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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# High-performance athletes' transition out of sport: developing corporate social responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates high-performance athletes' experiences of transitioning out of sport and the support provided to them and describes how the findings suggest Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives which may inform the development of sport policies addressing issues surrounding sport career transitions. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data exploring athletes' lived experiences of adapting to life after sport. Purposive sampling was applied to 20 retired high-performance athletes (10 male; 10 female), from six different countries, representing 11 Olympic sports. The causes of career termination are found to be multifaceted, with the findings indicating different factors such as 'feelings of reaching saturation point', shifts in priorities, decreased self-awareness of performance, policy changes (e.g. reductions in funding, changes in coaching personnel), and significant singular events such as crucial losses to key rivals. Lost goals and identity and a lack of pre-retirement planning were considered as major challenges post-retirement. Refocusing and developing new priorities in life and the importance of seeking support were highlighted in discussions on coping with life post-transition. The findings demonstrate that high-performance athletes require support and care from sport governing bodies and social support providers in adapting to post-athletic life. The implications of these findings for CSR initiatives and their relevance to the policymaking process are discussed.

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## KEYWORDS

Career transitions in sport; corporate social responsibility; high-performance athletes; organisational support; social support

## Introduction

In recent decades, various athlete development frameworks have been established to conceptualise the progression of athletes through different stages of their athletic career pathways. Such frameworks provide a structure for understanding the characteristics and dynamics of athletes' careers including both normative (i.e. expected, predictable) and non-normative (i.e. unexpected, unpredictable) transitions (Patatas *et al.* 2020). These frameworks tend to describe an athletic career as a progression through different stages characterised by specific attributes (Gulbin *et al.* 2013). The stages outlined in these frameworks are commonly referred to as initiation, nurturing, talent identification and development, mastery, and career termination/transition out of sport (e.g. Sotiriadou *et al.* 2008, Balyi *et al.* 2013, Gulbin *et al.* 2013, Wylleman 2019). By utilising these athlete development frameworks, researchers and

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practitioners have gained a better understanding of the complexities involved in athletic careers. The frameworks also provide valuable insights into the factors that influence an athlete's performance and transitions, and they can guide the design of effective developmental programmes and support systems that promote their holistic development and well-being (Hong and Coffee 2018). It is increasingly accepted that the career paths of successful athletes are shaped by the collaborative efforts of different stakeholders and organisations engaged in implementing effective elite sports policies (Sotiriadou *et al.* 2008). Previous studies have examined the formation of elite sport policies (e.g. Green and Oakley 2001, Houlihan and Green 2008, Andersen *et al.* 2015), analysed the factors influencing success in elite sports (e.g. De Bosscher *et al.* 2006, 2015), and investigated the role of sports policy factors and stakeholders in the development of athletes in Para sport (Patatas *et al.* 2020). However, there is a limited body of research exploring career transitions out of sport and the implications for sport policy.

Career transitions out of sport have been a key focus of research over the past five decades, with Lavallee *et al.* (2014) identifying several key factors that impact the quality of such transitions for athletes. These factors include individual characteristics like educational level, athletic achievements, vocational experience, financial status, as well as pre-retirement planning, the voluntariness of retirement, and the availability of social support during the transition period (Park *et al.* 2013, Wylleman 2019, Stambulova *et al.* 2021). Athletes' ability to navigate these factors can greatly impact their adaptation to post-athletic life and their success in making a smooth transition out of sport (Stambulova *et al.* 2009, Küettel *et al.* 2017). However, significant stresses associated with the transition out of sport can further complicate an athlete's ability to successfully adapt to post-athletic life; these include strong athletic identity, career-ending injuries, and lack of perceived social support (Lally 2007, Stephan and Demulier 2008, Park *et al.* 2013). Understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by athletes during this critical phase of their lives is crucial for the development and implementation of effective policies that can support their successful transition into post-athletic careers. Examining this aspect not only benefits individual athletes but also contributes to the broader field of sports policy by providing insights into the factors that can facilitate a smooth and fulfilling transition process. Thus, it is crucial for policy and support programmes developed by sport governing bodies and organisations to address the issues and challenges faced by athletes during transitions. Appropriate programmes and policies can play a significant role in facilitating successful transitions by providing athletes with the necessary resources and support (Hong and Coffee 2018). Such policies and programmes can also benefit organisations in terms of image and reputation, and by increasing athlete retention rates and productivity. Thus, it is critical for sport organisations and policymakers to address the challenges faced by elite athletes during transition and take appropriate actions to provide support. With this mind, the present study seeks to provide empirical evidence of the transitional experiences, challenges, and barriers faced by retired elite athletes, as well as their perceived needs to better prepare for post-sport life. Our findings may inform the establishment of targeted policies and programmes aimed at facilitating athletes' transition processes.

While research on sport career transitions is well-established, there is a lack of understanding of the association between career transitions in sport and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives which can form part of sport policy. Although different CSR behaviours and activities have been identified within the sport industry (Babiak and Wolfe 2006), little research has explored the relevance of CSR to athletes' post-sport transitions. Given that sport organisations both impact, and are impacted by, society, it is appropriate to consider CSR's role in supporting athletes' successful adaptation to post-sport life (Babiak and Wolfe 2009, Rowe *et al.* 2018). Thus, investigation is needed to explore the relationship between transitions out of sport, CSR, and sport policy. In seeking to enhance athletes' transitions out of sport and their subsequent well-being it may be appropriate for sports organisations to consider how incorporating CSR initiatives into sport policy may help facilitate this aim. This may not only enhance athletes' well-being but also demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and the broader societal impact of the sport industry.

