

Lavallee, D., Park, S., & Tod, D. (2010). Career termination. In S. Hanrahan & M. B. Andersen (Eds.), *Handbook of applied sport psychology* (pp. 242-249). Oxford: Routledge.

One of the issues commonly encountered by sport psychology practitioners is how to help athletes cope with career termination (Lavalley & Andersen, 2000). Even though retirement from sport is one of the only certainties in the life of a competitive athlete, individuals may resist planning for career termination and sometimes experience adjustment problems when faced with the end of sport participation. Attention has increased in the literature on psychological interventions for athletes in transitions, and research has started to document the effectiveness of specific interventions to assist retiring and retired athletes. Governing bodies of sport around the world have used this research to develop career transition programs for athletes (e.g., Anderson & Morris, 2000). Many of these programs employ sport psychologists to provide pre-transition and post-transition services for athletes.

Our purpose in this chapter is to provide an overview of a range of approaches sport psychology practitioners can employ when working with athletes who intend to terminate their sports participation or who have already ended their careers. We begin by building on Danish's life development work (see chapter 18 in this book) and reviewing how life development interventions can be effective in helping athletes adjust to retirement. We then outline the beneficial role of account-making, mentoring, and traditional therapeutic approaches when working with retired athletes.

#### <a>Life Development Interventions

In recent years researchers have focused on developing interventions to assist

athletes in transition. One such approach is the life development intervention (LDI) based upon Danish and colleagues' (e.g., Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995) psychoeducational-developmental model. LDI emphasizes continuous growth and development across the life span. The intervention is also based around critical life events that often disrupt daily routines and relationships, which can be sources of stress.

Danish et al. (1995) suggested a LDI can provide helpful strategies before an event (e.g., retirement), supportive strategies during an event, and counseling strategies after an event. In a sport setting, athletes experience several critical life events such as injuries, selection processes, within-career transitions, and career termination. Retirement from their sports can be seen as one of the most important life events for athletes because they have often spent long periods of time devoting themselves to their sports. When athletes have to leave their sports, they may often experience loss in many areas such as identity, public attention, everyday training, and social networks (e.g., Lally, 2007). Moreover, some athletes have to end their careers with no preparation or intention because of serious injuries or deselection. Such events often require considerable psychological adjustment due to the lack of preparation on the part of athletes.

In a recent study Lavalley (2005) found that a LDI was effective in helping retired athletes cope with their career terminations. The intervention employed both supportive and counseling strategies. Because it is important in a LDI for the practitioner to make an initial

assessment of life events (Danish et al., 1995), participants in Lavallee's study completed a personality type measurement and a career interest inventory during an intake session.

Following this assessment the intervention focused on helping the individuals identify skills they had developed in sport that could be transferred to other areas of their lives (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). The researcher used goal setting to identify new skills (e.g., interviewing skills), as well as develop future plans, and employed supportive and counseling strategies as a means of empowerment, because they helped the participants encounter their retirements constructively (Danish et al., 1995).

The third, and final, aspect of the intervention focused on the development of life skills (e.g., effective decision making) that could augment the participants' abilities to cope with their career terminations and other future events. Participants had opportunities to identify the skills as transferable, as well as new skills, to practice during intervention sessions while the researcher provided feedback, support, and follow-up to enhance personal competence (Danish et al., 1995). As part of an LDI sport psychologists might also want to consider employing other career transition measurement tools (see Box 26.1).

Lavallee (2005) demonstrated how a LDI can help athletes broaden their social identities while also enhancing their self-confidence and self-worth. Learning new coping skills related to their current situations helped increase their abilities to cope with retirement and have positive views of the end of their sport careers. Individual counseling sessions with

athletes provided opportunities to evaluate how committed they were to the sport role at that point in time. If their commitment suggested identity foreclosure by showing a strong tendency to avoid their upcoming life changes, the researcher made a differentiation between psychological and situational foreclosure in subsequent parts of the intervention (see chapter 30). Practitioners can use rapport building, effective listening, and empathic understanding during counseling sessions of the intervention to allow participants to express their emotions and reactions associated with their career terminations (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999).

