

Athletic retirement: A cross-national comparison of elite French and Swedish athletes

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Abstract

Objectives: The focus of this paper is on a cross-national comparison of elite French and Swedish athletes in terms of (a) pre-conditions for the athletic retirement; (b) coping and related factors; (c) perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition. The study also examines an impact of retirement planning upon the transition process and outcomes.

Design and Method: The Retirement from Sports survey [Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte (2004). Reactions to sport career termination: A cross-cultural comparison of German, Lithuanian, and Russian athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 61–75] translated into French/Swedish and adapted for studying athletes in corresponding countries was used. The sample was composed of 157 former international level athletes from France ($n = 69$) and Sweden ($n = 88$), males and females, representatives of different sports. ANOVA and MANOVA were used for the data analyses.

Results and Conclusion: A common pattern and two nationally specific patterns in the process of the transition to the post-career have been identified. The common pattern involved athletic retirement pre-conditions (e.g., retirement planning), coping and related factors. Cross-cultural differences related to reasons for termination, emotional reactions upon retirement (more positive in Swedish sample), perceived difficulty to start a new professional career, usage of emotion-focused/avoidance coping strategies (both higher in French sample), duration of the transition, current athletic identity, and professional choice/career/life satisfaction nowadays (all higher in Swedish sample). Retirement planning, regardless of the nation, was associated with more favourable emotions and coping behaviours in the transition but was not associated with perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition. The study showed that the

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transition out of elite sports is a dynamic, multidimensional, multilevel, and multifactor process in which nationality/culture plays an important role.

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Introduction

Athletic career termination is a normative and even inevitable transition for athletes. Retirement from elite sports influences immensely an athlete's life after sport and their holistic perception of an athletic career as positive or less than positive lifetime investment. It explains an interest of sport psychologists to this topic and a good body of scientific knowledge developed in the area during the last decades (Lavalée & Wylleman, 2000; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalée, 2004). Recently, a new perspective has emerged in the athletic career termination studies. After having identified the nature of this event, the difficulties encountered by former athletes, and the factors contributing to the quality of adaptation, current perspective is related to the cross-national differences in reactions to sport career termination, under the title "European Perspectives on Athletic Retirement" (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004). Existing career transition models and studies remain too general and it becomes therefore important to acknowledge the diversity which may exist in view of culturally specific characteristics (Seiler, Anders, & Irlinger, 1998; Wylleman et al., 2004). One of the first attempts to identify such cross-cultural differences in the pattern of reactions of former elite athletes was the Alfermann et al. (2004) study. The authors have investigated reactions to sport career termination among former athletes from Germany, Lithuania and Russia. They found that athletes of the three nations differ in their reasons for career termination, planning for retirement, emotional reactions to sport career termination, coping strategies and time for adaptation. As it is discussed in the paper, these culturally specific characteristics in the post-athletic career adaptation may appear as valid information for applied sport psychologists working with retiring and retired athletes in corresponding countries.

This study with a retrospective quantitative design is related to the European Perspectives on Athletic Retirement project. It focuses on a comparison between former elite French and Swedish athletes in terms of process and outcomes of athletic retirement. In line with the previous research within the project (Alfermann et al., 2004), it also examines the role of retirement planning in the transition. Theoretical frameworks for the present study are twofold. A combination of career transition models serves as a basis for studying the process of the transition, and the Ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is employed as a framework for a cross-national comparison.

Career transition theoretical frameworks

Existing career transition models (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 1997, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) consider transition as a process of coping with or adaptation to a new life/career situation in which several groups of factors are involved.

The human adaptation to a transition model (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995) explains a process and outcomes of a transition by interaction of four sets of factors (“the 4 S System”), including “situation” (e.g., event or non-event transition and how it is perceived by the person), “self” (e.g., individual profile), “support” (e.g., availability of various kinds of social support) and “strategies” (e.g., information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action). “Strategies” to cope with a transition can be seen as a key point in the model with the other three involved as groups of factors influencing coping.

The athletic career termination model (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) is designed particularly for the last athletic career transition. It focuses on reasons for career termination, factors and resources related to adaptation, and a quality of the transition. Two alternative outcomes are predicted by the model depending on a quality of the transition: “healthy career transition” and “career transition distress”. In the case of “career transition distress” a need for psychological intervention is outlined.

The athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 1997, 2003) based on empirical studies of Russian athletes (e.g., Stambulova, 1994) considers a career transition as a process of coping with a set of specific demands/challenges that is necessary for continuing athletic career successfully or to adjust to the post-career. Transition demands create developmental conflict between “what the athlete is” and “what he/she wants or ought to be”, which stimulates the athlete to mobilise resources and to find ways to cope with. Effectiveness of coping depends on a dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers. The resources imply all internal and external factors, which facilitate the coping process (e.g., the athlete’s self-knowledge, skills, personality traits, motivation, availability of social and/or financial support), and the barriers include all internal and external factors, which interfere with effective coping (e.g., a lack of necessary knowledge or skills, interpersonal conflicts, difficulties in combining sport and studies or work). The coping process is central in a transition and includes all strategies the athlete use in order to adjust to particular transition demands. Successful transition is associated with effective coping when the athlete is able to recruit/use or rapidly develop necessary resources and avoid (or overcome) potential transition barriers. An alternative outcome is a crisis transition when the athlete is unable to cope effectively on his/her own and needs a psychological intervention. Then the process of transition depends on the intervention. Effective intervention leads to the successful but “delayed” transition. Alternatively, ineffective or no intervention situations are followed by negative (often long-term) consequences or so-called “costs” for failure to cope with the transition (e.g., injuries, overtraining, neuroses, psycho-somatic illnesses, alcohol/drug use, criminal behaviours) (Stambulova, 1994, 2000).

