



THE RETENTION OF ELITE PLAYERS AFTER A JUNIOR CAREER

Understanding The Challenges Facing Players Making The Transition

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Title Slide.

The priority of this presentation is to identify the main reasons why elite athletes in a variety of sports decide to drop out from continuing their sport during the transitional period between junior elite and senior elite levels. The subsequent question is: are they the same or similar reasons as to why squash players drop out? What then, can we do about improving the situation to make it more realistic to retain a greater number of players? The term “athlete” is used generically to represent people directly competing in sport at a serious level.

A development model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic/vocational level.

Research by Wylleman and Lavallee for Vrije University, Brussels (2004) devised a transitional development model based on three development phases: childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The most problematic of these is the adolescence phase where athletes are confronted with most development tasks such as achieving relationships with peers of both sexes, accepting one’s physique, attaining emotional independence from parents, and making a momentous decision of what they should do to pursue a perceived realistic career. It is recognized that continued involvement and participation in sport plays an important role in the development of a person’s sense of self-identity, particularly during the transition from adolescence into adulthood.

The transitional period of an athlete’s career is usually between the ages of around 17-18 and 22-23, depending on the athlete’s physical and mental maturity. This transition starts whilst the athlete is entering their final stage of junior competition and encompasses the transition from late adolescence into adulthood.

The period when most dropouts occur is during the transitional period when athletes have completed their secondary education and their life takes on various new directions. They are faced with many conflicting challenges on social, economic and personal levels. It is during this stage that they start to doubt if they can cope with continuing their sport at the same level or if they can develop their potential to their or other people’s expectations.

Pressures that Elite Athletes face.

Elite athletes during the transitional stage basically fall into three categories: Student Athlete, Career Athlete or Professional Athlete.

Student Athletes

There are an increasing number of universities that encourage and support athletes to continue their sporting prowess during their higher education period. Indeed, this could lead to further recognition and promotion for the university itself if an athlete achieves suitable success. Some, not least US universities, offer scholarships but research indicates that the educational reputation of the establishment usually carries a greater weight in the final decision.

However, cost does contribute to whether there is a realistic chance of an athlete continuing to develop a sporting career whilst at university. In the UK, students are potentially faced with a major bill to repay upon completing their education. If they are subsequently considering turning professional in their sporting career, this can be a daunting burden, particularly if the financial rewards outside of the top end of their sport are low and they know that they will have to invest a further substantial sum in order to reach a level where they can earn a suitable income. This can also prove to be an unrealistic option if an athlete is looking for further education outside their own country in order to develop their sporting career in a country that will offer better training and competition levels. In countries that provide free education or even pay their students to go to university, it can come down to a choice of furthering their sporting career at a cost or sacrificing their desire of developing as an elite athlete, at least for their time at university.

Of course the argument that a degree offers an athlete a realistic alternative career is a strong one. Potential employers always look upon a high level of education favourably but how long will they consider someone who spends a few years pursuing a professional career in sport following their graduation before they prefer to have someone with a more up to date qualification? This question can be countered by employers also looking positively on someone with more advanced life skills experienced through the challenges of sport.

Career Athletes

Athletes advancing from school into a job or career with on-the-job training can be more financially secure but will almost inevitably experience time constraints. Finding an employer who will be flexible enough to allow an athlete time off for competition or national representation (training and competition) is a huge challenge. Almost inevitably an athlete will soon have to choose between advancement in their job or their sporting career, consequently leading to a compromise of one or the other.

Part-time work can ease the time challenge but will probably not represent a secure job future or one where there is a realistic long term career to develop. However, particularly for athletes who are not supported by federation or parental funding, it can provide a reasonable way of providing funds and demands that the athlete learns some basic time management, planning and

organisational skills in order to fulfil training and competition demands whilst still meeting their work responsibilities. Indeed, even a full-time professional athlete may feel compelled to earn some money through part-time work such as coaching, bar work or similar.

