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DOI: 10.1080/00336297.1983.10483777

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Leaving Competitive Sport: Retirement or Rebirth?

Jay J. Coakley

This paper reviews existing information on retirement from sport and offers an interpretation of the retirement process that will both challenge widespread assumptions held by sport sociologists and provide hypotheses for future research. The dynamics of the retirement process are discussed for athletes in top-level interscholastic and amateur sports as well as in professional sports. Existing data suggest that retirement for athletes in each of these contexts is not an inevitable source of stress, identity crises, or adjustment problems. It is argued that the dynamics of the sport retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems.

What happens to athletes when, for one reason or another, their active involvement in top-level competition ends? In recent years, concern about the fates of so-called ex-athletes has grown, and has usually focused on athletes' retirement from sport and the possibility that that retirement may be a source of problems. In some cases, leaving sport has been conceptualized as a form of "social death," and the ex-athlete described as being prone to critical social and psychological conditions. This paper will review the research on retirement from sport and offer a framework for exploring what happens when athletes end their active involvement in top-level competition.

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Before going any further, the major terms used in this discussion must be defined. First, competitive sport refers to any organized sport activity in which training and participation are time-consuming and in which the level of performance meets relatively high standards of expectations. Specifically, highly competitive interscholastic and amateur sports as well as professional sports of all types will be discussed. Second, retirement refers to the process of transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities. This is somewhat different from popular connotations of the term where retirement is often used to refer to an event which simply marks a withdrawal from, or an end to, an involvement. Popular synonyms for retirement are "to go away," "enter seclusion," "withdraw," "retreat," "give ground," "move back," or in baseball, "to make

an out." These terms make retirement sound final and negative when, in many cases, it involves new opportunities and the potential for growth and development. In fact, retirement often involves a type of graduation rather than a withdrawal, and graduations are celebrated with commencement exercises marking a beginning rather than an end. In any case, retirement is most accurately conceptualized as a role transition through which a person disengages from one set of activities and relationships to develop or expand other activities and relationships.

Paradoxes in the Study of Retirement

In describing competitive sport, the literature tends to emphasize the rigidity of sport organization, the existence of exploitation, and threats to athletes' autonomy and personal well-being. The literature describes athletes who complain about the aversive nature of their training schedules, the length of their seasons, and the lack of control over their own lives. This type of analysis should lead to the conclusion that most athletes would welcome retirement from competitive sport because it would allow them to pursue alternative activities more conducive to personal growth and development. However, discussions about ex-athletes usually emphasize retirement as a negative event (Ball, 1976; Harris & Eitzen, 1978; Hill & Lowe, 1974; McPherson, 1980; Rosenberg, 1980a, 1980b, 1981). Retired athletes are described as unwilling victims of circumstances causing them trauma, identity crises, loss of economic status, and the loss of meaningful social support from friends and fans.

The literature in social gerontology published prior to 1970 reveals a similar paradox in discussions of occupational retirement. On the other hand, retire-

ment was often described as something to look forward to and to work for; it was seen as a transition through which a person left the constraining context of work and entered the liberating context of leisure. On the other hand, retirement was also described as a problem, a source of personal trauma for the retiree, and a sentence to isolation and powerlessness. Although the merits of these descriptions are still debated, recent research in the field has shown that "for the most part, retirement appears to have little significant impact on broad levels of social adjustment and identity" (George, 1980, p. 73). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Retirement for some people is stressful. But the typical pattern involves no major changes in a person's level of adjustment. This does not mean that retired people have no problems, only that their problems are not characteristically caused by their retirements. Furthermore, research shows that most people prepare for retirement by using information they receive through informal sources. Personal coping styles for moving from a work career to other activities and relationships vary widely among retirees. Most coping styles are successful and none stand out as ideal (Atchley, 1980; George, 1980).

Unlike the gerontologists, sport sociologists are still in the initial stages of clearing up the contradictions in their study of retirement. Is retirement from competitive sport a problem, or does it provide new opportunities? Do athletes experience trauma during retirement, or do they experience relief? Is the transition out of the role of active player experienced as a withdrawal, a move back, a retreat, a failure? Or is it experienced as a period of growth and development? At present, the answer to these questions is "sometimes yes and sometimes no." Of course, some ex-athletes have made a successful transition from active involvement in competitive sport to other satis-

fyng activities, but others cling to their trophies, sport identities, and memories in ways that seem to impede their development. We do not know how often retiring athletes fall into either of these patterns, nor do we know why these patterns vary from one individual to the next. However, if some studies are reviewed through a conceptual framework that focuses attention on role transitions during late adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age, it is possible to develop hypotheses and make suggestions for future research.