To summarise, the career transition models allow viewing athletic retirement as a process involving pre-conditions related to the athletic career termination, perceived transition demands, coping strategies associated with external/internal factors that facilitate and/or interfere adaptation to the post-career, and also outcomes/consequences of the transition.

Cross-national comparison theoretical framework

The Ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is used as a complementary framework that demonstrates importance of micro- and macro-social influences on human development. It gives a way to interpret the results of cross-national comparison of

retired athletes taking into account the characteristics of the sport systems, cultural traditions and people's mentalities in different countries.

The Bronfenbrenner's model considers the social context of human development as consisted of macro-social factors (laws, traditions, policies on the society level), and a number micro-systems (e.g., family, peers, schoolmates/teachers, teammates/coaches), in which a person is involved. The "ecological key" of this model is an emphasis on interactions between different social systems and the claim that the interactive influences are multidirectional.

Wylleman (2004) adopted the ecological approach for describing elite sports climate as having macro-level (e.g., size of the country, population, level of welfare), meso-level (e.g., quality of sport-specific guidance, athletic infrastructure, media attention, public support for elite athletes), and micro-level (the athlete's psychosocial situation). This approach can help to understand why athletes from different countries differ in their pattern of reaction to retirement from elite sport as it was shown, for example, in the Alfermann et al. (2004) study.

To summarise, not only micro- but also meso- and macro-social environment in the country may influence the transitional situation for retired elite athletes. Therefore, it is important to consider some features of elite sports climate in both countries that are under comparison in this study.

Elite sports climate in France: In France, athletes are advised to combine their sport and professional career and to plan for a future after sport. Few elite athletes could receive total financial support and autonomy from their performances. Even the most successful athletes do not necessarily profit from their investment in sport, even if they receive high social recognition. Thus, national sports governing bodies, specific sport federations, independent organisations and academic institutions assist individuals in developing a professional career outside of sport as well as achieving sport-related goals. For example, for young elite athletes, an academic regimen is adapted to elite sport life rhythm (e.g. training, journeys and competitions). Senior elite athletes held part-time jobs that are adapted to high-level performance needs; that is to say, complete or semi-complete availability to train and compete (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières, 2003a). Thus, many athletes could prepare their socio-professional reinsertion in parallel to achievement of sport-related goals. Finally, it is up to the athletes themselves to decide how and what they do after career termination. But no public support system is available for former elite athletes, and they are not privileged members of the society. The majority of retired athletes had jobs to focus on after career termination, mainly their previous part-time job, which became a full-time occupation (Stephan et al., 2003a). There are neither national programmes nor career advisers designed to assist athletes after their retirement, and it is up to them to get psychological assistance if they experience difficulties in coping with the transition.

Elite sports climate in Sweden: Elite athletes are popular people in Sweden, and they receive a lot of mass media attention. Even after ending their athletic careers they are still visible members of the society. The Swedish Olympic Committee manages two support programmes for young talented athletes and for elite senior athletes helping them to combine sport and studies. Young talented athletes can study at "top sport schools", and university student-athletes may have flexible studies' regimen adjusted to their sport schedule. Elite athletes also have a possibility to receive financial support from the Swedish Olympic Committee for combining higher education and sport. Two hundred top athletes are annually involved in the programmes. There is a national support network with one national and nine regional Sports Development Centres—"service

stations” for elite athletes with, for example, psychological services and access to job market networks (Parker, 2004). Some recruitment agencies help elite athletes to find flexible employment. There is no special national programme that provides support to retired athletes. The Swedish Olympic Committee has one career adviser who helps the retired Olympic athletes in searching for a job. Some big sport clubs “advertise” their retiring athletes at the job market. Swedish companies tend to hold employees with high education grades; thus, education is of great importance for the elite athletes who want to succeed in securing employment after sports career. Opportunities to get paid jobs in sport are very limited because one of the basic principles of the Swedish sport system is volunteer coaching/administration throughout children/youth sports (Swedish Sports Confederation, 2000).

To summarise, the ecological approach provides a broader perspective for understanding external/internal factors related to coping with the transition, which are outlined in the career transition models. There are a lot of similarities in both countries in terms of conditions provided for active elite athletes. Partly, it is true for retired athletes (e.g., absence of retirement services and financial support). But it is also possible to see cross-national differences in social environments of former athletes in France and Sweden that might affect their transition to the post-career (e.g., higher public visibility of retired Swedish athletes compared with retired French athletes; a lack of paid jobs in sport available for former Swedish athletes). Therefore, the transition process and outcomes are considered in this study within specific cultural contexts, which is illustrated by Fig. 1, combining the ecological approach and career transition frameworks.