#### <a>Account-Making

Grove, Lavallee, Gordon, and Harvey's (1998) research showed that an account-making approach is an effective framework for understanding and resolving distressful reactions to sports career termination. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) adapted Horowitz's (1986) model of coping with loss to identify key elements in dealing with extremely distressful experiences. Compared to Horowitz's model that emphasized the role of "working through" in recovery, Harvey et al. developed the idea that individuals begin to construct stories about their traumatic experiences - why they happened, what they mean for the future. This "account" then is partially confided to close others, whose reactions may help or hinder individuals in dealing with their distressful reactions. If the close confidants react to the account with empathy (e.g., by lending an "ear," being there to listen, offering advice or encouragement, providing feedback when desired), individuals may move to

confront what has happened and deal with it rationally and constructively. If the close confidants do not react with empathy, the negative effects of the distressful reactions may grow, and individuals may become discouraged in trying to engage in this confiding social interaction activity that appears to be central to positive psychological adaptation.

When athletes experience distressful reactions to sport retirement, there may be several negative experiences associated with their earliest recognition that their careers are over. For example, there may be a loss of material and symbolic rewards associated with their career termination. More specifically, they may have to find new ways to make a living or occupy themselves during the times that they formerly trained. Their self-identities may begin to transform towards less publicly visible and esteemed status. Their intrinsic feelings of accomplishment and joy associated with highly competitive performances may have to be forgone, and substitute motivators may need to be found in their repertoires of skills and interests. The social environment that involves comradeship and adulation may also change as the athlete slides toward a lower profile in the minds of fans and peers.

Grove et al. (1998) found that 20% of athletes experience distressful reactions to retirement from sport. Experiences are likely to differ greatly among retired athletes who have distressful reactions to career termination. The account-making model proposes that for the best adaptation and healing to occur, individuals need to come to grips with the reality of the career termination. Retired athletes would receive substantial benefits from accepting

their distressful reactions and reconstructing new identities that use their careers and experiences in constructive ways for future activities, whether for individual gain or to give back to others. Erickson (1963) termed this active concern in guiding the generations that follow generativity and athletes are often in a position to “give back” in terms of activities post-retirement (e.g., coaching) that still have to do with sport.

An important initial task for sport psychology practitioners is to create an atmosphere where athletes are willing to reflect openly on the current versions of their retirement stories and begin to refine them. Once a climate of meaningful involvement and trust has been established, the psychologist can offer support, validation of feelings, and assistance in reconstructing life stories. At first, practitioners might suggest constructive activities, sharing information about themselves, offering companionship, asking the athletes to teach them or others how to do something, and/or providing information about life transitions and the retirement experiences of other athletes (Grove et al., 1998). Later, both open-ended and specific questions could be asked about various phases of the athletes’ careers (including the latter stages when retirement issues may have first become salient), tactfully confronting persistent denial, encouraging self-exploration of roles, values, interests, and skills. Also during this time, as the athlete reveals more about himself/herself, the psychologist may start to feel that he/she is, in some ways, being tested by the client.

At the same time, it is important to realize that neither confiding nor account-making

can be rushed. Both processes will involve periods of resistance, progress, plateau, and regression. Athletes will also differ in their abilities to understand their own experiences, express themselves, engage in personal disclosure, and construct articulate accounts. Initial attempts at confiding and account-making may best be done in writing so that athletes are better able to organize and clarify their thoughts and feelings (Pennebaker, 1990).

Practitioners can use a wide variety of therapeutic writing techniques including: diaries, journals, poems, letters, stories, and autobiographies. Such activities can be approached from a number of traditional behavior-change perspectives (e.g., rational-emotive behavior therapy; as outlined later in the chapter), and various degrees of structure can also be imposed to suit athletes' preferences, abilities, and readiness to deal with specific issues. Regardless of the specific format(s) and degree of structure, it is important to encourage progressive movement toward more "complete" accounts that include explanations, memories, and emotional reactions to the athletes' prior sport involvement, transition experiences, and uncertain futures. At the same time, the establishment of new behavioral patterns (e.g., involvement in the teaching of young athletes) should be encouraged because of the potent influence of one's behavior on self-perception and identity.