Leaving Interscholastic and Amateur Sport

Although research is scarce, the studies completed on former interscholastic and amateur athletes suggest that their "retirement" from sport is simply seen as a part of other normal developments such as leaving high school, entering college or the labor force, and settling down into new relationships associated with family and career. The studies do not support the idea that retirement from competitive sport is a characteristically traumatic and identity-shaking process. For example, in a study of 153 former outstanding male high school football and basketball players, Sands (1978) found that although sport was a crucial activity in their lives while they were in school, it declined in importance after graduation. The athletes in his sample generally defined their sport involvement as passing phases in their lives. According to Sands, the end of their involvement in competitive interscholastic sport was not accompanied by trauma or identity crises, and their loss of social recognition was handled quite realistically.

If this is the case for outstanding male athletes, we could expect similar realism and successful adjustment among others whose athletic status is less important

and less visible in the social environment of the high school. Young men in minor sports and young women in most varsity sports would be less likely to have their status and their relationships directly linked to their sport involvement. The transition out of competitive sport would probably not create trauma or adjustment problems for them. They might miss the camaraderie of teammates and the excitement of top-level athletic competition, but their memories of past sport participation are not likely to interfere with their future growth and development.

Other research on interscholastic athletes suggests that males who participate in varsity high school sports experience more success after graduation than do nonathletes. Compared to nonathletes, they are more likely to attend college, receive degrees, go on to graduate school, reach higher levels of occupational status, and earn higher incomes (Otto & Alwin, 1977; Phillips & Schafer, 1971; Bend, Note 1). This is *not* to say that their success comes from participation in sport. But these data hardly support the idea that ex-athletes have unique adjustment problems which interfere with their growth and development.

Research also suggests that when high school athletes increase their academic aspirations and achievements, the increases are primarily due to support they received through the important relationships in their lives. The sport experience takes on meaning through those relationships, especially those with parents and close friends. It is likely that the parents and close friends of most athletes, like the athletes themselves, would see sport participation as a passing phase in the normal process of growth and development.

It should be remembered that retirement from competitive interscholastic sport does not necessarily entail an end

to sport involvement. Many former high school athletes participate in community-based programs at a variety of competitive levels. They may go on to college and participate in varsity, intramural, or club sports. They may also continue their attachment to sport by majoring in physical education or recreation, by coaching or refereeing youth teams, or by becoming involved in any of a number of lifetime sport activities.

At the college level we could expect transition patterns similar to those at the high school level. For example, Snyder and Baber (1979) found no evidence among 233 former intercollegiate male athletes in a midwestern sample to suggest that retirement from sport was associated with problems. The former athletes were compared to nonathletes who had graduated during the same time period (1965-1975); there were no differences in levels of satisfaction with friends, marriage, work career, financial situation, or general life style. The data also showed that the former athletes shifted their interests and activities quite successfully after leaving school. Like nonathletes, they seemed to adjust to the normal challenges encountered after college. Unlike the nonathletes, they made sport and sport-related activities a major part of their leisure time. They attended more sport events, watched more sports on television, and actively participated in sports more often than did nonathletes. In other words, they did not usually terminate their involvement in sport when their intercollegiate careers ended. They simply tended to maintain their involvement by making it a high priority leisure activity while continuing to grow and develop in other dimensions of their lives during early adulthood.

Research on mobility and occupational achievement among former intercollegiate male athletes supports the work done by Snyder and Baber (1979). Studies by Dubois (1980) and Sack and

Thiel (1979) indicate that ex-athletes do not significantly differ from former classmates in their current socioeconomic status. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the athletes had no problems in adjusting to the transition from college to occupation, but it at least suggests that the problems, if they did exist, were not serious enough to cause their occupational patterns to differ from those of their college cohorts.

Although more research is needed, the majority of former intercollegiate male athletes appear able to handle the transition out of top-level sport competition constructively. The transition out of intercollegiate sport seems to go hand-in-hand with the transition from college to work careers, new friendships, marriage, parenthood, and other roles normally associated with early adulthood.

Research is also scarce on retirement from amateur sports where participation occurs outside of an interscholastic setting. Mihovilovic (1968) studied 44 former elite Yugoslavian male soccer players and reported that for them retirement was a painful event. He observed that older athletes tended to cling to team membership as long as possible and then had a difficult time adjusting to retirement. He concluded that the retired soccer player characteristically "hides, escapes, looks for compensation in alcohol, blames others, weaves dreams, . . . deceives himself as regards his possibilities, [and] grows indifferent to events around him" (p. 81).