Major empirical findings on athletic retirement

Athletic retirement studies have been focusing mainly on several internal/external factors that typically facilitate the transition and/or on factors that may work as barriers for successful adaptation to life after sports. For example, many studies demonstrated that athletes who retired voluntarily and planned their retirement in advance feel higher perceived control over the retirement process and have higher self-efficacy with regard to post-athletic career adaptation (Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann et al., 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; McPherson, 1980; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Athletic identity at the time of retirement, the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) is seen as another important factor influencing coping with the transition. A high/strong/exclusive athletic identity typically works as a barrier influencing occurrence of professional/social/emotional difficulties and corresponds to a longer duration of the adaptation to post-athletic career life (Alfermann et al., 2004; Brewer et al., 1993; Cecic Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Grove et al., 1997). The authors (e.g., Cecic Erpic et al., 2004) have also emphasised that the duration of the transition is related to the degree to which an athlete continues to be identified with the athlete’s role after career termination. Thus, a decrease in the athletic identity after finishing in elite sports may facilitate the athletic retirement process (Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997), and a difficulty of changing identity may prolong the transition.

Some studies emphasise the importance of social/emotional/financial support to retired athletes from significant others and related organisations (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières, 2003b). Typically, this support facilitates the transition.

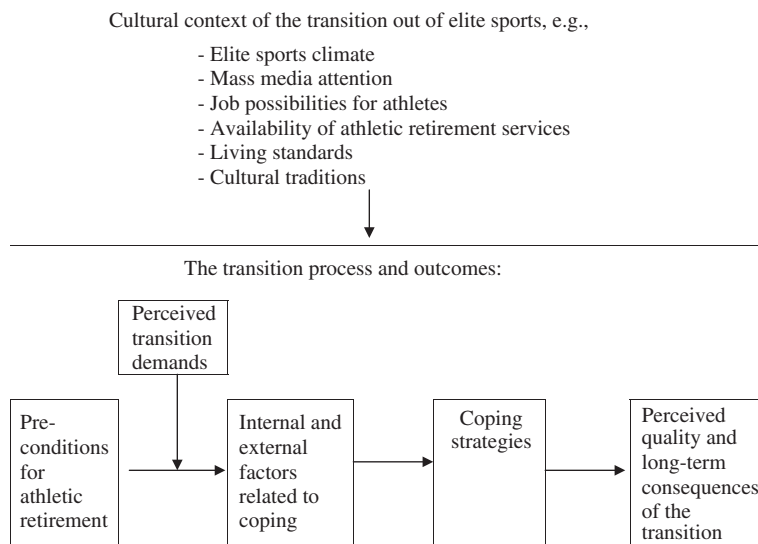


Fig. 1. Graphic illustration of the theoretical frameworks used in the study combining career transition models (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 1997, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) and the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

One more focus of athletic retirement studies is on coping strategies. Grove et al. (1997) showed that retired athletes employed a combination of emotion-focused, problem-focused and avoidance-oriented strategies, e.g., acceptance, positive reinterpretation, planning, active coping, mental disengagement and seeking for social support. Alfermann (2000) revealed that the use of coping strategies can be seen as a function of the nature of retirement. Forced retirees more often use defence mechanisms, passive strategies and seeking for social support. Voluntary retired athletes prefer active strategies.

To summarise, empirical studies on athletic retirement emphasise voluntary termination, retirement planning, adequate social support and multiple personal identity as factors facilitating coping with the transition. Alternatively, maintaining high athletic identity after the end of an athletic career might work as a barrier in adaptation to the post-career.

Objectives and hypotheses

The first and main objective of the study is to compare athletic retirement of former French and Swedish athletes in terms of (a) pre-conditions; (b) coping and related factors; (c) perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition. In line with previous research (Alfermann et al., 2004) and models (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), it also examines effects of planned vs. unplanned retirement upon coping and outcomes of the transition.

With regard to the first objective of this study, it is hypothesised that both common and culturally specific patterns in the process of transition are expected to be found. On the basis of comparison of elite sport climates in France and Sweden, two more specific predictions can also be made. The first one is longer perceived duration of the transition in the Swedish sample that is

based on a lack of paid jobs in sport available for former Swedish athletes and higher requirements to employees' educational level in Sweden than in France. The second one is higher athletic identity long after athletic career termination in the Swedish sample that is based on higher social visibility of former elite athletes in Sweden than in France.

In terms of the second objective of the study, it is hypothesised that, regardless of the nation, planned retirement would be associated with more favourable emotional and behavioural reactions to career termination.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 157 former international level athletes from France ($n = 69$) and Sweden ($n = 88$). Two criteria were used for including participants in the study: (a) participation in competitions at international level; (b) retirement from sport no longer than 10 years ago. The 46 male and 23 female French athletes competed in canoeing, track and field, synchronised swimming, fencing, rowing, weightlifting, diving, handball and judo. The 57 male and 31 female Swedish athletes participated in 23 individual and team sports (e.g., track and field, wrestling, boxing, rowing, table-tennis, shooting, cross-country and alpine skiing, weightlifting, football, ice-hockey, bandy, handball).