These elaborated accounts and new behavioral involvements can then form the basis for private reflection, discussions with significant others, support group interactions, and/or private consultation with the sport psychologist. In the short term, feedback from these

activities will enable the athletes to work through loss-related issues (e.g., denial, feelings of despair), further refine personal retirement stories, and develop plans for future behaviors.

Over time, the complementary processes of account-making, confiding, refining stories, and engaging in new behavior patterns will accomplish a number of therapeutic goals.

Specifically, the retirement experiences will be chronicled and their reality will be confirmed; personal memories and emotions will be formally recorded as central components of the experiences; the athletes will actively practice communication and interpersonal skills; the athletes will achieve a sense of integration, closure, and identity change; and the athletes will be prepared to embrace new and different challenges (Grove et al., 1998). Identity change can lead to generativity, and sport psychology practitioners can facilitate generativity by consciously encouraging retired athletes to discuss their refined accounts with others who are in the midst of their careers. Such an approach could be incorporated into mentoring programs as outlined in the following section.

#### <a>Mentoring

Researchers have recently identified mentoring as a useful approach to assist athletes in making transitions out of sport (Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000).

Kram (1992) defined mentoring as a close relationship in which a mentor counsels, supports, and guides a protégé. Research in a number of settings outside of sport has documented the benefits of such an intervention (e.g., Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993), and several sport

psychologists have suggested mentoring as a possible way to assist athletes in coping with career transition processes (e.g., Jackson, Mayocchi, & Dover, 1998). In addition, Perna, Zaichkowsky, and Bocknek (1996) reported the positive effects of mentoring during career transitions in sport settings. The study assessed levels of mentoring among a sample of senior-year student-athletes and found evidence that those who had mentors to guide them through the crucial stages of transition showed higher intimacy scores (which indicated a degree of comfort with emotional expression and personal relationships) when compared with athletes who received less mentoring.

In the sport career termination process, some athletes reported that they approached their coaches as mentors because they (coaches) are often former athletes who have previously experienced career transitions from participation in sport. Brooks and Sikes (1997) described desirable mentor characteristics such as being accessible, supportive, a good communicator, and a good listener, along with displaying positive and encouraging attitudes. Although coaches need to focus on their current (and potentially future) athletes, they are in a good position to offer support to retired (or soon to retire) athletes. Sport psychologists can help develop a mentoring relationship between coaches and retiring athletes. In doing so, practitioners need to consider the athletes' perceptions of coaches as mentors, the willingness of coaches to be mentors, as well as the importance of individual communication skills in mentoring. For example, when athletes show fear of an uncertain

future and stressful reactions caused by career termination, mentors can reduce these negative reactions by listening, supporting, encouraging, and leading them to positive paths and building individual career development plans.

Sinclair and Orlick (1993) suggested that retiring athletes often feel alienated from their sports upon career termination, and opportunities for them to contribute to the sport system may help with their sense of isolation and disengagement. Mentoring is one method for doing so because such relationships will help current athletes plan for their post-athletic careers and assist former athletes in the adjustment process. A number of career assistance programs employ athletes to facilitate group discussions among recently retired athletes (Anderson & Morris, 2000). In addition, athletes who experience distressful reactions to retirement from sport could return to their sporting teams and discuss their retirement-related accounts with other athletes in the midst of their careers.

#### <a>Traditional Therapeutic Approaches

Sport psychology practitioners may want to consider employing more traditional behavioral, cognitive, and emotional interventions when working with retired athletes alongside life development interventions, account-making, and mentoring. Although no research has been conducted specifically in relation to career termination, researchers have recommended emotional expression (Kennedy-Moor & Watson, 1999), cognitive therapy (Beck & Weishaar, 2000), rational-emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 2000), and stress

inoculation training (Meichenbaum & Deffenbacher, 1988) in the literature as approaches to facilitate career termination adjustment among elite athletes.

Emotional expression is based on existential psychotherapy and involves counseling that focuses on ontological experiences, one's personal values, and the present event. The approach aims to help individuals confront their existential concerns and express negative emotions based on the evidence that suppression of emotion contributes to individuals' distress (Classen, Doopman, Angell, & Spiegel, 1996). In the career transition process some athletes with strong and exclusive athletic identities at retirement may experience feelings of loss, fear of freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Lavallee et al., 2000). Expression of these negative emotions may reduce distress and provide opportunities for former athletes to reorder life priorities and re-establish meaning, as well as encourage them to cope with their current situations (Yalom, 1980).