The purpose of the study is, therefore, to gain in-depth insights into athletes' lived experiences of transitioning out of sport, and explore the implications of these experiences for CSR practice and its potential impact on sport policy development.

## Literature review

### *Career development and transitions in sport*

Research on athletes' career development and transitions has evolved through three stages, spanning five decades, reflecting changes in our understanding and knowledge (Wylleman and Rosier 2016, Stambulova *et al.* 2021). The first stage (1960s-1980s) focused on career termination, using non-sport frameworks. The second stage (1990s) shifted towards a whole career perspective and within-career transitions, utilising sport-specific frameworks. The third stage (2000s-present) has embraced a whole person and environmental perspective, incorporating culturally sensitive research and practice. New theoretical frameworks have emerged in this stage, such as the athletic career transition model (Stambulova 2003), the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman 2019), and the cultural transition model (Ryba *et al.* 2015). As research on career development and transition has progressed, scholars have examined various factors (e.g. athletic identity, voluntary career termination) influencing the quality of athletes' transitions (Lally 2007, Torregrosa *et al.* 2015, Stambulova *et al.* 2021). In this respect, research has highlighted the significance of transition in athletes' lives and the challenges faced by them in their post-athletic lives. These challenges include uncertainties associated with employment and potential lifestyle changes, feelings of vulnerability in managing changes in their expectations, goals, and plans, anxiety about 'the unknown', particularly in the case of athletes who have developed their careers around structure and organisation, and concerns about the broader impact of transitions on athletes' support networks and entourages (Kohe and Purdy 2020). However, it is important to note that while there has been progress in understanding career transitions, there remains a need for critical reflection on the underlying assumptions and values that inform theoretical frameworks and research practices.

While the evolution of research on career development and transition has certainly contributed to our understanding of athletes' experiences, it is important to critically assess the limitations of previous studies. For instance, early research tended to focus narrowly on career termination and retirement, overlooking the nuances of within-sport transitions and other types of transition (Park *et al.* 2013). While not all retired athletes view their career terminations as negative or traumatic, earlier studies often fail to capture the full range of experiences and emotions associated with the process (Alfermann 2000). Individuals' experiences of transitions out of sport may be unique to each individual and vary depending on available resources, causes of career termination, and other personal circumstances (Kohe and Purdy 2020). As such, it is important to approach the topic of transition with sensitivity and a nuanced understanding of the coping process that it entails, acknowledging both the potential positive and negative consequences that can arise (Stambulova *et al.* 2009). Despite the progress made in research on athletes' career transitions, it is important to note that the focus on transition out of sport still persists (Stambulova *et al.* 2021). Torregrosa *et al.* (2015) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study to identify factors that affect the transition process. This found that a lack of retirement planning, involuntary termination, single athletic identity, lack of social support, and reactive coping strategies contributed to difficulties when transitioning out of sport. Brown *et al.* (2018) investigated the role of social support in athletes' adaptation to post-athletic life using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Their findings suggest that athletes who received positive social support during the transition process were more likely to have a successful adaptation to post-athletic life, while those who found it challenging to seek support were more vulnerable to mental health issues. While studies such as Torregrosa *et al.* (2015) and Brown *et al.* (2018) have advanced our understanding of factors influencing athletes' career transitions, it is

crucial to note that these studies were conducted with specific national samples. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of athletes across different cultural and sporting contexts.

Research into sport careers transitions has blossomed and is well established, but the focus is often on informing practitioners and sport governing bodies on how to improve their practices and provide better support to athletes. Research findings may also serve to enhance sport policies of national governments and sport governing bodies and organisations. There are limited examples but the independent report, entitled 'Duty of Care in Sport Review' was developed in the U.K with its lead author being Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, a former Paralympian and House of Lords member (Grey-Thompson 2017). The report addresses four different areas including education, transitions, representation, equality, and diversity, highlighting the need for increased support in areas such as athletes' safeguarding, mental health, youth talent identification, deselection, and transition periods. Although these recommendations presently lack legal enforceability (Kohe and Purdy 2020), researchers may usefully contribute to the policymaking process, providing empirical evidence and recommendations to address the challenges faced by athletes as they prepare for their post-athletic lives.

### **Corporate social responsibility**

CSR refers to the strategic behaviours of companies and organisations (Trendafilova *et al.* 2013). Ullmann (1985) defines CSR as an organisation's ability to fulfil the expectations, needs, and demands of external stakeholders beyond those related to the company's products or markets. Carroll (1979) characterises CSR as the societal expectations placed on organisations, while Vogel (2005) refers to it as practices that enhance the workplace and contribute to society beyond the legal obligations of companies. Research on sport career transitions may have a greater impact on the policymaking process if they are integrated into CSR initiatives. This integration can have the potential to enhance benefits for both athletes and sport governing bodies and organisations, although this has not been extensively explored. In the sports industry, CSR has become increasingly important (Tacon and Walters 2010), with sport governing bodies and organisations recognising it as a critical focus over the past decade (Filizöz and Fişne 2011). The relationship between CSR and sport is well-established, given the critical role that sport plays in addressing social issues (Giulianotti 2015). As such, sport governing bodies and organisations can implement CSR initiatives to make a positive impact on society, as seen with FIFA's 'Football for Hope' and 'Wind in Africa with Africa' initiatives (Walters 2009). Professional sport teams have also implemented programmes to address social concerns and engage in various CSR behaviours (Walters 2009, Trendafilova *et al.* 2013). In addition, athletes have established charitable foundations, such as David Beckham's 7 Fund (Rowe *et al.* 2018), as a means of contributing to society.

