who identified a weight of evidence that suggested the need for athletes to receive post career planning advice. This was taken up by **Anderson and Morris, 2000** in championing the need for such a support network to be implemented upon the commencement of an athletic career in order to help alleviate any anxiety an athlete may develop.

### **ATHLETE TRANSITION**

**Douglas and Careless, 2005** identified an increasing awareness of the impact of personal, environmental and lifestyle factors on athletic performance. This supports **Bryant and Glennon, 2006**:

By alleviating anxieties experienced outside of the field of play, athletes can focus better on the field of play. Athletes are scared to leave what they know (sport) for the unknown (real world, life and career).

By assisting athletes in preparing for that transition to leave sport, they can stay in sport longer and perform without the baggage of worrying about what's next.

*Bryant and Glennon, 2006, p.7*

This school of thought is echoed by **Svoboda and Vanek, 1982 and Murphy, 1995** who suggest that a decrease in anxiety due to a more holistic life focus can actually lead to an improvement in athletic performance. **Mckenzie et al, 2003** believe that athletes that engage in educational and personal development during their careers will benefit from the knowledge that they are prepared for life after sport and experience less stress and anxiety about their futures.