Wolff and Lester (1989) have suggested that cognitive therapy is suitable to reduce retired athletes' anxiety and depression stemming from maladaptive cognitions including negative views of the self, the world, and the future that potentially occur during the career transition process. The approach aims to decrease maladaptive cognitions related to the sport career endings and build adaptive perspectives for post-sport life. Similarly, rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) can be an effective therapy for athletes who exhibit denial of the end of their sport careers or hold irrational views of their sport career terminations. REBT

can assist athletes in shifting irrational or incongruent beliefs to rational or healthy ones, and provide them with powerful insights into their sport career terminations and current status.

Gordon and Lavalley (2004) recommended stress-inoculation training because of its utility in decreasing distress and building coping abilities through training. Practitioners can encourage retired athletes who experience their sport career terminations as problematic events to perceive them as problems to be solved and to focus on what is changeable.

Meichenbaum and Deffenbacher (1988) outlined three phases of stress inoculation training (SIT) that include educational and conceptual understanding of the treatment process, the development of coping skills, and the refining and application of the acquired coping skills. Various kinds of therapeutic methods can be applied as coping skills in SIT: cognitive restructuring, self-instructional training, problem solving, and relaxation.

Practitioners can teach relaxation skills to athletes who are experiencing heightened arousal and anxiety. When athletes master a relaxation skill they can start to use it in nonanxious situations and progressively apply it in anxious circumstances as well. Cognitive restructuring aims to identify and modify negative, anxious thoughts and images.

Psychologists can employ cognitive reconstructing with athletes to build positive viewpoints of their current problems. During sessions, if athletes continue to struggle with their problems, then practitioners may add other methods such as problem-solving, which refers to a direct focus on coping with the behavioral demands, and self-instructional training

designed to build positive reinforcement. During the final stage of applying cognitive coping skills, practitioners should provide support and reward athletes' successful coping processes and efforts.

#### <a>Conclusion

Helping athletes make successful transitions out of sport is not a simple process. Sport psychologists are sometimes approached months, and occasionally years, after athletes have ended their competitive careers for help with their transitions (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2007). In some instances, it may also be the first time the athletes have sought a sport psychologist's help for any issue, transition-related or otherwise. The range of approaches reviewed in this chapter can assist sport psychology practitioners when working with athletes in transition (see Box 26.2 for a summary).

## <a>References

- Alfermann, D., Stambulova, N., & Zemaityte, A. (2004). Reactions to sports career termination: A cross-cultural comparison of German, Lithuanian, and Russian athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 5*, 61-75.
- Anderson, D., & Morris, T. (2000). Athlete lifestyle programs. In D. Lavallee & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp. 59–81). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Beck, A. T., & Weishaar, M. E. (2000). Cognitive therapy. In R. J. Corsini & D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current psychotherapies* (6th ed., pp. 241-272). Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Brooks, V., & Sikes, P. (1997). *The good mentor guide: Initial teacher education in secondary schools*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Burke, R. J., McKeen, C. A., & McKenna, C. (1993). Correlates of mentoring in organizations: The mentor's perspective. *Psychological Reports, 72*, 883-896.
- Classen, C., Koopman, C., Angell, K., & Spiegel, D. (1996). Coping styles associated with psychological adjustment to advanced breast cancer. *Health Psychology, 15*, 434-437.
- Danish, S. J., Petitpas, A. J., & Hale, B. D. (1995). Psychological interventions: A life developmental model. In S. M. Murphy (Ed.), *Sport psychology interventions* (pp. 19-38). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

