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Career transitions in sport: European perspectives

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Abstract

Background and purpose. The concept of transitions has, during the past decade, become a well-delineated topic of study among the sport psychology community. This introductory article provides an overview of the major developments within this thematic field of research, as well as a description of interventions used with athletes in transition. Avenues for further research and developments are proposed.

Methods. Literature review and integration.

Results and conclusions. Analysis reveals that the concept of transition is currently viewed in a holistic, life-span perspective which spans the athletic and post-athletic career and which includes transitions occurring in the athletic career as well as those occurring in other domains of athletes' lives. This 'beginning-to-end' approach is illustrated with a developmental model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level. At the level of interventions, analysis suggests that the focus on interventions has shifted from the use of traditional therapeutic approaches to cope with the possible traumatic experience of the termination of the athletic career, to that of career transitions and athlete life skill programs aimed at providing support and education to athletes making athletic and non-athletic transitions. Finally, suggestions for future conceptual developments include the need to extend the available knowledge on the characteristics of specific transitions (e.g. non-normative transitions, in-career transitions), on the influence of sport-, gender- or cultural-specific factors on the quality of the transitional process, as well as on the user-friendliness and applicability of sports career transition interventions and programs across the range of athletes.

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Introduction

The concept of ‘transition’ has been related during the past decades to a variety of topics including individual life span development (e.g. Erikson, 1963), occupational planning (e.g. Hopson & Adams, 1977), educational processes (e.g. Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000), social support (e.g. Cutrona & Russell, 1990), and the processes of aging, retirement, and dying (e.g. Cummings & Henry, 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1969). In general, a transition has been related to the occurrence of one or more specific events which brings about not only in an individual ‘a change in assumptions about oneself’ (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5), but also a social disequilibrium (Wapner & Craig-Bay, 1992) that goes beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life (Sharf, 1997). In the field of sport psychology the concept of transition was introduced in the wake of psychologists and social scientists’ interest during the 1970s–early 1980s in how (former) athletes coped with the event of retirement from high-level competitive and professional sports (e.g. Haerle, 1975; Hallden, 1965; Mihovilovic, 1968). Since then, the focus of research has evolved in different phases: while the athletic career end was originally seen as a singular event, researchers re-appraised the termination of the athletic career as a transitional process. As the following overview will show, this transitional approach was later implemented to other phases and events occurring during the athletic career, and resulted in the current holistic, life-span perspective on (athletic as well as non-athletic) transitions faced by athletes.

The athletic career end as a singular event

In the wake of popular reports on the incidence of distress experienced by athletes when terminating their involvement from organized sports, sport psychological research was conducted on the retirement from elite sport and the drop out from youth sport. Both types of termination of involvement were initially explained in terms of a singular, all-ending event. Early studies included generally well publicized negative or even traumatic experiences among athletes retiring from elite sports. For example, Mihovilovic’s (1968) survey of 44 Yugoslavian former first-league soccer players showed that not only 95% ended their soccer career involuntarily and suddenly, but also that this end was perceived to be very negative by those players without another profession on retirement. Other studies also expressed concern for the number of athletes who experienced traumatic effects upon athletic career termination, including alcohol and substance abuse, acute depression, eating disorders, identity confusion, decreased self-confidence, and attempted suicide (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie, 1987; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982).

Paralleling the ‘end’ of the athletic career to that of retirement from the work force, or even to the process of dying, sport psychologists drew from the fields of social gerontology—the study of the aging process—and of thanatology—the study of the process of dying and death (for a detailed overview, see Lavallee, 2000). From social gerontology, for example, ‘Subculture’ theory was used which asserts that prolonged social interactions among individuals leads to the development of a group consciousness, and that people can be less active and well adjusted during retirement even if the situation is different from overall social norms (Rosenberg, 1981). While athletes have fairly distinguishable (sub)cultural characteristics, and although it assists in revealing poten-

