Life after sport: swimming through transitions

A reflection on my journey from elite swimming to sport and exercise medicine

My life as an athlete was a glorious one. Somehow, one of my innate talents saw me training and dedicating my life to swimming. It's a world of hard work, but the environment is a great one: friends with whom you spend hours training and travelling, with shared goals; meeting similar people from around the world; finding out how you can perform at your peak with a multidisciplinary team behind you; and competing at Olympic Games, World Championships, World Cups and Commonwealth Games. The highs were high, and the lows were low. For me, winning a Commonwealth Games gold medal and swimming at the Sydney Olympics were a highlight, missing out on the World Championships in my hometown of Perth felt like devastation.

At the peak of an athlete's career, focus is finite and mountains seem scalable without effort. Years of training culminate in a feeling of armour and athleticism, and the athlete's body is fine-tuned for peak performance. Then, one day, their sporting career comes to an end, be it through injury or illness, form slump, age, financial pressure, children, a feeling that their time is up, or just the call of life after sport. The identity of that person is called into question, and the transition to the life of a former athlete begins. Where days were once filled with focus on sporting triumph as a goal, life after sport becomes a little less clear. Goals seem less defined and there is no once-every-4-year pinnacle event, nor a yearly grand final to peak for.

For many athletes, identity is fostered from a young age, when a skill or talent is noted, praised, trained and then honed for the rare hope of sporting glory. Hours of training commence in primary and early high school, and success and failure are felt regularly through competition and training. Sport teaches some of life's greatest lessons, and arms athletes with opportunity, experience and skills to take to their life after sport.

The murky waters of retirement from any occupation, and transitions between life stages in general, are difficult to navigate for many: for the doctor at the end of their career who is moving from a life filled with patients and pressure to the world of retirement, for the bricklayer who is unable to continue with manual work due to knee osteoarthritis, for first-time parents juggling the unknown of a precious human life without a manual, and in the same vein, for the athlete who has finished their sporting career.

There have been many successful sporting talents in this country who have fallen through the cracks in the journey from sporting glory and world records to crime, drugs and depression. There have also been equal numbers of sporting talents who have succeeded through that tortuous path and forged successful careers in business, health, teaching, politics and the equally important roles of parenting, and many of these talents do not see the spotlight after sport because the stories are not told.

The transition for high profile athletes probably garners the most media coverage and pressure when things don't go right, because the athlete's life has been under the media spotlight through their sporting achievements, often from a very young age. The public's ongoing appetite for success is coupled with their insatiable desire to read that our heroes are also human. Regardless of our place in the realms of fame, sport is a part of our identity that is difficult to replace.

So why do some of us succeed in a transition and others don't? As with all things in life, it is probably our unique microcosm of nature and nurture, opportunity and drive, and a little bit of luck.

Success is easily defined in the sporting arena, with personal bests, peak physical fitness, medals and trophies highlighting achievement. Meaning for me, as an athlete, came from setting and realising goals and from challenging my body and mind to be better than the previous season. In the non-sporting world, success is more difficult to define. For me, however, success is contributing in a meaningful way to society, whatever your role.

The years after deciding that 30 hours a week of following the black line up and down a pool was no longer for me were certainly not a breeze. It was hard to adjust to a life of normality, where the highlight of my year might be passing exams after months of study or a wine or five at the end of semester, and neither of those was followed by a stadium of 5000 people singing the national anthem with you. There were times when I questioned my identity and yearned to be back travelling and training and having the opportunity I once had. It was a time of self-exploration and doing many of the things that I missed out on as a teenager — I stayed out late, explored the state with non-sporting travel, ate out and socialised on weeknights. There were feelings of loss, hopelessness and worry. It was hard to come to terms with being less athletic and accepting the changes that occurred to my body when the intense training ended.

The beginnings of my journey into medicine were manifested with part-time study, however difficult, while travelling the world for swimming. And while, at the time, it may have seemed a waste to be studying one or two science units per year, it gave me a foundation to build upon when the swimming journey ended. My pathway through university swayed away from sport and health, and I trialled art and commerce, but neither gave me any meaningful satisfaction. When I started medical school, I knew I had found my new purpose.

Rachel A Harris

Canberra Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine, Canberra, ACT.

admin@drrachelharris.com

doi: 10.5694/mja18.00073

Skills I had learnt in sport transferred well to the life of a medical student and then doctor. Time management and focus, empathy for others, goal setting and working as a member of a team, all made the change easier.

My transition from swimming to medicine was punctuated by reminders that in the end, sport is just sport. I was fortunate to remain grounded through family, friends and experiences while I swam; however, medicine really showed me this in all its glory. The corridors of Perth's largest teaching hospital showed me that failing to win a medal at the Olympics was nowhere near the tragedy of ill health, injury, poverty and untimely death. The remote health clinics of the Kimberley showed me that being able to travel the world doing an activity I loved was a dream that most people would never get the opportunity to do. For many, it was a daily struggle to survive isolation, alcohol, ill health, violence and inequality. This was the real world.

There is no one answer for how an athlete can avoid a difficult or challenging transition. Sporting organisations, which have a significant impact on the growth, development and guidance of our young athletes, have the power to help facilitate post-sport planning. A team and sporting culture where non-sporting endeavours are an expected part of the training week should be the norm. Whether it involves study or work experience, these undertakings should contribute to the development of life skills, such as financial literacy, so that when transition needs to occur, it begins with at least a few developed skills.

I do believe that every interaction makes a difference, and as such, the athlete's general practitioner, team physician or specialist can plant the seed and encourage early transition planning and the lifelong health benefits of exercise. We need to ensure that our athletes are realistic about what sport can provide, and reduce the expectation of entitlement. Athletes should see themselves as a cog in a well functioning community, where entitlement has no place, but where volunteering and community work are an integral part. We need to assist athletes to see that no matter how hard their sporting journey may be, there are people in our communities that will do it tougher and never have the same opportunities.

We should be using our past athletes as mentors for the next generation. Transition is not a new entity; thousands have done it before us. It would be nice to learn from their success and failures, so the athletes of the future don't repeat the mistakes of the past. Initiatives such as the Australian Swimmers' Association and Swimming Australia's Beyond the Black Line (https://www.beyondtheblackline.com.au) are invaluable. We need to prepare our athletes for the real world by fostering resilience in our champions from a young age; the conversation about life after sport needs to start early. We need our athletes to be able to transfer their sport-acquired skills, including goal setting, focus and being a team player, to plan their future after sport. They need to understand that sport can, unfortunately, be taken away without them making the decision to retire.

Realistically, we can strive to give people the tools to be ready, but, ultimately, they must be accountable for their journey. Perhaps it is our role in sport and the community to foster a culture where success is measured by creating champion people, not just champions on a dais.

Acknowledgements: I thank Larissa Trease and Richard Renton for their assistance in editing this article, and Richard Charlesworth, AO; Daniel Kowalski, OAM; Alana Nicholls and Jesse Phillips for their expert advice and comments on this article.

Competing interests: I am a current board member of the Western Australian Institute of Sport and registrar representative at the Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physician's board.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed. ■

© 2018 AMPCo Pty Ltd. Produced with Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.