Professional Athletes

Of course the ideal scenario for athletes set on a successful career in their chosen sport, is for them to be dedicated to full-time training and playing. This allows them to find the ideal personnel and environment that will enable them to advance their sporting career with a minimum of external distractions. Opportunities of learning new beliefs and developing new behaviours will advance their maturity and expand their strength of character but it is a high-risk strategy. They and their supporters are putting their faith in becoming successful in an industry where only a very small percentage reach a world-class elite level with appropriate career/financial rewards. There is no back up career to fall back on if they fail.

They are exposed to financial pressures for a number of years before their dedication could pay off. This means that while they are being encouraged and taught to be increasingly self responsible for their career, they are wholly dependent on external financial support. This pressure can become overwhelming if the athlete feels that they are not fulfilling the expectations of their financial supporters – private, parental or federation.

Although athletes have almost total control over the time that they can dedicate to training and competing, everything else they do is dictated by what is best for their professional career. This can put pressure on their social life especially when they identify perceived sacrifices that don't apply to other friends within their social circle. This can put a strain on friendships, which might result in an athlete only having their professional peers as friends, possibly creating an unbalanced social footing.

Common reasons for athletes' premature dropout from elite sport.

There are no definitive studies or reports specifically for squash (that I could find) but there are several studies for a variety of other sports, including track and field athletics, gymnastics, tennis, golf, rugby, ice hockey and basketball (European) conducted by researchers of variable nationality. There are a number of common reasons cited for athletes in each sport not continuing a career in their chosen sport at elite level. The most common (in no specific order), which were suggested by athletes from the majority of the aforementioned sports, are as follows:

- Time consuming training restricting other activities seen as normal by people outside sport.
- Parental pressure of wanting a good education and economic security for their children.
- A lack of a realistic time period provided by parents to continue their support for an athlete to show that they have got what it takes to make it at elite level, e.g. a gap year (or two) between leaving school and starting university or "I'll support you for two years to show me what you've got and then consider whether it's realistic to carry on."

- Little or no support or the threat of support being withdrawn from the relevant federation. Athletes also stated that the inconsistency of how federation funding was shared out was also a factor that discouraged them from carrying on.
- The inability of athletes to find a suitable training environment with the necessary resources. One of the main factors recognised by all sports is to have a base that provides a competitive training environment that pushes each athlete and a coach who supports and encourages them through good and bad times.
- A federation that is too dictatorial in demanding that an athlete uses their choice of coach and consequently threatening to withdraw support if they refuse. This is obviously more appropriate for individual sports where it is largely recognised that athletes should be able to find a suitable coach that they feel they can build a relationship with that will enable them to reach their potential, and then receive a subsequent endorsement from the federation. Regarding team sports, it was further recognised that the choice of which team an athlete joined was often determined by who the coach was.
- The difficulty of achieving sufficiently encouraging results became a major contributor to decreasing motivation and enthusiasm to carry on. Athletes entering their transitional stage are used to achieving rewarding performances in a relatively short time during their junior career but suddenly, when they become seniors, these rewards are not so forthcoming.
- The pressure of expectation from parents, coach or federation can be unrealistic, particularly if these expectations are not in line with the athlete's own expectations. It is imperative that all parties are in agreement and that the athlete sets the level of expectation, with astute guidance from all other appropriate factions.

The 2 biggest reasons for dropout.

The following are the two most common reasons why athletes from most sports will dropout before they reach their potential:

1. Financial. Athletes are unable to continue because of a lack of money. This is by far the biggest reason why athletes drop out. Many athletes bemoan that their sport provides insufficient rewards at the beginning of an athlete's career to allow them to survive long enough to reach a level from which they can make a living. They also recognise that it mustn't be too easy but that it should be a realistic challenge that can be met by discipline, hard work and dedication.
2. A lack of preparation. Athletes stated that they received insufficient information and a lack of advice on what to expect during their transitional phase. When they realised that they did not know what they had to do or that they had underestimated the challenge, they felt exposed, inadequate and unable to carry on. This may sound surprising as it can be argued that it's up to the athlete to find out what they should expect but who and where do they turn to for advice – parents; a coach; federation; governing body? All of these could provide the right information and guidance but what if they can't? A small federation may not have anyone suitably qualified on their board.