tial adjustment problems experienced by athletes in ending their athletic career, the use of this theory was questioned because retiring athletes are moving out of, and not into, the proposed subculture (Gordon, 1995). Although, at first hand, other gerontological theories seemed to enable sport psychologists to explain or even predict the quality of athletic retirement, they were found to fail as, in comparison, to occupational retirement (a) athletes retire at an earlier age, (b) retired athletes will generally continue into an occupational career, and because (c) career termination need not be an inherently negative event requiring considerable adjustment. From thanatology, for example, the ‘Social death’ approach was used to explain that after their sports career termination retired athletes are treated as if they were dead even though still biologically alive, bringing about the loss of social functioning, isolation, or even ostracism. This approach failed, among others, due to the obvious fact that athletic retirees continued functioning in society, albeit in a different social role. A more popular use of thanatology involved describing athletic retirement in the series of stages experienced when facing death (Kubler-Ross, 1969), including denial and isolation, in which athletes initially refuse to acknowledge the inevitability of their career termination; anger, in which retiring athletes become disturbed at the overall changing situation; bargaining, in which they try to negotiate for a lengthened career in sport; depression, in which they experience a distress reaction to retirement; and acceptance, in which retirees eventually come to accept their career transition. Notwithstanding their intuitive appeal, thanatological models were criticized especially because of the lack of analogy between terminal illness and career termination (e.g. Gordon, 1995; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Although gerontological and thanatological models were instrumental in stimulating research on career termination issues, they remained limited for explaining sports career termination due to their non-sport specific character, their presumption of career termination as being an inherently negative event, requiring considerable adjustment, and their neglect of life after athletic retirement (Wylleman, Lavalée, & Alfermann, 1999).

The termination of the athletic career as a transition

Research findings which made relative the traumatic character of career termination—13% (Alfermann, 1995) to 15% (Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom, & Annerel, 1993) instead of the 70–80% reported in earlier research (e.g. Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982)—and the suggestion that the athletic career termination could serve as an opportunity for ‘social rebirth’ (Coakley, 1983), led researchers to suggest that the athletic career termination should be seen as a transitional process rather than as a singular event (McPherson, 1980). Once again, sport psychologists looked outside of the athletic domain for conceptual frameworks by focusing on ‘transition models’ (e.g. Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) in which a transition was defined as “an event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Transition frameworks used in research with athletes included Sussman’s (1972) Analytical Model, and especially the Model of Human Adaptation to Transition as proposed by Schlossberg and colleagues (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). In this model, three major sets of factors interact during a transition, including (a) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (e.g. psychosocial competence, gender,

age, previous experience with a transition of a similar nature), (b) the perception of the particular transition (e.g. role change, affect, occurrence of stress), and (c) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments (e.g. the evaluation of internal support systems, institutional support). A number of researchers used this model in an attempt to understand the career transition process of athletes (e.g. Baillie & Danish, 1992; Parker, 1994; Sinclair & Orlick, 1994; Swain, 1991). As empirical findings revealed that the adjustment process to post-athletic life was mediated, among others, by the voluntariness with which athletes retired and their preparation for a life after sport (e.g. Alfermann & Gross, 1997; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998; Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996), the focus of research gradually broadened to the pre- and post career ending phases. While transition models incorporated a wider range of influence than gerontological and thanatological models, and allowed for the possibility of both positive and negative adjustment (Crook & Robertson, 1991), they were still found to lack operational detail of the specific components related to the adjustment process among athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). More comprehensive conceptual models of adaptation to career transition were consequentially proposed (e.g. Gordon, 1995; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 1998). For example, Taylor and Ogilvie's (1998) domain-specific model which examines the entire course of the career transition process includes: (a) the causal factors that initiate the career transition process; (b) the developmental factors related to transition adaptation; (c) the coping resources that affect the responses to career transitions; (d) the quality of adjustment to career transition; and (e) possible treatment issues for distressful reactions to career transition. Other conceptualisations include, among others, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) retirement process among elite, female gymnasts as a transition consisting of the phases of 'Retirement' (the actual withdrawal from sport), 'Nowhere Land' (period of uncertainty and disorientation), and 'New Beginnings'.