Babiak and Wolfe (2013) proposed six categories or 'pillars' of CSR initiatives in sport, including labour relations, environmental management and sustainability, corporate governance, diversity and equity, philanthropy, and community relations. However, it is important to consider that these pillars were developed in a North American context and may not be applicable elsewhere. In addition, Walker and Parent (2010) categorised the CSR initiatives and activities of 100 U.S. sport entities into various areas, such as community involvement, fair business practices, worker health and safety, cultural diversity, the environment, and youth education. These categories encompass both internal and external initiatives and activities (Rowe *et al.* 2018). While various types of CSR initiatives have been implemented in the sport industry (e.g. Babiak and Wolfe 2009, 2013, Kolyperas *et al.* 2016), research on the role of sport governing bodies and organisations in supporting high-performance athletes' transitions out of sport through a CSR lens is limited. Babiak and Wolfe (2013) also emphasise the need for support for athletes during both within-sport transitions (e.g. amateur to professional) and transitions out

of sport. Examining such support from a CSR perspective provides a new approach to understanding the issues. Thus, this study aims to investigate high-performance athletes' experiences of transitioning out of sport and the support provided to them. The objective is to provide recommendations on how the findings may be integrated into CSR initiatives, which, in turn, can inform the development of sport policy to address existing issues surrounding sport career transitions.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 20 retired high-performance athletes (10 males and 10 females) were purposively selected for this study. Participants were recruited from six countries, including Japan ( $n = 1$ ), Mexico ( $n = 1$ ), Portugal ( $n = 2$ ), Singapore ( $n = 6$ ), South Korea ( $n = 3$ ), and the UK ( $n = 7$ ). Their ages at the time of data collection ranged between 26 and 41 years ( $M = 32.5$ ,  $SD = 4.44$ ), and their retirement duration varied between 1 and 13 years ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ ). To protect participants' identities, their sports and nationalities are not specified in this study. All participants had achieved high-performance status, with 18 having participated in the Olympic Games, one in the Paralympic Games, and one in the Commonwealth Games, as shown in Table 1.

### Procedure

A purposive sample was recruited through the first author's contacts, and snowball sampling was subsequently applied to extend the sample (Noy 2008). Initially, the research team aimed to have three participants from Singapore, South Korea, and the UK. However, data from 20 participants representing six countries were collected due to participants introducing their colleagues and competitors. A multi-case study approach was applied to identify patterns and underlying relationships (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Haddock-Millar *et al.* 2016). Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, methods, risks, and benefits, and were informed of their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time. While the first author had professional contacts with the organisations and practitioners and these served to recruit the

Table 1. Description of participants.

Participant	Gender	Sport	Country	Age at retirement	Years retired
Athlete 1	Male	Individual	Korea	33	5
Athlete 2	Male	Individual	Korea	41	13
Athlete 3	Female	Individual	Korea	37	13
Athlete 4	Female	Fencing	Japan	40	9
Athlete 5	Female	Individual	UK	26	3
Athlete 6	Female	Team	UK	28	1
Athlete 7	Female	Individual	Singapore	31	9
Athlete 8	Male	Individual	UK	40	7
Athlete 9	Male	Individual	UK	31	2
Athlete 10	Male	Individual	Portugal	37	9
Athlete 11	Male	Individual	UK	34	1
Athlete 12	Female	Individual	Mexico	29	5
Athlete 13	Female	Individual	Singapore	29	2
Athlete 14	Male	Individual	Portugal	35	9
Athlete 15	Female	Individual	Singapore	29	2
Athlete 16	Female	Individual	UK	32	5
Athlete 17	Male	Individual	Singapore	33	7
Athlete 18	Female	Individual	Singapore	28	5
Athlete 19	Male	Individual	Singapore	30	2
Athlete 20	Male	Individual	UK	27	3

participants, she did not have any pre-existing personal relationships with them. To reduce potential researcher bias, the authors employed rigorous research design, transparent reporting, and self-reflection. This approach helped to ensure that the study's findings were robust (Rothman *et al.* 2008).

The study employed semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face ( $n = 11$ ) with athletes from Britain and Korea, or via online video calls ( $n = 9$ ) with athletes from Portugal, Mexico, and Singapore. The semi-structured interviews were designed to be flexible to allow participants to share meaningful experiences that were not covered in the interview guide developed from the literature review (Park *et al.* 2013, Lavalley *et al.* 2014, Stambulova *et al.* 2021) and author discussions. The interview guide covered questions on the athletes' sport backgrounds, causes of retirement, experiences following retirement, career transition distress, and available resources to cope with career transitions. Interviews lasted between 62 and 179 minutes ( $M = 99.9$ ,  $SD = 39.73$ ) and were coded to ensure confidentiality. Verbatim transcription was used for further analysis.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive approach, was used to analyse the interview data collected, which involved identifying meaningful and significant themes across the data (Braun *et al.*, 2016). The analysis followed the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and sought to remain open to the research participants' lived experiences. The data were coded by the first author and she identified the themes based on the coding process. The second author then acted as a critical friend by reviewing the identified themes and providing a thorough evaluation of them. 'A critical friend' is an approach facilitated to ensure the rigour and quality of qualitative studies, enabling researchers to enhance the reliability of their studies (Smith and McGannon 2018). It is also intended 'to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other's construction of knowledge' (Cowan and Taylor 2016, p. 508). In this regard, both authors critically reviewed the identified themes, reaching a consensus by reflecting on the data analysis process.