Finding a coach with the right experience isn't always possible. There are few parents with a similar experience. Talking to a current professional athlete will almost certainly provide useful advice but not everyone will have access to such a person. Most governing bodies and player associations don't seem to provide a constructive guidance structure to prepare athletes for the transitional phase so relevant assistance for athletes can be hard to come by.

Squash.

As mentioned before, there are no studies available to explore why few players in squash manage to continue to an elite level in their senior career. However, for the last 3 years Czech player Ondrej Uherka has been combining squash training with my group of players in England and a university career at the University of Hertfordshire. His final thesis was on trying to explain why the transition of Czech junior squash players to professional level is so unsuccessful. For the past 10-15 years the Czech Republic has produced some promising junior players and national junior teams have achieved several high positions in various European championships. However only three players so far, Jan Koukal (PSA 62 June 2014), Lucie Fialova and Olga Ertlova (WSA 47 and 59 respectively, June 2014), have gone on to develop reasonably successful professional careers.

Uherka of course, has a direct involvement as a player in Czech squash at junior and senior levels and he is also in the transitional stage of his career. He believes that the Czech Squash Federation provides a comparative depiction of many other relatively small governing bodies of other countries and that the results of his research will be fairly indicative of what players from such countries will also feel.

As part of the process of his qualitative research he interviewed 10 players (7 male and 3 female) who were still within the recognised transitional stage but who had already decided not to continue their pursuit of a professional career. His conclusions determined that the barriers the players came across which they felt they were unable to overcome largely concurred with those submitted by sports that have carried out more extensive research.

He found that the 3 biggest reasons for Czech players dropping out are:

1. Financial pressures
2. Lack of a suitable coach and training environment
3. Insufficient preparation and direction

In Uherka's interviews the players expressed statements that corresponded with similar feelings of athletes from other sports:

"I didn't have the financial resources to continue with squash at a professional level."

"The problem with squash is that the financial rewards are so small that it costs a fortune to be able to play a sufficient number of tournaments to move up the rankings."

“If you don’t have rich parents or an outside source of financial support, it’s very difficult to sustain without getting into debt and becoming demoralised.”

“I didn’t have any idea on how to organise my training and wasn’t prepared for the step up between the junior and senior game.”

“There was no one who could really advise me during the transitional period or even before it to prepare me for having to balance my studies, social life, training and people’s expectations.”

“Looking back, I should have started playing senior tournaments before I left the juniors, just to gain experience. But people around me only had eyes for short-term goals and junior glory.”

“My parents told me that it was my decision (whether to turn professional) but all the time they were gently trying to convince me to take up a higher education.”

“I felt pressured by the amount of time I had to devote to both my studies and squash. I had to make a decision: do I fall behind at university or in squash?”

“I had no social life. I found that I was either training or studying, or coaching in order to raise funds for travelling to tournaments.”

“We don’t have the competition here. You end up playing the same players all the time which doesn’t stretch you enough.”

“I didn’t handle the transitional changes well. I think one of the main reasons was that I didn’t have a coach who could help me through the difficult times and motivate me.”

“I think that if you want to become a world-class player, you need to go to a different country. We don’t have the competition or experienced coaches here. But how realistic is that when you feel you must have a university education? Maybe the two don’t go together.”

It wasn’t all doom and gloom. Uherka found that nearly all the players he interviewed found the transitional process a valuable one. A typical statement was:

“Even if you fail (to become a successful professional player) I think it’s worth trying because it will enrich you. It builds character, gives you discipline and organisational skills. It develops your personality.”

The Athletic Triangle.