However, a closer examination of Mihovilovic's data reveals that the adjustment problems among the retired soccer players were not as pervasive as he suggested. For example, over 60% of them remained nonsmokers or smoked no more than they did before retirement; 84% remained nondrinkers or drank no more than before retirement; 82% stayed in good physical shape; 60% kept in constant touch with their past team-

mates; 70% did not report any constriction in their circle of friends; 80% still participated in sport tournaments; and nearly 90% maintained their connections with sport by coaching, refereeing, serving in some other support capacity, or working in sport organizations. Contrary to Mihovilovic's conclusion, then, this seems to be an impressive adjustment record for athletes whose sport experiences had monopolized their attention for many years and had prevented most of them from completing their education or receiving job training. It is especially impressive when one considers that over half of the former players had retired suddenly and involuntarily. This does not mean that retirement required no personal adjustments, but it does suggest that it was handled quite well in spite of being unwelcome.

Mihovilovic's study answers few questions about retirement among amateur athletes. Although his data did not suggest that many of the former soccer players experienced measurable failure in coping with life after retirement, his conclusion referred to considerable pain, stress, and maladjustment. It may be that his confusing interpretation reflected the range of transition patterns associated with retirement—coupled with his own concern and ambivalence about retirement issues. More research is needed to identify the conditions and characteristics associated with these patterns.

There is similar confusion when discussing the retirement of other amateur athletes. Swimmers, gymnasts, tennis players, and figure skaters, since the age of 5, have spent considerable time in training and competition; the conclusion is that retirement will probably cause them numerous problems. Yet many former amateur athletes seemingly have been able to use their sport careers as stepping stones to other involvement, or have developed other interests and skills

while participating in sport. But there is no systematic, empirical basis for a discussion of these possibilities.

In a *Sports Illustrated* article, journalist Janice Kaplan (1977) briefly described the retirement of three former amateur athletes. Her descriptions portrayed a range of patterns. For example, former gold-medalist swimmer Debbie Meyer retired at age 19. Shortly thereafter she became depressed and gained 50 pounds. Then she entered and dropped out of two colleges, went on a crash diet, and suffered from anorexia nervosa. She recovered, started coaching at a swim club, became a successful assistant coach at Stanford University, and then accepted a good marketing position with a swimsuit manufacturer. Fritz Hobbs, part of the silver medal-winning rowing team in the 1972 Olympic Games, combined athletics with his pursuit of B.A. and M.B.A. degrees at Harvard and, after dropping out of top-level competition, made a smooth transition into a Wall Street job. Now Hobbs uses his past sport experience as a conversation topic with clients, is involved with an amateur rowing association, and plays squash several times a week. John Williams, a 1972 Olympic gold medal archer, dropped out of top-level competition at 19. He obtained a low-paid consulting job with an archery equipment manufacturer, entered and dropped out of one school, entered another and volunteered as an archery coach. Williams encountered some political problems in amateur archery, joined the Professional Archery Association and won its annual competition. He was ejected from the PAA for reasons stemming from his earlier problems in amateur archery, was later reinstated, went back to school, and continued working for the equipment manufacturer while competing professionally and doing private coaching.

These three examples are summarized

not because they are representative, but because they show some of the variations to be expected in a study of retirement among amateur athletes. In fact, the variation would probably be greater than that found among former interscholastic athletes because amateur athletes are a more diversified group. Retirement from amateur sport occurs at many ages for a variety of reasons, while retirement from interscholastic sport is usually associated with other transitions in a young person's life. Leaving amateur sport does not necessarily correspond with these other transitions.

Leaving Professional Sports

There is more information about former athletes from professional sports than there is at other levels of participation, but confusion still exists about the dynamics of the retirement process. For example, sociologist Marvin Sussman (1972) once wrote that retirement from professional sport was never a problem because athletes were aware of the brevity of their careers and prepared accordingly; furthermore, professional athletes were guaranteed second careers when their sport careers ended. However, recent information has indicated that Sussman's statements were based on popular misconceptions and did not accurately describe the retirement process.

It is now known that many professional athletes have until recently ignored the prospect of early retirement and that second careers are sometimes difficult to initiate and maintain. But it is also naive to use just this negative information and conclude that former professional athletes in general are overwhelmed by retirement-induced stress and are unable to cope constructively with the adjustments required by moving out of active sport involvement. Too often, images of retirement are shaped by visions of a successful Fran Tarkenton selling insurance on television, or a

disillusioned Mercury Morris sitting in jail after a drug conviction. The few systematic studies that have been done indicate that neither Tarkenton nor Morris is typical. The fates of former athletes cannot be collectively characterized as either glorious or disastrous. A brief review of these studies illustrates this point.