To enhance research quality, the authors followed guidelines by Yardley (2008) and recommendations by Brown *et al.* (2018) to address sensitivity to context and commitment and rigour in design and implementation. To ensure consistency, the first author conducted all interviews and built rapport with participants by sharing her personal experiences. A research journal was kept for a reflexive approach. Suitable samples were selected, and pilot interviews were conducted, with thorough data collection and analysis processes undertaken. Two pilot interviews, not included in the final sample of 20 participants, were conducted by the first author with retired athletes who had competed at an international level, to test the clarity and suitability of the interview guide for the study population. Modifications were made based on feedback received before conducting the final interviews (Sampson 2004). This approach is consistent with best practice in qualitative research in seeking to improve the quality and rigour of the study (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The authors ensured transparency and coherence in the research through an audit trail reviewed by the second author. They followed Yardley's (2008) guidelines to enhance the study's quality and importance, addressing design, data, analysis, dissemination, and impact. These steps helped ensure the study's reliability and validity and provided a strong foundation for its conclusions and recommendations.

### Results

Five themes were identified during the process of data analysis; these included: (a) Causes of Decision to Transition out of Sport, (b) Lost Goals, Lost Identity, (c) Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning, (d) Refocusing and Developing New Life Priorities, and (e) Seeking Support. The following sub-sections present detailed findings for each theme, supported by direct quotes from the



participants, in order to provide an exploration of their experiences, and implications for policy development.

### ***Causes of decision to transition out of sport***

The decision to retire from athletic careers is typically influenced by several factors, indicating the complexity of such decisions. Thirteen out of 20 participants stated that they had 'had enough' of their athletic careers, citing changes in priorities, such as starting a family or finding a new job/profession, and a natural conclusion to their athletic careers. However, other participants mentioned reasons such as decreased performance (Athletes 2 and 7), knee injury (Athlete 4), funding cuts (Athletes 11 and 16), new coaches (Athlete 15), and 'losing to a rival' (Athlete 16). The study observed that many athletes' priorities changed after they had 'had enough', became aware of decreasing performance, or experienced changes in policy, such as funding cuts or changes in coaching staff. Athlete 6 stopped enjoying her sport and wanted to settle down and start a family. While athletes who felt fulfilled in their athletic careers tended to identify new priorities as a natural sequence, those who experienced negative circumstances, such as injury, poor performance, funding cuts, or changes in coaches, were forced to find meaning elsewhere to overcome their disadvantageous situations. However, despite their frustrating circumstances, participants dealt with their situations well due to their high levels of self-awareness and honesty regarding the challenges faced by them. For instance, Athlete 7 stated,

I spoke to my coach about it, so we had a discussion. We both agreed that I had almost reached the peak of my performance for this type of boat. Even if I were to get any stronger, the marginal difference would not be significant. Realistically, I would not be able to come close to winning a medal at the Olympics.

It is evident from the participants' responses that a strong sense of self-awareness and fulfilment was an important factor in their transitions. In this regard, athletes who were able to realistically assess their chances of achieving their goals and finding fulfilment in their athletic accomplishments tended to be better able to navigate their transitions.

### ***Lost goals, lost identity***

All participants experienced adjustment difficulties following retirement, particularly in terms of lost athletic goals and identity. Participants felt lost without the structure and focus provided by their athletic careers as they were no longer pursuing sporting goals or overcoming challenges. This lack of direction and purpose led some participants to experience feelings of depression. The following quote from a retired athlete highlights the challenges associated with losing one's athletic identity and goals:

When I was an athlete, my entire focus was on achieving an Olympic medal. That was my singular goal, and I didn't really think about what would happen after. Now that I'm retired, I don't know what my goal is. I feel completely lost. (Athlete 9)

The following quote from Athlete 7 illustrates the significant impact that a lifelong athletic career can have on an individual's sense of identity and purpose:

Aside from a few brief breaks, I've been involved in [her sport] for the majority of my life - since I was just seven years old. It was such a huge part of my identity, and I was always working towards a goal. But after I retired, I felt like there was a big hole in my life - a really big hole.

Other retired athletes also highlighted the identity issues and loss of purpose that can contribute to negative psychological outcomes following retirement: 'The loss of our athletic identity and goals left us feeling lost, frustrated, and even depressed', stated Athlete 15. Athlete 10 provided additional insight into the challenges faced by retired athletes, stating that,



When you're an athlete and you're winning, everybody likes you, everybody is your friend, you're in the newspapers, you're in the news. Suddenly you're not an athlete anymore and nobody cares about you.

Retirement from sport often presents immediate challenges related to the loss of athletic identity and goals, regardless of the reasons for career termination. The retired athletes in this study appear to have developed strong athletic identities, which has limited their ability to cultivate well-rounded identities during their careers. This narrow focus on their sport has resulted from their exclusive commitment to athletic pursuits, leaving little time or opportunity for other activities.

### ***Lack of pre-retirement planning***

The majority of retired athletes in this study expressed uncertainty regarding their futures post-retirement. Only two participants (Athletes 13 and 17) reported having clear plans for post-athletic life. Many athletes acknowledged a lack of pre-retirement planning and were unsure about how to replace the role of sport in their lives. Despite their success as athletes, they recognised a deficit in experience and skills outside of their sport. For example, Athlete 16 stated that they 'were on the bottom of the ladder' in other domains. Some athletes even questioned whether their chosen post-athletic careers were appropriate for them. Many retired athletes, including those who became coaches, expressed uncertainty about whether they had made the right choice. Athlete 13 highlights the challenges associated with choosing a post-athletic career:

I became a coach because I needed to make money, and it seemed like an easy option to start something. But it wasn't really for me. Eventually, I started my own business to help other athletes, provide mentorship, and work with disadvantaged children. This was much more meaningful to me.

After suffering from depression while applying for employment, Athlete 20 started his own business, which was successful but ultimately did not fulfil his passion. He started his own business, which was successful, but he realised it was not what he wanted to do. 'The business went well, but it wasn't my number one passion', explained Athlete 20. 'My passion was in performance sport'.