- Ellis, A. (2000). Rational emotive behavior therapy. In R. J. Corsini, & D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current psychotherapies* (6th ed., pp. 168-204). Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Fernandez, A., Stephan, Y., & Fouquereau, E. (2006). Assessing reasons for sports career termination: Developing the Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 7*, 407-421.
- Gordon, S., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in competitive sport. In T. Morris & J. Summers (Eds.), *Sport psychology: Theory, applications and issues*. (2nd ed., pp. 584-610). Milton, QLD, Australia: Wiley.
- Grove, J. R., Lavallee, D., Gordon, S., & Harvey, J. H. (1998). Account-making: A model for understanding and resolving distressful reactions to retirement from sport. *The Sport Psychologist, 12*, 52-67.
- Harvey, J. H., Weber, A. L., & Orbuch, T. L. (1990). *Interpersonal accounts: A social psychological perspective*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Hawkins, K., & Blann, F. W. (1993). *Athlete/coach career development and transition*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Australian Sports Commission.
- Horowitz, M. J. (1986). *Stress response syndromes* (2nd ed.). Northvale, NJ: Aronson.
- Jackson, S., Mayocchi, L., & Dover, J. (1998). Life after winning gold: II. Coping with change as an Olympic gold medallist. *The Sport Psychologist, 12*, 137-155.

Kennedy-Moor, E., & Watson, J. C. (1999). *Expressing emotion*. New York: Guildford Press.

Kram, K. E. (1992). *Mentoring at work*. London: Scott Foreman.

Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8, 85-99.

Lavallee, D. (2005). The effect of a life development intervention on sports career transition adjustment. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 193-202.

Lavallee, D., & Andersen, M. B. (2000). Leaving sport: Easing career transitions. In M. B. Andersen (Ed.), *Doing sport psychology* (pp. 249-261). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Lavallee, D., Nesti, M., Borkeles, E., Cockerill, I., & Edge, A. (2000). Intervention strategies for athletes in transition. In D. Lavallee & P. Wylleman, (Eds.) *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp. 111-130). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Mayocchi, L., & Hanrahan, S. J. (2000). Transferable skills for career change. In D. Lavallee & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp. 95-110). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Meichenbaum, D. H., & Deffenbacher, J. L. (1988). Stress inoculation training. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 16, 69-90.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1990). *Opening up*. New York: Morrow.

Perna, F. M., Zaichkowsky, L., & Bocknek, G. (1996). The association of mentoring with psychosocial development among male athletes at termination of college career.

*Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 8*, 76-88.

Petitpas, A. J., Giges, B., & Danish, S. J. (1999). The sport psychologist-athlete relationship:

Implications for training. *The Sport Psychologist, 13*, 344-357.

Sinclair, D. A., & Orlick, T. (1993). Positive transitions from high-performance sport. *The*

*Sport Psychologist, 7*, 138-150.

Van Raalte, J. L., & Andersen, M. B. (2007). When sport psychology consulting is a means

to an end(ing): Roles and agendas when helping athletes leave their sports. *The*

*Sport Psychologist, 21*, 227-242.

Wolff, R., & Lester, D. (1989). A theoretical basis for counseling the retired professional

athlete. *Psychological Reports, 64*, 1043–1046.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Harper Collins.

## Box 26.1

*Advances in the Measurement of Career Transitions in Sport*

To supplement interventions, sport psychologists might want to consider available measurement tools. There have been advances in the measurement of career transitions in sport in recent years, including the development of the following:

- *Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory* (Fernandez, Stephen, & Fouquereau, 2006)
- *Retirement Sports Survey* (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004)
- *British Athletes' Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career and Education (BALANCE) Scale* (Lavallee, 2005; developed specifically to assess the quality of adjustment following sports career termination)
- *Athlete Retirement Questionnaire* (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993)
- *Australian Athletes Career Transition Inventory* (Hawkins & Blann, 1993)

## Box 26.2

*Summary of Practical Considerations for Sport Psychologists Working with Athletes Who are Dealing with Career Terminations*

- Helping athletes cope with their career terminations is one of the most commonly encountered issues for sport psychology practitioners
- A Life Development Intervention can help with developing: (a) coping strategies with athletes prior to retirement, (b) supportive strategies with athletes during the process of retirement, and (c) counseling strategies with athletes post-retirement
- An account-making approach can be a useful framework for understanding and resolving distressful reactions to career termination.
- Mentoring can be useful in helping guide athletes through the career transition process.
- Emotional expression, cognitive therapy, rational-emotive behavior therapy, and stress inoculation training are recommended to facilitate career termination adjustment among athletes.