The Athlete-Parents, Athlete-Coach, Coach-Parents relationships are commonly referred to as the athletic triangle (R. Carlson: The path to national level in sports in Sweden – Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 1993). The quality of these interpersonal relationships in the athletic triangle was found to be one of the major contributors to the successful transition of athletes to a professional level.

Parents’ Transitional Roles.

The support from parents is most important during childhood when they provide sport related advice and emotional support in order to help their children proceed from one transitional phase to another. The role of parents

changes over the different stages of athletic development from a leadership role to a more observant and supportive role. However, it is always significant for an individual's progress. Emotionally the athlete moves from accepting advice in younger years to seeking endorsement of their actions in adolescence to support of their performances in adulthood.

- During the transitional stage the athlete will often be heavily reliant on their parents to supply economic support.
- This can provide a pressure of perceived obligation to their parents where the athlete will seek reassurance from the parents that they are fully behind them in what they're doing.
- Finally, the athlete will require for the parents to be just that: parents. They will need the home environment and home comforts to offer a sanctuary where they can escape the pressures of the transitional stage.

Coaches' Transitional Roles.

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is fundamental to the athletes' transition to the next stage. The coach providing positive instruction, feedback and encouragement and taking a more holistic view will be far more influential than an autocratic one. During an athlete's junior years, the coach's role is largely as an instructor, teaching athletes various technical and tactical skills and providing relevant training activities.

As the athlete moves through adolescence and into the transitional stage, the coach largely takes over from the parents as the leader, providing professional, emotional and practical/organisational direction.

In the time that athletes progress into adulthood and mastering their athletic abilities, the coach becomes more of a mentor and consultant.

- The coach must be able to provide a suitable competitive environment that will stretch athletes and make them confront various challenges.
- The relationship between coach and athlete should develop in a holistic and cognitive way, encouraging the athlete to take more responsibility as they mature into an elite athlete.
- As stated before, a coach that delivers accurate analysis and positive feedback is much more likely to provide the type of relationship and environment that is suitable for athletes to progress.

A coach must recognise that they are working with people who have already decided to undertake something out of the ordinary. It isn't ordinary to choose a career where the failure rate is so extraordinarily high. A professional athlete is someone who wants to do something different to what is normal, something that people who decide to go down a more conventional career path may not understand. Coaches themselves must be innovative and not be afraid of taking risks to do things differently. It's a challenge to encourage people to break out of simply doing what is expected and coaches need to think differently and challenge themselves to be creative. The whole point of coaching is to get athletes to express themselves and to take ownership of

their career. To do that a coach must provide an environment that concentrates on success, not failure, improvement, not fear of making mistakes.

A coach must also recognise that developing an elite player is not down to one person. There is no such thing as a complete coach – there will always be someone that is more able to teach something than you; the key is to recognise this and understand it is not a weakness. Like attracts like so a coach's core values are likely to attract players with similar values. Athletes need the input of more than one coach during their career but they also need the strength of the relationship with that one coach that evolves through its own transitional stages to develop the bond based around common core values. It is the collective faiths and beliefs that provide the strength and confidence an athlete needs to be able to make it.

The Complete Team.

The complete team can be made up by the federation playing a part in the overall transition of a player to elite level. The federation's role is not necessarily as fundamental as the parents-player-coach roles. Players can become elite performers without help from a federation but a federation can undertake a valuable role to help and support players if they work cooperatively with players and coaches.

During the junior years a federation will offer the support of junior tournaments, regional and national training squads, and junior international team events.

In the transitional stage, similar support continues and they can also help prepare parents and players for life after juniors.

When the player reaches senior status, the federation will usually provide support similar to the juniors, i.e. competitions, training squads and international team events.