The participants in this study reported feeling pressure to establish a new career after retirement from sport, which often led to a lack of fulfilment and a sense of unfulfilled potential. Many participants did not have sufficient time to explore their interests and passions outside sport, which further limited their options for post-athletic careers. Some had found employment in professional occupations (e.g. as a banker, PE teacher, businessperson, police officer, coach, or pilot), while others were still exploring their options. It is noteworthy that the only two athletes (Athletes 13 and 17) who had established clear post-athletic goals reported feeling more fulfilled and satisfied with their lives. It is important to note that the two athletes who established clear post-athletic goals had done so prior to their retirement from sport, while others began exploring their options only after retirement. This highlights the importance of early career planning and preparation for life beyond sport. The following quote from Athlete 17 highlights the importance of pursuing a career aligning with an individual's interests and values:

You will need to explore your interests before making a decision [...] you need to choose something that makes you happy. Just working towards your goals. I might feel empty without goals, and this gets worse if your job doesn't make you happy. (Athlete 17)

Once again, this indicates that retired athletes had limited opportunities to explore future career options or develop career plans due to an exclusive focus on sport. This narrow focus on athletic pursuits may have limited their ability to cultivate well-rounded skill sets and explore alternative career paths.

### ***Refocusing and developing new priorities in life***

Retired athletes emphasised the importance of setting new goals and priorities to cope with the challenges of retirement. Many participants found it helpful to reflect on their experiences as athletes, recalling how they set and achieved goals, and identifying transferable skills that could be applied in other domains. These realisations contributed to their successful adaptation to post-athletic life, as highlighted by Athlete 6 who noted, ‘this is almost like a delayed hangover because that happened so subtly and I was like, “Life’s far too short. I need to get on with things”’. Athlete 18 described the importance of goal-setting and planning in the transition to post-athletic life, stating that

One day, I sat down and thought, ‘What do I want to do? What is my goal? How am I getting there?’ I started thinking about it step by step, having a plan, setting up a plan, long-term and short-term goals.

Athlete 10 also emphasised the importance of setting new objectives and seeking out new experiences:

My next objective was to finish my university and to be the best student in the class. Not only the best student in class, but to get international experience. I did a lot of workshops internationally and provided myself with a lot of information to be the best person I could be.

Participants recognised the importance of continuing education in facilitating successful transitions to post-athletic life. Athlete 9, for example, noted that her next goal was to pursue a master’s degree in sport management in order to broaden her career options. Several other athletes (Athletes 10, 12, 16, and 20) also expressed an interest in studying sport management. Interestingly, all Korean and Singaporean athletes in the study had already earned university degrees or similar qualifications as a result of continuing academic study during their athletic careers. This provided them with an advantage when applying for post-athletic employment, highlighting the importance of pursuing educational opportunities during athletic careers. Athlete 17, who had established clear post-athletic goals and emphasised the importance of pre-retirement planning, highlighted the challenges faced by high-performance athletes in Singapore:

Most high-performance athletes in Singapore are not well-supported as sporting career is not very much appreciated in the society. That’s why they studied, got a degree to get a job. As we live in a very education-driven culture/society, even if you don’t know what to do after retirement, most of them have a backup plan.

Korean athletes attended universities designed for elite athletes, providing them with support in their educational pursuits superior to Singaporean athletes. This advantage allowed them to complete their degrees and prepare for post-athletic careers. Athletes who had dropped out of higher education during their sporting careers, such as Athletes 8, 9, and 10, emphasised the importance of managing dual careers and competing demands in order to be better prepared for life after sport. This highlights the significance of balancing athletic and educational pursuits, and suggests that athletes who are able to pursue on-going education and training may be better equipped to navigate the challenges of retirement and pursue fulfilling post-athletic careers. Athlete 8 offered a valuable perspective on the importance of setting new goals and priorities following retirement, noting that even if athletes ended their careers without an Olympic medal, they could still be happy and fulfilled if they were able to transition successfully to post-athletic life.

The use of transferable skills developed during athletic careers was also highlighted as a key factor in successful post-athletic transitions. Athletes emphasised the importance of skills such as time management, communication, organisation, leadership, and commitment, and noted that these skills had been highly valued in their post-athletic careers: ‘business sectors appreciate sport people have really good work ethics’ (Athlete 20). Athlete 1 underscored the importance of recognising and utilising transferable skills, noting that athletes developed a wide range of skills during their sporting careers and could apply them successfully elsewhere:

Athletes exclusively commit to one thing and know how to organise every day and how hard they need work to achieve their goal. We develop a lot of skills during our sporting careers. We just need to know what we have and just use them for other goals and plans.

The importance of self-awareness in identifying and utilising transferable skills was highlighted by participants. While athletes possess a range of valuable skills that can be transferred to other domains, they may not be aware of these skills or may fear having to 'start all over again' in their post-athletic careers. While participants did not discuss specific interventions they had experienced, their accounts suggest that emotional, psychological, and organisational support may be particularly valuable in helping athletes to identify and utilise transferable skills.

### ***Seeking support***

Participants turned to various sources of support during their transition out of sport, including parents, partners, friends, and sport agencies. However, some participants hesitated to seek support immediately, concerned that others might not understand the unique challenges associated with retirement from sport. Athlete 6 noted, 'I wasn't sure if they really understood what I was going through'. Feeling understood and supported was crucial for successful transition, as highlighted by Athlete 12's experience of family and friends not understanding his decision to retire, compared to Athlete 19's positive experience of his wife's support as a fellow high-level athlete in his sport.