Instrument

The Retirement from Sports survey was used in the present study. This instrument was specially designed by Alfermann and Stambulova for cross-national comparisons and previously used in the [Alfermann et al. \(2004\)](#) study for the comparison of German, Lithuanian, and Russian athletes. For the purpose of the present study, the English (basic) version of the survey was translated into French by the second author and into Swedish by the third author. Both national versions were triangulated with language experts and tested in pilot studies with small samples of French and Swedish athletes according to recommendations of [Hanin and Spielberger \(1983\)](#).

After general and sport biographical data obtained, the participants were asked to answer a set of questions with multiple choice or yes/no or ranking answers as well as scale-answers about the process of athletic retirement including *pre-conditions* (athletic identity during the sports career; satisfaction with the career; reasons for termination; retirement planning; voluntary/involuntary retirement; timing of termination); *coping and related factors during the transition* (emotional reactions to retirement; perceived difficulties during the transition, including a difficulty to change the identity; perceived financial and psychological support; coping strategies; duration of the transition), *perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition* (satisfaction with professional choice, perceived success in professional career, general life satisfaction, current athletic identity and relation to sport nowadays).

Pre-conditions of the athletic retirement

As a measure of athletic identity during a sports career, a shortened five-item version of the scale of [Brewer et al. \(1993\)](#) was employed. Answers were given on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (= not at all) to 7 (= very much), with higher values corresponding to higher athletic identity. The alpha

coefficient was .69. Satisfaction with athletic career was assessed by a multiple choice question with five answers from “completely satisfied” to “completely dissatisfied” that in fact worked as a five-point scale with higher values corresponding to higher satisfaction. Reasons for athletic career termination were explored via a ranking procedure. Athletes were asked to rate six potential reasons, which included job/profession-, sport-, relationships-, health-, family-related reasons, and financial reasons (e.g., job offer, deterioration in sport results, conflicts with coach/sport officials, injuries, desire to create own family, a lack of financial support correspondingly). Participants were also asked two yes/no questions about planning their retirement in advance and about voluntary/involuntary termination in sports. In addition, they rated the timeliness of the career termination on a five-point scale from 1 (= too early) via 3 (quite opportune) to 5 (= too late).

Coping and related factors during the transition

To assess emotional reactions upon retirement the participants were presented a list of five typical negative emotions (anxiety, emptiness, sadness, uncertainty, aggression) and five typical positive emotions (freedom, happiness, joy, relief, relaxation), which they had to rate on a five-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (= very much). The scale values were averaged for the positive ($\alpha = .78$) and the negative ($\alpha = .79$) emotions scale, respectively. Areas of perceived difficulties during the transition included professional career, studies, family, communication (social network), and leisure activities. Each item was assessed by a five-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (= very much). The same scales were used to assess the degree of perceived financial support (e.g., from parents, other relatives, friends, sport organisations) and psychological support (e.g., from parents, spouse, other relatives, friends, coach, psychologist). One yes/no question used to explore a perceived difficulty to change the identity after athletic career termination. For studying coping strategies, a 12-item coping scale was derived from a coping questionnaire developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). Athletes were asked to rate each item (e.g., “I have been refusing to believe that my sports career is really finished”, “I have been trying to come up with a strategy, or plan about what to do”, “I have been expressing my negative feelings”) on a five-point Likert scale with a higher value corresponding to higher approval of the coping strategy. Athletes were also asked about how much time (in months) they needed to adapt to the post-career.

Perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition

Participants rated their athletic identity nowadays (still feeling like an athlete) on one five-point rating scale from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (= very much). The same scales were used for assessing four items related to satisfaction with life nowadays. Scale values were averaged over the four items. The α coefficient was .73. Two yes/no questions were asked about satisfaction with professional choice and with the success achieved in professional career. The participants' current relation to sport was assessed by eight yes/no statements like “I do exercise for myself”, “I work professionally in sport” (see Table 3 for the full list).

Procedure

Names and addresses of retired athletes were obtained in both countries via the sports federations and institutions. The surveys with invitation letters and paid envelopes were sent to

potential participants by mail. In the invitation letters, the idea of the study was explained and ethical issues (voluntary participation, confidentiality in data treatment and presentation) were emphasised. The return rates were 69% in France and 67% in Sweden. From returned surveys, only the data from participants who met the two above-mentioned criteria were involved in statistical analyses.

Analyses

Separated one-way ANOVA were conducted to evaluate differences between French and Swedish athletes for pre-conditions of the transition (i.e., athletic identity during the athletic career, satisfaction with the athletic career and timeliness of retirement). χ^2 comparisons were computed for retirement planning and voluntary retirement.

For coping and related factors, separated one-way MANOVAs were conducted to evaluate cross-national differences for coping strategies, difficulties experienced after retirement, sources of financial support and sources of psychological support. Following these analyses, one-way ANOVAs were performed on each variable, using the Bonferroni correction to avoid type I error (.05/number of variables). Any test that resulted in a p -value of less than .004 for coping strategies, less than .01 for difficulties, and .007 for financial and psychological support was considered statistically significant. One-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate cross-national differences for perceived duration of the transition.

For perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition, χ^2 comparisons were computed for satisfaction with professional choice and perceived success in professional career. χ^2 were also computed to compare the current role of sport and exercise in French and Swedish athletes' lives. Given the multiple comparisons that were made for these variables, any test that resulted in a p -value of less than .004 was considered statistically significant. One-way ANOVAs were conducted to test for cross-national differences for athletic identity nowadays and general life satisfaction.

The same analyses were conducted to test the differences between planned and unplanned retirement in terms of the rest of the variables.

Results

Initial analyses

Using ANOVA, no differences between French and Swedish athletes were found in the age of starting a career (15.36 for French and 15.18 for Swedish athletes) and the age of best performance (25.24 and 25.86 correspondingly), but a significant difference emerged for the age of career termination, $F(1, 155) = 4.93$, $p < .05$, with Swedish athletes being older than their French counterparts at the time of career termination (31.35 vs. 29.72). Swedish athletes were also older than French at the time of the study (38.55 vs. 34.88, $F(1, 155) = 22.40$, $p < .0001$). Swedish athletes were retired for more years ago than French athletes, $F(1, 155) = 12.02$, $p < .001$ (7.20 vs. 5.15 years, respectively).

Gender differences appeared only for age at the time of retirement, with males being older than females (36.87 vs. 34.16, $p < .01$); for satisfaction with athletic career, females were more satisfied

than males ($p < .05$). Several coping strategies differed also, Wilks' $\lambda = .86$, $F(12, 144) = 1.93$, $p < .05$. Accounting for Bonferroni correction, females reported more use of saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape ($p = .004$), and more spending time/talking to other people ($p = .003$). Because gender differences were not many, the data were combined across genders for further analyses.

Cross-national comparison on athletic retirement of former elite French and Swedish athletes

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for *pre-conditions* of the transition in retired French and Swedish athletes. It demonstrates the only significant difference that Swedish athletes reported higher satisfaction with their careers in sport than their French counterparts.

Comparison of reasons for athletic career termination shows that French athletes terminated careers in sport mainly for health-related reasons followed by job-related and relationships-related reasons. Swedish athletes emphasised sport-related reasons as most important, and health-, family-related reasons as their next choices.

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for *coping and related factors* in retired French and Swedish athletes.

A multivariate ANOVA showed that athletes of the two nations differed significantly in their coping strategies, Wilks' $\lambda = .71$, $F(12, 144) = 4.68$, $p < .0001$. Univariate analysis with a Bonferroni correction (α level = .004) revealed that French athletes reported more use of refusing to believe in retirement, saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape, and doing something to think about it less. Swedish athletes reported significantly more positive emotions after sports career termination than French athletes. A MANOVA with a nationality as independent variable and all categories of difficulties experienced by athletes as dependent variables was significant, Wilks' $\lambda = .85$, $F(5, 151) = 4.95$, $p < .001$. French athletes experienced more difficulties than Swedish athletes in their professional career. The cross-national comparison for psychological support during the transition was significant, Wilks' $\lambda = .81$, $F(7, 149) = 4.78$, $p < .0001$. Scheffe's post hoc test revealed that Swedish athletes received more psychological support from relatives other than parents and spouse compared with French athletes. Table 2 shows that Swedish athletes needed a longer time for adaptation to the post-career than French athletes.

Table 3 shows means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for *perceived quality and long-term consequences* of the transitions in retired French and Swedish athletes.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for pre-conditions of the transition in retired French and Swedish athletes

Variables	French sample ($N = 69$)	Swedish sample ($N = 88$)	F/χ^2 -values
Athletic identity during athletic career	5.36 (1.10)	5.64 (1.04)	2.74
Satisfaction with the athletic career	3.73 (1.13)	4.37 (0.68)	18.94****
Retirement planning	55%	67%	2.35
Voluntary retirement	73%	87%	3.15
Timeliness of retirement	2.36 (0.92)	2.45 (0.82)	.43

Note: Df = 1.155; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; **** $p < .0001$.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for coping and related factors in retired French and Swedish athletes