Transitions in the athletic career

During the late 1990s, attention shifted from one particular transition (i.e. the career termination), toward a more life-span perspective of athletic involvement. This shift in perspective runs parallel with research from the fields of talent development, deliberate practice, and career development. Early work on talent development included Bloom's (1985) identification of stages in the way talented individuals (within the fields of science, art, and sport) developed. This route of talent development in sports included: (a) the initiation stage where young athletes are introduced to organized sports and during which they are identified as talented athletes; (b) the development stage during which athletes become more dedicated to their sport and where the amount of training and level of specialization is increased; and (c) the mastery or perfection stage in which athletes reach their highest level of athletic proficiency. From the perspective of the development of deliberate play and practice, Côté (1999) identified the stages of sampling, specializing, investment and mastery or performance. While these perspectives could be linked to the transitions faced by athletes, Stambulova (1994, 2000) actually developed a stage model based upon her research on career transitions among Russian athletes. Stambulova considered the athletic career as consisting of predictable stages and transitions, including: (a) the beginning of the sports specialization; (b) the transition to intensive training in the chosen sport; (c) the transition to high-

achievement and adult sports; (d) the transition from amateur to professional sports; (e) the transition from culmination to the end of the sports career; and (f) the end of the sports career.

Life span perspective on transitions faced by athletes

As research findings confirmed that athletes encounter different stages and transitions throughout their athletic career, a more ‘holistic’ approach to the study of transitions faced by athletes was advocated (Wylleman et al., 1999). While this approach should take a ‘beginning-to-end’ or life-span perspective, spanning the athletic and post-athletic career, it was also deemed important that those transitions faced by athletes in other domains of development should be included. The rationale for this latter point was based upon research findings showing the strong concurrent, interactive and reciprocal nature of transitions occurring in the athletic career (athletic transitions) and those transitions occurring in other domains of athletes’ lives (e.g. academic, psychosocial, professional) (e.g. Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, & Cumming, 2000). Using research data on the career development of pupil-athletes, student-athletes, professional and elite athletes, and of former Olympians, Wylleman and Lavalée (2003) presented a developmental model which includes normative transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level (see Fig. 1).

The top layer represents the stages and transitions athletes face in their athletic development including the three stages identified by Bloom (1985) and a discontinuation stage added reflecting the transition out of competitive sport as a process which could have a relatively long duration. The second layer reflects the developmental stages and transitions occurring at psychological level, including childhood, adolescence, and (young) adulthood. The third layer is representative of the changes which can occur in the athlete’s psychosocial development relative to her or his athletic involvement, including the athletic family, peer relationships, coach–athlete relationships, marital relationships and other interpersonal relationships significant to athletes. The final layer

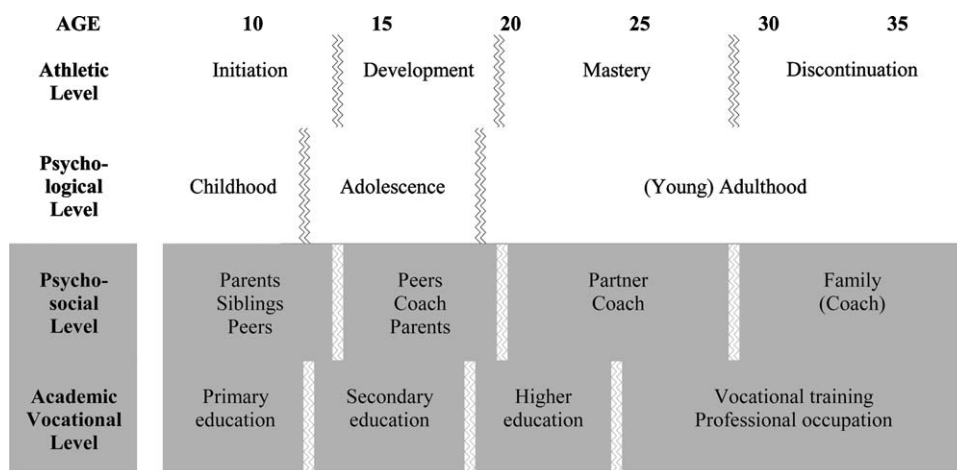


Fig. 1. A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2003).