In a 1958 survey of former major league baseball players, Haerle (1975) concluded that retirement created strain but that the overall transition out of sport involved successful patterns of coping with these strains. He found that many of the former players missed the daily camaraderie of teammates, but this did not interfere with their search to find new jobs and to make the other adjustments required in their lives outside of sport. The respondents made these adjustments in spite of the fact that about 75% of them had never seriously thought about retirement until the last quarter of their active playing careers.

Two other studies of former baseball players, one by Arviko (Note 2) and the other by Lerch (1979), report findings similar to those of Haerle. The levels of adjustment among respondents in each of these studies were relatively high. Only 15% scored low on a measure of life satisfaction. Although neither study could explain more than 15% of the variance in life satisfaction scores, factors such as good health, a high income, a high level of education, a positive pre-retirement attitude, and a job connected with sport all related positively to feelings of satisfaction. Had these researchers used comparison groups, they probably would have found the retired players to be a relatively well-adjusted group of older adults.

Recent data from a sample of retired NFL players (Reynolds, 1981) also showed that most respondents scored high in self-esteem, and that satisfaction with their present jobs was most strongly

linked with the amount of social support coming from close friends and relatives. This was especially true for players working in low-status jobs unrelated to their personal occupational interests.

Unfortunately, there are questions about the representativeness of each sample in these latter three studies. The data were collected through mailed questionnaires and the response rates were low (38%, 45%, and 22%, respectively). Therefore one should be cautious about using them to characterize the retirement process. In addition, each study focuses on one of the two major male team sports in the United States.

The only available systematic information on former athletes of individual sports has been reported in two studies of boxers, one by Weinberg and Arond (1952) and the other by Hare (1971). Weinberg and Arond traced the post-retirement careers of 95 ex-champions and leading contenders. They found that retirement was accompanied by a dramatic decline in prestige and income, and by emotional problems stemming from trying to find jobs outside of boxing. However, most of the problems seemed to be directly linked to injuries, a heavy past dependence on managers, and carefree spending habits begun during their active boxing careers. The possibility that the boxers' minority status, or the low socioeconomic status of their families, could be related to adjustment problems was not discussed by Weinberg and Arond. But Hare dealt with it in a 1971 study. He concluded that family socioeconomic background and minority status were both significant variables in the retirement process for the former boxers he studied. Since most of them came from low income families lacking the resources to provide material support during retirement, and since they encountered discrimination in the job market, the adjustments to retirement were difficult to make.

Discussion and Implications

For most interscholastic athletes, leaving competitive sport is tied to general changes in their educational careers. It is usually associated with normal role transitions involving moves into other educational settings or the labor force. Because leaving sport occurs simultaneously with these other transitions, it is difficult to separate the effects of retirement from the effects of other significant events such as dropping out of school, graduating, continuing one's education in a new setting, trying to find a job, starting a career, and coping with the other developmental tasks faced during early adulthood.

Of course, some former high school athletes, like Harry Angstrom in Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, will have problems in their lives, but it would be naive to conclude that those problems are inevitably linked to prior sport participation or retirement from it. In order to discover factors unique to the transition out of sport, researchers need to use comparison groups. This will prevent them from mistakenly inferring that the normal adjustment problems of late adolescence and early adulthood are causally linked to retirement from sport.

In addition to the need for comparison groups, there is a need to explore the manner in which sport retirement patterns vary with the socioeconomic status and gender of former interscholastic athletes. If the transition out of competitive sport is eased by continuing sport involvement in other settings, patterns may vary by status and gender because opportunities for involvement vary along these dimensions. For example, a young woman who no longer has access to school-sponsored sports may run into problems when she tries to continue her involvement in sport. Community programs are scarce for women with highly developed skills. And young women

who live with their parents or spouses may have more difficulties than do their male counterparts in negotiating the free time and resources to take advantage of opportunities that do exist. These access problems would probably be intensified for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, former athletes from lower status backgrounds may lack the material supports and social contacts that their higher status counterparts find useful in initiating careers and adjusting to life after leaving school. The transition out of sport goes more smoothly when the transition into important nonsport roles, activities, and relationships also goes smoothly.

The transition out of amateur and professional sports would be influenced by similar factors. Some sports naturally draw athletes from upper status backgrounds. They provide the athletes with numerous opportunities to develop social contacts with nonathletes who are able to assist them in making the transition into careers and extending nonsport activities and relationships. For example, golfers and tennis players are often able to become teaching pros or administrators at private clubs or to use their social contacts to enter relatively satisfying nonsport careers. These types of career shifts are similar to the changes experienced by many individuals in their late 20s and their 30s, changes that are usually perceived as normal aspects of a person's work history. However, women and on some occasions blacks would not have as many of these opportunities as white males. But the problems they encounter would be similar to the problems faced by their nonathletic counterparts. In other words, their adjustment problems would be grounded in general social structural conditions rather than in their past sport careers and their retirement from sport. Former athletes can most easily redefine their identities when they are able to become involved

in roles, activities, and relationships which nurture and extend new dimensions of their self-concepts.