Variables	French sample ($N = 69$)	Swedish sample ($N = 88$)	F/χ^2 -values
<i>Coping strategies</i>			
Refusing to believe in retirement	1.92 (1.42)	1.35 (0.83)	9.98***
Taking action to improve the situation	2.71 (1.35)	2.61 (1.44)	.18
Coming up with a strategy or plan	3.04 (1.48)	3.09 (1.58)	.03
Using alcohol/drugs	1.23 (0.76)	1.04 (0.25)	4.51
Giving up	1.34 (0.83)	1.11 (0.41)	5.25
Saying things to escape unpleasant feelings	2.24 (1.42)	1.20 (0.57)	38.93****
Spending time or talking to other people	2.07 (1.27)	1.88 (1.25)	.83
Expressing negative feelings	2.13 (1.36)	2.94 (1.06)	.39
Trying to see the situation more positively	3.10 (1.42)	2.65 (1.46)	3.59
Doing something to think about it less	2.33 (1.54)	1.65 (1.12)	9.97***
Accepting the reality of retirement	3.59 (1.59)	4.15 (1.31)	5.93
Making jokes	1.88 (1.24)	1.92 (1.14)	.03
<i>Emotional reactions upon retirement</i>			
Negative emotions	2.56 (1.00)	2.44 (0.91)	.58
Positive emotions	2.26 (0.86)	3.00 (0.83)	29.78****
<i>Perceived difficulties in the transition</i>			
Professional career	2.33 (1.57)	1.59 (1.16)	11.52***
Studies	1.55 (1.20)	1.34 (0.94)	1.49
Family	1.84 (1.33)	1.52 (1.01)	2.86
Communication	1.82 (1.29)	2.01 (1.30)	.78
Leisure activities	2.02 (1.29)	1.64 (1.11)	3.92
Changing identity	30.43%	35.23%	.57
<i>Perceived financial support</i>			
From parents	1.94 (1.53)	1.68 (1.26)	1.35
From other relatives	1.02 (0.16)	1.11 (0.61)	1.23
From friends	1.20 (0.69)	1.10 (0.40)	1.28
From sport organisations	1.43 (1.00)	1.35 (1.03)	.25
From various funds	1.27 (0.87)	1.52 (1.16)	2.16
<i>Perceived psychological support</i>			
From parents	2.68 (1.49)	2.73 (1.59)	.05
From spouse	3.01 (1.71)	3.03 (1.71)	.00
From other relatives	1.02 (0.16)	1.69 (1.25)	19.07****
From friends	2.62 (1.43)	2.43 (1.51)	.64
From coach	1.92 (1.36)	1.65 (1.24)	1.64
From sport officials	1.28 (0.78)	1.53 (1.12)	2.35
From a psychologist	1.39 (1.08)	1.11 (0.63)	4.00
<i>Other related factors</i>			
Perceived duration of the transition (months)	9.30 (5.05)	19.87 (14.21)	31.47****

Note: Df = 1.155; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; **** $p < .0001$.

Retired Swedish athletes reported significantly higher satisfaction with professional choice, higher perceived success in their professional careers, and higher general life satisfaction than retired French athletes. In terms of their relation to sport nowadays, former Swedish athletes demonstrate higher current athletic identity than former French athletes. Accounting for Bonferroni correction of the α level because of multiple comparisons that are made, show that retired French athletes more often work professionally in sport than retired Swedish athletes.

Planned vs. unplanned retirement

Comparison between the two samples for retirement planning demonstrated no significant differences. Nationality \times Retirement planning interaction was found only for a satisfaction with athletic career, $F(1, 153) = 4.20$, $p < .05$. The Scheffé post hoc test revealed that French athletes who have not planned to retire are less satisfied with their athletic career than the Swedish who have planned to retire ($p < .0001$) and Swedish who have not plan to retire ($p < .001$). Other results revealed no interaction effects, but only main effects of retirement planning and/or nation.

Planned retirement was associated with higher satisfaction with sport career, $F(1, 155) = 20.03$, $p < .0001$, satisfaction with timeliness of career termination, $F(1, 155) = 17.87$, $p < .0001$, and less negative emotional reactions to the retirement situation, $F(1, 155) = 5.97$, $p < .05$. The analysis of coping strategies revealed a significant multivariate main effect, Wilks' $\lambda = .81$, $F(12, 144) = 2.79$, $p < .01$. Planned retirement was associated with less use of refusing to believe in retirement ($p < .0001$), less use of drugs ($p = .001$), less giving up ($p = .004$), and more use of accepting retirement ($p < .001$). No other significant differences were found between planned and unplanned retirement.

Table 3

Means, standard deviations and F/χ^2 -values for perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition in retired French and Swedish athletes

Variables	French sample ($N = 69$)	Swedish sample ($N = 88$)	F/χ^2 -values
<i>Satisfaction/perceived success</i>			
Satisfaction with professional choice	78.24%	91.67%	5.53*
Perceived success in professional career	76.81%	84.09%	8.25*
General life satisfaction	3.64 (0.80)	3.90 (0.75)	4.57*
<i>Current relation to sport</i>			
Athletic identity nowadays	2.33 (1.40)	2.94 (1.24)	8.31**
Exercising for oneself	85.5%	81.8%	.38
Taking part in competitions for veterans	21.7%	38.6%	5.14
Keeping relations with former coaches	68.1%	50.0%	5.21
Keeping relations with sport friends	94.2%	84.1%	3.89
Working professionally in sport	66.7%	23.8%	28.96****
Having an additional job related to sport	42.0%	21.6%	7.61
Visiting competitions as a spectator	68.1%	69.3%	.02
Advising informally young athletes	63.8%	43.2%	6.56

Note: Df = 1.155; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; **** $p < .0001$.

Discussion

Cross-national comparison on athletic retirement of former elite French and Swedish athletes

The result on cross-national comparison supported hypothesis 1 that both common and nationally specific patterns exist in the process and outcomes of the transition to the post-career among former elite French and Swedish athletes.

The common pattern for both national samples covers some characteristics of athletic careers, pre-conditions for the retirement, coping and related factors, and also long-term consequences of the transition. Elite athletes in France and Sweden started their careers when they were around 15 years old, achieved their best sport results around 25–26 years old, and during their sport participation had very high athletic identities. A majority of both French and Swedish athletes planned career termination in advance, perceived their retirement as voluntary and also as an opportune or a bit earlier than in proper time. After career termination, French and Swedish athletes experienced moderate negative emotional reactions (mainly emptiness, sadness and uncertainty), a lack of all kinds of financial support and moderate psychological support from spouse, parents and friends. In both samples, psychological support from former coaches, sport officials and psychologists appeared to be very low. About one-third in each sample reported difficulties in changing identity. In coping with the transition, athletes used a combination of coping strategies, mainly accepting the reality of retirement, trying to see the situation more positively and coming up with a strategy or plan. In both samples, giving up and using alcohol/drugs were among the least used strategies. At the time of the study, a vast majority of retired athletes in both countries continued to exercise for themselves.