reflects the stages and transitions at academic and vocational level, including the transition into primary education/elementary school, the stage of secondary education/high school, the transition into higher education (college/university), and finally the transition into vocational training and/or a professional occupation (which may, however, also occur at an earlier age). This model underlines not only the interactive nature of transitions in different domains of life of athletes, but also that non-athletic transitions may affect the development of athletes' sports career. While ages are tentative, this model illustrates, for example, that the athletic transition from initiation to development stage, runs parallel with the transition from primary to secondary level. This academic transition has in fact been linked to the occurrence of attrition in (competitive) youth sports (Van Reusel et al., 1992): as pupils change educational levels, they generally also disperse to different schools, thus breaking up the friendship networks which were a primary source of initiation of sport participation among youth. In another example of the interactive nature of athletic and non-athletic transitions faced by talented athletes, this model also shows that as young talented athletes try to transit into the mastery or perfection stage in their athletic career—where athletes need to perform to their highest level, as consistent and for as long as possible—they also have to cope with transitional changes at psychological level (from adolescence into young adulthood), at psychosocial level (development of temporary/stable relationships with a partner), and at academic or vocational level (transiting into higher education or into a professional occupation). Of course, not all athletes' sports careers will span all stages. In fact many young (talented) athletes may already have dropped out during the development or the beginning of their perfection stage. While this developmental model does not include non-normative transitions (e.g. a season-ending injury, a change of personal coach, or an unanticipated transfer to another team) or those transitions which were expected or hoped for but which did not happen (e.g. not making the Olympic Games)—labelled nonevents (Schlossberg, 1984)—and which also impact the quality of athletes' participation in competitive sport, it should provide sport psychologists with a framework to situate and reflect upon the developmental, interactive and interdependent nature of transitions and stages faced by an athlete.

Interventions with athletes in transition

As the awareness of the importance of career transitions increased over the years, so has the need for interventions with athletes in transition. The interventions suggested have paralleled the developments at conceptual level.

In view of the possible traumatic experience of the termination of the athletic career suggested in earlier research, a number of traditional therapeutic approaches, including cognitive restructuring, stress management and emotional expression, has been recommended as techniques to facilitate post-retirement adjustment among elite athletes (Gordon, 1995; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Other intervention strategies for practitioners working with athletes in transition, include the use of projective techniques (e.g. Bardaxoglou, 1997), a psycho-analytic approach (Chamalidis, 1995), an information processing approach, mentoring, and an existential psychology approach (Lavallee, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000; Wylleman et al., 1999). One avenue for working with athletes in transition has been account-making, which is the act of explaining, describing, and emotionally reacting to problematic or influential life events (Grove,

Lavallee, Gordon, & Harvey, 1998; Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1997). This technique is used with athletes to confront their career transition experiences mentally by thinking about it, putting it aside, cognitively constructing the various components of the transition (i.e. its nature, why it happened, how one feels about it, and what it means for the future), and then coming back again and renewing the analysis. This ‘account’ is then partially confided to close others, whose reaction may help or hinder the individual in dealing with career transition experience. If the confidants react to the account with empathy, the athlete may move with dispatch to confront what has happened and deal with it rationally and constructively. Several sport psychologists have recommended former athletes to rhetorically work-through any retirement-related difficulties (Parker, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 1993).

Whenever individual counselling is proposed to athletes in transition, it should assist them in coping with developments in the self-identity, changes in the available emotional and social support, the enhancement of coping skills, and the development of a sense of control (Murphy, 1995). The counselling process needs to emphasize the qualities which the retiring or retired athlete possesses and which are transferable and put to good use in other settings (e.g. commitment, communication skills). Lavallee and Andersen (2000) suggested that when considering interventions in working with athletes post-transition attention should be focused on voluntariness of termination and locus of control, degree of identification with athlete role, extent of foreclosure on non-sport areas, availability of coping resources, previous transitions experience, continued sport-related involvement, post-sporting career planning, understanding and use of transferable skills, achievement of sport-related goals, access to career-transition support services, and new focus after retirement.

Building upon the transitional approach, career transitions and athlete life skill programs have been developed which were initially geared toward providing support to athletes making the transition from an athletic career to life after retirement (Anderson & Morris, 2000). Table 1 presents a number of career development programs developed by governing bodies and sport institutes around the world to assist individuals in developing a professional career outside of sport, as well as achieving their sport-related goals.

These programs are primarily managed by national sports governing bodies, national Olympic Committees, specific sport federations (e.g. National Basketball Players Association), academic institutions (e.g. Vrije Universiteit Brussel), and independent organizations linked to sport settings (e.g. Women’s Sports Foundation). While some programs address the needs of professional athletes (e.g. the United States National Football Leagues Career Transition Program), the majority have been developed for elite amateur sports participants. They are generally aimed at developing social, educational, and work-related skills in elite athletes and generally focus on lifestyle management and the development of transferable skills that can assist individuals in making the transition from life in sport into a post-sport career including commitment, goal setting, time management, repeated practice, and disciplined preparations (Anderson & Morris, 2000; Lavallee, Gorely, Lavallee, & Wylleman, 2001; Wylleman et al., 1999). Content and target population of these programs may vary: where the ‘Career Transition Program’ (CTP) was aimed at assisting players to deal with retirement from the National Football League, the ‘Study and Talent Education Program’ (STEP) provides information and teaches elite level student-athletes skills to optimise the combination of an academic and an athletic career, as well as initiating successfully a post-academic vocational career. In general, they include values and interest exploration, career awareness