Parents were found to be a key source of both financial and emotional support for athletes during the transition period. Athletes' partners, friends, and other family members mainly provided emotional support. Athlete 6 highlighted the importance of support from partners and loved ones, stating that 'my wife also played [his sport] at a competitive level, so she understood my decision and feelings. It was very positive to me'. While coaches were highly valued by athletes during their sporting careers, none of the participants in this study mentioned receiving support from coaches during the transition period. Athlete 18 mentioned the lack of support from their former coach, stating, 'I think coaches need to be more involved in the transition process. They could check in on the athletes or just show their support'. Similarly, while some athletes noted the need for psychological support during the transition, support from sport psychologists was only mentioned by one athlete (Athlete 6). Athlete 6 was able to access psychological support during her transition because she was eligible for different support services provided by her sport governing body and actively sought out this type of assistance. Athlete 2 expressed the need for such support, saying 'it [support from sport psychologist] wasn't available at all at that time but when I looked back, it would be very helpful if I could have one'. Athlete 16 also highlighted the importance of psychological support, stating 'Psychological support is needed more in transitions'. Although many athletes acknowledged the need for psychological support during their transition out of sport, they reported a lack of awareness of support services provided by their sport governing bodies. Participants highlighted the importance of being informed about available support. Additionally, many athletes hesitated to ask for support due to a lack of prior experience with such resources.

Some athletes (Athletes 6, 8, 9, 11, and 16) highlighted the importance of support from a sport agency during their transition process, as it provided various work and networking experiences and emotional support. Athlete 16 noted that the agency made them feel cared for, while Athlete 9 appreciated their business contacts and advice. These British athletes valued the agency's support more than their national career assistance programme, except for Athlete 6, who highlighted help from an advisor from the national career assistance programme. However, participants from different countries (Athletes 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, and 18) indicated a lack of support from sport

governing bodies and coaches in retirement, as well as poor promotion and availability of resources. Athlete 18's experience highlights this lack of support:

You know, I didn't know how to retire. When I finally made a decision, emotionally very hard decision, I wanted to let people know and officially retire. But I realised I did not know the mechanism, who to write to, etc. We should have been informed by sport governing bodies, coaches, or someone who knows how to do this. [...] they need to create some kind of template on how to retire or something.

While athletes received support from their families, parents, and friends, they felt neglected by professionals such as coaches and sport psychologists, as well as by sport governing bodies and organisations. The athletes' accounts suggest that they were undervalued and unsupported by these entities, despite their significant contributions to their success. This lack of support can negatively impact the quality of athletes' transitions out of sport, and requires attention and action from sport governing bodies and organisations.

## Discussion

The study investigates both the experiences of high-performance athletes as they transition out of sport and the support they receive throughout the process. The aim is to provide recommendations on how these findings can engender relevant Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This integration may inform the development of sport policy, which addresses critical issues related to sport career transitions. By examining the factors, which influence athletes' decisions on transition out of sport, the study provides insights into the multi-faceted causes of career termination. While previous studies have identified some factors which contribute to career termination such as age, deselection, injury, and free choice (Lavalley *et al.* 2014), our findings suggest additional causes such as changes in priorities and feeling of 'having had enough', and involuntary policy changes such as funding cuts, changes in coaching staff, and losses to rivals. A more nuanced and flexible model is needed to better represent athletes' experiences during their transitions. We propose a modification to include funding cuts, coaching staff changes, fulfilment of athletic careers, and changed priorities. These factors play a significant role in career termination and should be considered when developing customised support for athletes during career termination. Such complexity indeed highlights the need for customised support for athletes experiencing career termination; this should be tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. This support could be embedded in the future CSR initiatives of sport governing bodies and organisations. The NFL Player Care Foundation (<http://www.nflplayercare.com/>) serves as an excellent example of a comprehensive CSR initiative designed to support retired athletes. The foundation provides a range of services to retired NFL players, including medical, emotional, financial, and social welfare support. In addition, it offers programmes that focus on career development, continuing education, and job training. Through these initiatives, the foundation aims to help retired athletes transition successfully into post-sport careers while also addressing their physical and mental health needs. The success of this initiative highlights the potential impact of CSR initiatives in providing customised support for athletes during their transitions out of sport. By embedding customised support for athletes into their CSR initiatives, sport governing bodies and organisations can fulfil their moral responsibility to address the challenges experienced by athletes during their transitions out of sport. In this respect, they can help athletes develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in their post-sport careers, while also helping to maintain the positive reputation of the sport industry generally. This understanding and practice can contribute to the development of sport policy, offering guidelines to sport governing bodies and organisations for creating appropriate CSR initiatives, similar to the NFL Player Care Foundation, as well as relevant schemes that better support individuals in their transition out of sport. These initiatives should take into account the individual's reasons for career termination and their specific career stages. This can result in athletes making well-informed decisions and successfully managing the transition process.