In similar fashion, when a sport draws athletes from lower status backgrounds researchers must assess the transition out of sport and into other activities relative to the characteristics and adjustment problems of comparable nonathletes. For example, to say that the problems experienced by former boxers are related to their retirement from sport would not be justified unless they were greater than or different from the problems experienced by similar nonathletes. It may be that retired black boxers have no more problems than those experienced by other 30-year-old black males who grew up on the streets of large inner cities, received little education, and had few resources to assist them in career development or job training. Again, retirement from competitive sport may be the scene of problems but it does not necessarily cause those problems.

After reviewing the implications of the data on retirement from competitive sport, it seems reasonable to conclude that leaving sport is not *inevitably* stressful or identity-shaking, nor is it the source of serious adjustment problems. Adjustments are necessary—just as they are in any role transition—but it seems that the majority of former top athletes from all levels of competition make them in a relatively constructive manner. Of course, this does not mean that retirement from sport is never the source of serious problems. There are enough examples of apparent failures to show the need to further explore the patterns of success and failure.

In the search for these patterns it could be hypothesized that when adjustment problems do exist they are most likely among former athletes:

1. whose sport careers have seriously restricted the development of cre-

dentials and attributes that others like them were able to form in coping with normal developmental tasks through life.

2. whose relationships have been restricted to other athletes, involving interaction based primarily on sport-related issues and activities;
3. whose families have provided little social and emotional support for any involvement outside the physical dimensions of sport activity;
4. whose backgrounds have provided little access to activity alternatives and role models outside of sport;
5. whose lack of material resources and social contacts have restricted their transitions into careers, expressive nonsport relationships, and satisfying leisure activities.

These hypotheses emphasize the social structural factors related to successful role transitions. They are based on the notion that serious adjustment problems are ultimately grounded in the availability of resources for moving into roles, activities, and relationships unrelated to active sport participation. This differs from traditional approaches where retirement is conceptualized in terms of adjustment problems related to a social psychological detachment from the role of athlete and from the activities and relationships associated with that role.

The hypotheses also acknowledge that even elite athletes have attributes, identities, interests, and relationships that are not strictly based on their active participation in sport. Research in the sociology of sport has promoted the idea that there are two types of people in the world, athletes and nonathletes. Also promoted is the idea that athletes are not only different from nonathletes but that they are quite similar to one another, similar to the point of being unidimensional persons. Therefore, retirement from sport is discussed with the tenden-

cy to emphasize how these "unidimensional" persons can cope with the loss of their roles and identities. However, when athletes are seen as complex individuals coming from diverse backgrounds and having diverse interests, relationships, and expectations, retirement from sport is more likely viewed as a transition into alternative roles, relationships, and activities. And this transition is seen as being influenced by the same social structural factors that affect all young adults. Therefore, former athletes probably do not have as much in common with one another as they do with nonathletes of the same gender, race, age, educational level, and socioeconomic background.

Conclusion

This discussion of retirement from competitive sport suggests that the nature of the retirement process is primarily grounded in the social structural context in which it occurs. In the future, the transition out of sport should be analyzed in terms of such factors as the age, race, gender, education, and socioeconomic status of the retiring athlete. Other factors such as the existence of social, emotional, and material support systems, and the existence of racism and sexism, should also be considered. One should not assume that retirement from competitive sport automatically creates problems until the experiences of former athletes are compared with the experiences of similar nonathletes.

When former athletes enter careers with lower salaries and less prestige than they were accorded during their active playing days they should not be defined as victims of retirement. Managing a bar or restaurant in the old hometown, returning to school, or teaching and coaching in a small high school should not be considered failings simply be-

cause they do not enable the former athletes to drive new cars every year, travel to exciting places, or read their names in newspapers every week. Just because ex-athletes become similar to those they resembled when their sport careers began does not necessarily signal trauma, identity crises, or serious adjustment problems. Although some former athletes may experience problems with their financial affairs, their relationships, or their personal identities, the origins of these problems may not be related to their past involvement in sport. Just as those who study socialization through sport must separate the effects of sport involvement from other sources of growth and development, those who study retirement must separate the consequences of leaving sport from the challenges and adjustments normally associated with late adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age.

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