Table 1

Selected overview of career transition programs

Program	Institution	Country
Athlete Career and Education (ACE) Program	Australian Institute of Sport	Australia
Athlete Career and Education (ACE-UK) Program	UK Sports Institute	UK
British Athlete Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career and Education (BALANCE) Program	University of Strathclyde	Scotland
Career Assistance Program for Athletes	US Olympic Committee	USA
Making the Jump Program	Advisory Resource Centre for Athlete	USA
Olympic Athlete Career Centre—National Sports Centre	Olympic Athlete Career Centre	Canada
Olympic Job Opportunities Program	Australian Olympic Committee	Australia
Study and Talent Education Program (STEP)	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	Belgium
The Retiring Athlete	Dutch Olympic Committee	Netherlands
Wales Lifestyle Management Program	Sports Council for Wales	Wales
Whole-istic	American College Athletic Association	USA
Women's Sports Foundation Athlete Service	Women's Sports Foundation	USA

Note. The 'Olympic Athlete Career Centre—National Sports Centre' includes 'New Beginnings: Transition from High Performance Sport', 'Self-Directed Career Planning Guide', 'Athlete Registered Retirement from Sports Plan', and the 'Shadow Program'.

and decision-making, CV preparation, interview techniques, job search strategies, career counselling, and the development of generic social and interpersonal skills.

The programs in Table 1 vary also in format (e.g. workshops, seminars, educational modules), and methods (e.g. presenting information, educating, providing guidance, skill-learning). In general, the following topics are covered in these programs:

1. Social aspects, including, quality of relationships (e.g. family, friends) in the context of sport and of an academic/professional occupation.
2. Aspects relevant to a balanced style of living: self-image, self-esteem, and self-identity, social roles, responsibilities, priorities, and participation in leisure activities.
3. Personal management skills, such as, education, academic skills, skills required in professional occupation, financial planning, skills transferable from the athletic career, and coping skills.
4. Vocational and professional occupation, including vocational guidance, soliciting (e.g. résumé, interview, curriculum vitae), knowledge of the job market, networking, and career advice.
5. Aspects relevant to career retirement, such as, possible advantages of retirement, perceived and expected problems related to retirement, physical/physiological aspects of retirement and decreased levels of athletic activity (Wylleman et al., 1999).

It is clear that transition programs need to be multidimensional and include enhancement, support, and counselling components (Petitpas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 1996). Evaluations of these programs, such as the Australian Athlete Career Education (ACE) program—which has recently also been implemented in the UK by the UK Sports Institute across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—showed that a majority of athletes were generally satisfied with the actual services and courses they had attended (Lavallee et al., 2001).

Conclusions and avenues for future development

The growing number of publications (e.g. Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000) and congress symposia on the topic of career transitions is not only indicative of the interest from the sport psychology community. It also reflects a number of developments which has occurred in the study of career transitions during the past three decades. A first major development has been the shift in perspective used in the conceptualisation of the transitions faced by athletes. While researchers originally focused on one transition (i.e. the career termination), the focus of interest broadened to a life-span perspective including different life domains relevant to athletes. This has put the spot light on the role and influence of ‘non-athletic’ transitions which (may) affect the development of the athletic career, including those transitions at psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational level. A second development constitutes the shift from a theoretical perspective on career termination to the testing and development of conceptual models specifically related to the adaptation to career transition. These models include career-termination models (e.g. Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001) as well as career-transition models (e.g. Stambulova, 1994, 2000; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003). Third, researchers have gradually broadened their attention from identifying causes and consequences of career-ending transition to the identification of specific psychological factors related to the quality of career transitions (e.g. athletic identity, transferable skills, transition-related skills) (e.g. Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000; Čečič Erpič, 2001; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Lavallee et al., 2000; Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000; Petitpas, Cornelius, & Brewer, 2001). Finally, the focus of interest has shifted from the development of career termination and post-career programs to the evaluation of intervention strategies and career transition programs and services (e.g. Anderson & Morris, 2000; Lavallee et al., 2001; Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999).