The study highlights the challenges high-performance athletes face when transitioning out of sport, consistent with previous research (Trendafilova *et al.* 2013). To address these challenges, sport governing bodies and organisations should develop CSR initiatives and activities to support athletes during their transitions, as recommended by Babiak and Wolfe (2013). Engaging retired athletes as role models and mentors can be one potential response, given their transferable skills and value in CSR activities (Walters 2009). Retired athletes can contribute to youth development, education, and health, inspiring young people to engage in community-oriented CSR (Babiak and Wolfe 2009, Rowe *et al.* 2018), while providing a sense of belonging and opportunities to give back to their sport (Park *et al.* 2012). For instance, former British track and field athlete Dame Kelly Holmes established the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust (<https://www.damekellyholmestrust.org/>), which uses retired athletes as mentors to help disadvantaged young people achieve their goals. The present study also highlights the potential for athletes to inspire and motivate individuals to achieve their goals through hard work and commitment while coping with different stressors and psychological demands. This can be a powerful tool by which to encourage young people to engage in sport and physical activities; this can address the widely recognised social issue of physical inactivity and obesity impacting negatively upon long-term health and wellbeing (Tacon and Walters 2010, Giulianotti 2015). Thus, it is important for sport governing bodies and organisations to recognise the potential of retired high-performance athletes as ambassadors for sport and physical activity, and to encourage them to engage in CSR activities accordingly. Furthermore, the findings highlight the lack of support provided by sport governing bodies and organisations to high-performance athletes, regardless of the sport systems, which apply in their particular countries. This is surprising considering that previous research has suggested that sport governing bodies and organisations have a moral responsibility to support their athletes to develop balanced identities by creating appropriate environmental conditions (Anderson and Morris 2000, Surujal 2016, Hong and Coffee 2018) and have established career support programmes worldwide (see Hong and Coffee 2018). This emphasises the need for the establishment of relevant policies aimed at developing structured support systems to address this issue effectively. Policymakers and CSR stakeholders can collaborate to foster partnerships that promote the provision of support services for retired athletes by leveraging resources and expertise from different sectors, such as sport governing bodies, educational institutions, and sponsors. This collaboration can result in creating well-established support networks that effectively address the specific needs and challenges faced by retired athletes. Policymakers are able to not only develop and promote CSR guidelines and policies within sport governing bodies and organisations, but also to encourage corporate sponsors to prioritise CSR initiatives that specifically address the needs of retired athletes. The Johan Cruyff Institute (<https://johancruyffinstitute.com/en/>), founded by former professional footballer Johan Cruyff, serves as another example, of an initiative that can inform national governments and sport governing bodies in their development of CSR initiatives. Based on the founder's own experience, the institute has developed and implemented a CSR programme focusing on ensuring that athletes are able to develop dual careers, which will help them better prepare for transitioning out of sport and for successful post-athletic careers. For instance, the Cruyff Athlete Fund initiative supports professional athletes from minority sport and those transitioning to sport management by pursuing postgraduate or master's programmes at the Johan Cruyff Institute. Such CSR programmes and initiatives can also inform national governments and sport governing bodies in creating their own programmes and initiatives, or in considering collaborations with organisations and institutes that already have well-established programmes and initiatives.

The literature indicates that pre-retirement planning, development of rounded-identity, available resources and voluntary retirement are critical factors associated positively with smooth transitions (Park *et al.* 2013, Torregrosa *et al.* 2015, Stambulova *et al.* 2021). While our findings support such evidence, we also identify other significant factors. As evidenced previously, identity issues and 'lost' goals were recognised as psychological challenges regardless of whether retirement was voluntary or involuntary. This supports literature suggesting that strong athletic identity can hinder positive

transitions (Lavallee *et al.* 1997, Lally 2007). According to Ryba *et al.* (2015), athletes who focus solely on their athletic careers and neglect the development of other aspects of their identity can be classified as 'monophonic'. It is worth noting, however, that the idea of a well-rounded identity highlights the significance of acknowledging and demonstrating multiple identities in addition to an athletic one. Athletes' lack of pre-retirement planning was found to contribute to transition 'distress', a finding consistent with previous studies (Park *et al.* 2013, Torregrosa *et al.* 2015). Limited time for exploring new interests during their athletic careers and limited career options post-retirement contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction and un-fulfilment. Providing specific support during athletic careers to enhance pre-retirement planning could improve athletes' transitions. While transitioning to coaching is a common career option, it still presents challenges, as noted by Chroni *et al.* (2020), who found that early career coaches faced transitional challenges and uncertainties despite their professional backgrounds and sports achievements. This highlights the importance of athletes having opportunities to explore interests other than sport during their athletic careers and the need for continued support during and after the transition to coaching. In this regard, policymakers could consider implementing initiatives and supporting services that provide athletes with tailored support and resources to establish their pre-retirement planning. This may include mentoring, financial education, career coaching or counselling, and skill development programmes to prepare athletes for post-athletic life and increase their career options. By means of such programmes or initiatives, athletes may have the opportunity to explore their interests beyond sport e.g. by engaging in internships or networking events. This will enable them to foster relationships with organisations and companies in the sport industry or beyond.

As regards pre-retirement planning, our findings highlight the importance of pre-retirement planning in the cases of two retired athletes. While a lack of pre-retirement planning has been identified as a hindering factor for successful post-athletic life, these cases demonstrate the potential benefits of such planning. Therefore, we suggest that further research should investigate and promote successful cases of pre-retirement planning to motivate and inspire active athletes who will inevitably experience transitioning out of sport. Apart from these two cases, we acknowledge that Korean and Singaporean athletes have successfully managed dual careers, resulting in them obtaining degrees at higher education institutions. Korean athletes attend universities designed for elite athletes, providing them with support for their academic endeavours. On the other hand, Singaporean athletes live in an education-driven culture and society but lack support for sport. Holding these qualifications may offer athletes improved opportunities in their transition to post-athletic careers, particularly as compared to individuals who do not hold such qualifications. However, it should be noted that an in-depth investigation of this matter is out-with the scope of the current study. Since their motivation for acquiring a degree is not necessarily driven career considerations, we have separated them from the two cases mentioned earlier. However, the accounts of participants in Korea and Singapore provide valuable insights into the importance of dual careers. Dual careers have previously been highlighted as impacting positively on career transitions out of sport (Torregrosa *et al.* 2015). While some high-performance athletes have had to forgo educational opportunities due to a lack of support, dual careers in sport and work/study can be beneficial in preparing athletes for transition and mitigating challenging adjustments to life outside of sport (Torregrosa *et al.* 2015, Hong *et al.* 2022). However, balancing multiple life domains simultaneously can be challenging, and dual career athletes must develop appropriate coping skills and have suitable support in place (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004, Ryba *et al.* 2015, Wylleman 2019). In this respect, policymakers can establish guidelines for sport governing bodies/organisations and educational institutions to provide resources, guidance and mentoring to assist athletes to balance dual careers. For instance, the EU guidelines on the dual careers of athletes have been developed to recommend policy actions to support the dual careers of high-performance athletes (European Commission 2012); The Duty of Care in Sport Review, argues that schools should be helped to support talented young athletes who are pursuing dual careers (Grey-Thompson 2017). Policymakers can also promote the value and significance of dual careers through campaigns, policy statements,