The results of the study also demonstrate *two nationally specific patterns* in the process of the transition.

Compared with the Swedish sample, French athletes retired from sports at a younger age mainly because of health-, job- and relationship-related reasons and also because they were less satisfied with their athletic careers. Both younger age of retirement and lower satisfaction with sport participation might be associated with a predominance of health-related reasons for the termination (e.g., exhaustion, injuries, illnesses, overtraining). During the transition, French athletes had less positive emotional reactions upon retirement and used more defensive emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies (e.g., refusing to believe in retirement, saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape). They also perceived more difficulties to manage their new professional careers compared with the Swedish sample. It is interesting to note that a vast majority of former elite athletes in France in fact make relocations in sport, i.e. work professionally (66.7%) or have additional work related to sports (42.0%). In previous studies, the same pattern was found, e.g. for Spanish athletes (Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004). Staying in the sport domain, athletes could develop high expectations to cope easily with a new job but it appeared to be more difficult than they expected. In addition, French athletes experienced less psychological support from relatives during the transition compared with Swedish athletes. At the same time, they perceived their transition as twice shorter. Nowadays, former elite French athletes have lower athletic identity and are less satisfied with their professional choice/success, and life in general than their Swedish counterparts.

A nationally specific pattern for Swedish athletes in the transition is mirroring in many aspects the one for French athletes. Shortly, Swedish athletes terminated their careers at older age mainly

because of sport-, health- and family-related reasons, and also because they were more satisfied with their athletic careers. Compared with their French counterparts, they experienced more positive emotional reactions (especially feeling of freedom) in the transition and more psychological support from relatives. Only 23.8% of Swedish athletes chose a new professional job in the sport domain and only 21.6% had an additional job related to sport. It means that a vast majority of Swedish athletes experienced a very radical change in their activities (e.g., studies, jobs in the areas unrelated to sports), social environment and lifestyle. Taking this proposition together with a prevalence of sport-related reasons to retire, it is not very surprising that they reported about twice longer duration of the transition than French athletes. After all, nowadays, former Swedish elite athletes maintain higher athletic identity and feel more satisfied with their professional choice, professional career success and life in general compared with their French counterparts.

Considering the common and the two nationally specific patterns of the transition to the post-career from the point of career transition models, it is possible to conclude that this study clearly supports a view of the transition as a process with pre-conditions, coping and related factors, and outcomes/long-term consequences (e.g., Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999; Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bocknek, 1996; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). It also demonstrates that the transition process is multidimensional (with changes in several spheres of life), multilevel (with changes on various psychological levels—from emotional reactions to personal identities) and multifactor (with a number of factors interplayed, including national identity). The study supports the important role of coping strategies in the transition and shows that athletes use a combination of various strategies that might reflect a really dynamic character of the transition process (e.g., Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000).

Considering the results of cross-national comparison conducted in this study from the point of the Ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is possible to see that the common pattern in the process of the transition to the post-career among French and Swedish athletes reflects some obvious similarities between macro/meso-levels in their social environments. As it was mentioned earlier, in both countries active elite athletes are provided with financial and organisational support programmes, they also feel highly recognised and valued in their corresponding societies. All these might influence their very high athletic identities during athletic careers and a difficulty to change the identity in the post-career. At the same time, sport systems in both countries give athletes a free choice to decide about their termination from sports and about what to do afterwards. Through these factors, together with an absence of financial support or any special support programmes for retired athletes, the sport systems place complete responsibility in the transition to the post-career on athletes themselves and stimulate them to plan retirement, to make own decisions and to find own ways to cope.

On the other hand, the two nationally specific patterns of athletic retirement also support the Ecological model and demonstrate that macro/meso-social factors seem to be important agents in the transition. The results supported the two predictions complementing the hypothesis 1, namely, about longer duration of the transition and higher athletic identity nowadays in the Swedish sample compared with the French one. A lack of paid jobs in sport available for former Swedish athletes and higher requirements to employees' educational level in Sweden than in France might relate to the longer duration of the post-career adaptation in the Swedish sample in spite of some

more favourable characteristics of their transition process (e.g., more positive emotional reactions, less use of defensive coping strategies). In addition, former elite athletes in Sweden continue to be visible members of the society. This cultural tradition, on the one hand, makes rather natural for former elite Swedish athletes to keep their athletic identities after termination in sport, and, on the other hand, place an additional responsibility on them to achieve Swedish living standards, which are among the highest in west Europe. Sandemose (1934) formulated the so-called “Jante-law” as a key for understanding Swedish mentality. It postulates an importance “to be within the standard” (not much higher than a majority of people but also not lower) as a basis for personal satisfaction and self-esteem. It appeared that former elite athletes in Sweden need more time to start a new professional career outside sports and to achieve high living standards, and they seem to succeed because the majority of them currently feel satisfied with their professional choice/success, and life in general. Besides, as stated by Lavalley et al. (1997), keeping high athletic identity in the post-career might also contribute to the longer duration of the transition.