- The transitional stage of a player's career is the time when they will be most challenged economically. It is the single biggest factor as to why so many players dropout. It therefore makes sense that a federation has a system in place that can help such players, directly or indirectly. Direct support can be based around a performance related scheme dependent on certain stages reached by players. Indirect financial support can be provided through a specialist support programme offering players (and coaches) expertise in vital areas of a player's development. With squash being a small, sadly non-Olympic sport, budgets are constantly being squeezed so designation of funds has to be carefully thought through in order to provide players with realistic chances of advancing through each stage.
- Federations must make sure that they are developing coaches alongside players. Having a suitable coach education programme is paramount to the success of any elite player programme. European countries have the benefit of using the ESF Coach Training Courses

providing a solid base of training based on the England Squash education system and I know that WSF has just completed writing its own Level 1 course and will soon be following with Levels 2 and 3. But, developing an elite player is not just about attending courses. It is all about a coach gaining experience and if a country doesn't have any players of a relevant standard, then a federation can provide certain opportunities for coaches. Send them to work with experienced coaches and players in other countries. Bring in experienced coaches to their country to work with their coaches and elite players. Coaches need mentoring as well as players. It is ironic that mentoring in the business world is a recognised and valued service that has been adapted from coaching in sport. Sport has only recently recognised its apparent shortfall in this area and an increasing number of sports (certainly all the sports I have researched for this presentation) are now employing a mentoring system for its athletes and coaches. This is something that maybe WSF could be exploring as a further development of coach education and training.

- The preparation of players and parents for the transitional period is another major contributing factor leading to athletes quitting their sport. If the federation doesn't have anyone able to do this, they could invite someone with suitable experience to attend a national squad where such players and parents can be briefed. Alternatively, the governing body (world or regional) could look at producing an appropriate workshop(s) that can be presented to players, parents, coaches, and federation members, by a suitably qualified person.

Players.

So what are the players' roles in the transitional stage? There are too many to mention here and certainly it's an area that warrants a discussion of its own.

However, the 3 most important psychological principles that elite athletes must possess are:

- Self-discipline
- Hunger – a competitive fire
- Self-belief

They must also show an independent decision-making skill. Without these attributes, forget it – but of course, it's more complicated than that!

Sir Clive Woodward (England Rugby Union Head Coach of the 2003 World Champions and Director of Olympic Performance of the British Olympic Association) in a recent interview stated, "Neither money nor facilities guarantee success." He went on to say, "Some athletes now have access to a huge range of support services and they almost start to believe that without these they can't win. In my view, from the moment you start to have this dependence, you'll never win. You can achieve success with just the basics."

I also see another trend, particularly in squash and that is that if a player does not have a support structure that is provided for them, they will not win. I think they're largely right but I also think that some use it as an excuse to give up too easily rather than seeking out a suitable support structure of their own.

Other players already have the opportunities but either don't recognise them or are not mature enough to work the structure to aid their development.

Fundamentally, it comes down to whether the player wants to take their opportunities and is determined enough to breakdown all the barriers along the way. But this discussion is primarily about how the player can be retained to help them through the transitional stage rather than exploring what the character prerequisites of an elite player are.

And finally...

Governing Body's Roles.

What are the governing body's roles during the transitional period? We've touched upon a couple of potential roles already but for me there is one thing that stands out as being fundamental to retaining players during the transitional period:

- An under 23 tournament circuit

Out of all the sports I have researched for this discussion, squash is the only one that does not have a recognised competitive under 23 circuit, either at regional or world level.

The majority of players leaving junior squash are not going to turn professional but this should not prevent them from reaching an elite level in their own country and playing for their country in major international championships. But once they leave junior squash behind, there is no international circuit other than PSA or WSA and as we have already seen, that particular journey is too long or too difficult for the majority to realistically contemplate, particularly if they are combining it with a higher education or a job, as the most of them will. Providing them with an under 23 circuit allows them to realistically target a level of success that can retain their interest into senior squash. It allows them to develop as a player who can also provide necessary competition to the established senior players in their country. It is a bridge joining the chasm between junior and senior squash.

There is also an added bonus to an under 23 circuit: it offers a platform from which preparation workshops and coach mentoring sessions can be delivered to all relevant parties.

That seems a good note on which to end. I hope this presentation provokes some constructive discussion and subsequent action on how to retain players during the transitional period.

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