and collaboration with sport governing bodies, organisations, and other key stakeholders in order to create supportive environments that encourage athletes' pursuit of dual careers. In addition, they can consider allocating funding and other relevant resources to support dual career athletes through financial assistance for education, training, and career development; this can help athletes enhance their employability.

Athletes' transferable skills may be valuable when transitioning to other domains. While some athletes struggled with their strong athletic identities and a lack of pre-retirement planning, others recognised the importance of transferable skills such as time management, communication, and leadership. These skills can be beneficial to CSR initiatives, professional teams, and human resource development in the sport industry (Taylor *et al.* 2015). Practitioners, including coaches and sport psychologists, could help athletes recognise the importance of their transferable skills and how to apply them to other domains, while also encouraging goal setting, hard work, and commitment. Danish *et al.* (1993) highlighted the importance of athletes' self-awareness in transferring their skills, which includes increasing awareness of acquired skills, understanding their context, and acknowledging their value in other domains. Mayocchi and Hanrahan (2000) recommended prompting athletes to become more conscious of their skills and providing feedback on their attempts to transfer these. However, there is limited empirical evidence on athletes' self-awareness during their transitions. Our study found that a strong sense of self-awareness and fulfilment is essential for athletes to navigate their transitions successfully. Those who lack self-awareness or struggle to find fulfilment in their athletic accomplishments may find it challenging to adjust to post-sport life. These findings support the importance of personal attributes, such as self-awareness and fulfilment, in retirement transitions. To promote the transfer of skills, Mayocchi and Hanrahan (2000) also recommended that athletes should be prompted to become more conscious of the skills they have acquired, the contexts in which these skills were obtained, and when and how to apply these skills. In addition, feedback should be given to athletes on their attempts to transfer skills, and assistance should be provided in devising plans for applying skills in various contexts (Jones and Lavalée 2009).

Seeking support was identified as a key coping skill essential to managing transitional challenges. Coping skills (internal resources) and social support (external resources) play a significant role in athletes' adaptation to life after sport (see also Stambulova *et al.* 2009, 2021, Park *et al.* 2013, Brown *et al.* 2018). While athletes in this study had social support from family, partners, and friends, they noted a lack of support from professionals (e.g. coaches and sport psychologist) and sport governing bodies and organisations. The study emphasises the need for customised support for retired athletes, taking into account their unique needs and challenges. Support providers must understand the emotional and psychological difficulties of retirement and elite athletes' demands and stresses. In this respect, policy makers and sport governing bodies should recognise the importance of social support and prioritise the establishment of support systems by integrating specialised practitioners (e.g. sport psychologists, career counsellors) into sport governing bodies/organisations or developing collaborations with external support services. By providing focused assistance and resources that address specific requirements, policymakers and sports organisations can ensure retired athletes transition successfully to life beyond sport. In addition, despite the importance of psychological support during the transition, many athletes were unaware of available services due to inadequate promotion and communication. Thus, sport governing bodies must proactively educate athletes about psychological support services to address their needs during transitions out of sport.

The study revealed that British athletes who had access to a national career assistance programme were grateful for the support provided by both their sport agency and their governing body. Although not all British athletes received transitional support from their agencies, it is noteworthy that those who did appreciated the personalised support they received. This support demonstrated that they were respected and cared for as individuals, rather than simply being seen as part of a group. The tailored support services provided by sport agencies could serve as a model for other sport governing bodies and organisations in developing accessible resources for retired athletes. Sport governing bodies and organisations worldwide have developed career assistance



programmes, but these findings should be considered when developing and evaluating the efficacy of their support provision (Hong and Coffee 2018, Torregrosa *et al.* 2020). Some participants experienced confusion following their athletic achievements, signalling a need for psychological support. This highlights the importance of considering the needs of high-performance athletes when developing supportive interventions. This is reflective of the suggestions proposed in the extant CSR-related literature (Babiak and Wolfe 2013).

While the present study provides a range of implications and recommendations for developing CSR initiatives and relevant policies, we acknowledge that it is also subject to limitations. While athletes' accounts were collected from six countries, the numbers of participants varied. For instance, there was only one athlete from each of Japan and Mexico. It was not feasible to interview more athletes at the time of data collection in order to complete the study within the imposed timeline. Thus, future research might usefully utilise a more balanced sample in terms of the number of participants from each country. While the study was not designed to be cross-cultural, future studies may be conducted cross-culturally with balanced samples across nations in order to address cultural sensitivity. One of the significant findings was that support from sport agencies was highlighted as more valuable and practical than that from sport governing bodies/organisations. Such support was discussed only by British athletes, but its applicability to other jurisdictions might be usefully explored.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study is available on request from the corresponding author. The data is not publicly available due to the fact that it contains information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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