In contrast, former elite athletes in France are confronted with a radical change in their social recognition after athletic career termination (Stephan et al., 2003b). In fact, they are forced to replace their athletic identities by new professional identities (e.g., coach’s) that might speed up the process of the transition (Lavalley et al., 1997) but not always lead to satisfaction with their professional choice/career and current life. As revealed in the Results section, many of them have their jobs in the world of sport and keep contacts with teammates and coaches. All these might indicate a conflict between perceived necessity to adopt new professional identities and their attempt to maintain athletic identity in order to avoid the loss of social recognition. This conflict could explain retirement difficulties in retired French athletes and their lower satisfaction variables compared with the Swedish sample.

To summarise, this study supports one of the main conclusions of Alfermann et al. (2004) that athletes in the transition should be considered within a specific cultural context. Social macro- and meso-factors are nationally/culturally specific and might work as resources and also as barriers in the transition to the post-career.

Planned vs. unplanned retirement

The results supported hypothesis 2 that retirement planning would be associated with more favourable emotional and behavioural reactions to career termination regardless of the nation. In line with Alfermann et al. (2004), this study failed to find support for an interaction between retirement planning and nationality. These two independent variables represent two different mechanisms, cognitive vs. social, influencing the reactions to retirement independently (Alfermann et al., 2004). An athlete plans retirement on the basis of his/her perception of the social context and his/her life circumstances. Nationality is an aspect of the macro-system, and did not include an individual’s cognitive processes of structuring the future in the post-career.

As expected and in accordance with previous research and models (Alfermann et al., 2004; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001), the results revealed that retirement planning was associated with higher satisfaction with athletic career, satisfaction with timeliness of career termination and less negative emotional reactions upon retirement. It was also associated with more active coping strategies and less use of defensive emotion-focused strategies. At the same time, no significant

differences were found between athletes who planned and did not plan retirement in terms of perceived quality and long-term consequence variables.

Previous studies have demonstrated that athletes who planned their retirement in advance feel higher perceived control over the retirement process and have higher self-efficacy with regard to post-athletic career adaptation (Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann et al., 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; McPherson, 1980; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001; Webb et al., 1998). As suggested by Alfermann et al. (2004), athletes who plan retirement in advance do not waste their energy in wrong directions, and are able to mobilise and use their resources more effectively than athletes who do not plan their retirement.

To summarise, regardless of the nation, retirement planning was associated with more favourable emotions and behaviours during the transition but it was not associated with perceived quality and long-term consequences of the transition.

Limitations of the study, future research and applications

Among limitations of this study, at least three should be mentioned. First of all, it is the retrospective design that could cause a recall bias (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stephan et al., 2003a). Even if athletes retired less than 10 years ago, memory selection/reinterpretation process could play a role in the results obtained. To our knowledge, little research has been conducted in vivo, at the time of the transition, except Stephan et al.'s (2003a, b) studies. Retrospective designs are still relied upon extensively because of the difficulties related to the selection and recruitment of a homogeneous, elite-level sample of former athletes retired at the same time. Second, the samples for the quantitative design were relatively small but mainly because of the two criteria of the subjects' selection related to the level of the athletes and the time after the termination from sports. Third, to make more confident conclusions about an impact of retirement planning upon the transition the measurement of this variable should be further improved. In the Retirement from Sports survey, there is only one question about the retirement planning with yes/no answer. In future research, more attention should be paid to exploring the nature of the retirement planning (i.e. what and how the athletes plan). One more suggestion to improve the Retirement from Sports survey is to equal two measurements of athletic identity (during and after athletic career) to avoid the existing simplification of the second one. Future studies can also follow the transition process longitudinally and to compare athletes from different sports. In terms of athletic retirement, it would be interesting to compare "richer and poorer" sports, for example, retirement from elite tennis/golf/football and retirement from elite fencing/rowing. At last, future studies pertaining to the European Perspectives on Athletic Retirement must include more countries to cover more accurately the impact of culture/sport system on retirement from elite sports.

Applied perspectives of this study relate to deeper understanding of the transition to the post-career and to emphasising the role of some principles/approaches in the psychological work with retiring/retired athletes. It is shown that the transition out of elite sports is a multidimensional, multilevel and multifactor process in which nationality/culture plays rather important role. It supports Alfermann et al. (2004) in suggesting *a culturally specific approach* in applied work with athletes in the transition that implies to help them to adjust within particular society and culture. The study also supports a multilevel approach that means treating athletes not only on the

symptomatic level (e.g., negative emotional reactions) providing “technique based symptomatic relief” (Corlett, 1996, p. 88), but also addressing a variety of issues behind the symptoms (e.g., perceptions, identities, attitudes). More concrete, the study showed that psychological services specially designed for retiring/retired athletes can be very beneficial in both France and Sweden. Applied sport psychologists should analyse not only the athlete’s micro-social environment but also macro- and meso-social factors that might work as resources and/or as barriers in the transition.

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