Where could we go from here? At a conceptual level there is a need to extent our knowledge on specific transitions. While the career termination among (elite/professional) athletes has been studied closely, it has never explicitly been linked to the occurrence of ‘dropout’ in youth sports. And yet, dropping out, which also reflects athletes ending their involvement in sport, has been assumed to be more difficult to cope with than retirement: dropout is seen as a premature or off-time career termination at a developmentally atypical point in life—the athlete did not reach her or his full potential—while retirement is generally seen as an on-time event after a long-term career (Alfermann, 2000). Proposals for re-defining the participatory status of young athletes, such as the ‘transfer dropout’ (Lindner, Johns, & Butcher, 1991), ‘sport-specific dropout’ (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988), or ‘sport transfer’ (Klint & Weiss, 1986; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982) reflect different types of dropouts which could also be viewed in terms of transitions, and more particularly as ‘in-career’ transitions. In following this conceptual parallel, researchers could revisit the concept of transitions from the perspective of the conceptual frameworks on participation

and discontinuation, including competence motivation theory (Harter, 1981), achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984), the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt, & Keeler, 1993), or Smith's (1986) Cognitive-Affective Model of Sport Burnout. Moreover, as existing transitional models (e.g. Stambulova, 1994, 2000; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003) are generally based upon normative transitions, which are part of a definite sequence of sports- and age-related events (e.g. transition from junior to senior level, from regional to national-level competitions, from amateur to professional status, from active participation to discontinuation from competitive sport), sports scientists could look into existing links with research on the processes underlying participation and discontinuation motivation and the sport socialization process (Greendorfer, 1992).

Second, as research has generally focused on the identification of transitions which are normative in nature, researchers have paid less attention to the occurrence of non-normative transitions. These idiosyncratic transitions, which are generally unpredicted, unanticipated, and involuntary, do not occur in a set plan or schedule but are the result of important events that take place in an individual's life and to which it responds (Schlossberg, 1984). For athletes, these transitions may include a sudden change of personal coach, or an unanticipated de-selection for a major championship after years of preparation—a transition which is also known as a 'nonevent' (Petitpas et al., 1997). An athletic injury is one of the most important non-normative athletic transitions with which athletes may be confronted. The unpredictable and involuntary nature of this type of transitions will require researchers to develop conceptual models which include the mechanisms required by athletes to cope successfully with these type of transitions.

Third, while existing transitional models are reflective of the athletic as well as non-athletic normative transitions which occur throughout (and after) the athletic career, they remain too general. It becomes therefore important to acknowledge the diversity which may exist in view of sport-, gender- or cultural-specific characteristics (e.g. Seiler, Anders, & Irlinger, 1998). For example, while transiting from national to international level is a normative transition which is present in all sports, the ages at which this transition occurs may be very sport-specific (e.g. female gymnastics versus male rowers).

Fourth, it remains a must for researchers to provide ways in which practitioners can apply research findings in their applied work with athletes. While the existing transition models provide sport psychologists with a theoretical framework to situate the developmental, interactive and interdependent nature of transitions and stages athletes face, it remains important that the demands of particular stages and transitions are linked to the resources available to athletes and their surrounding to make each transition successfully. In this way, professionals working with athletes could assist them in structuring optimal transition experiences throughout their sport career. This includes first the opportunity to take a new look at the phenomenon of drop-out in youth sports from a transitional perspective and thus formulate concrete interventions for talented young athletes contemplating quitting sport (e.g. Lavallee & Andersen, 2000). Second, using a developmental transitional model, sport psychologists should use a life-span approach to work with athletes in transition. For example, using the developmental model presented in Fig. 1 more attention has recently been paid to the way in which talented young athletes may be assisted in successfully transiting from junior to senior level by situating it in the context of non-athletic transitions occurring in the same period (e.g. transition from adolescence to young adulthood, transition from secondary to higher education) (Wylleman, 2002).

Sports career transition programs also need to be evaluated on their user-friendliness and applicability across the range of athletes. For example, evaluative research by Lavallee et al. (2001) has demonstrated that career transition programs need to include several key points to be successful (e.g. group-specific targeting and promoting, emphasis on the education of athletes of the need for long-term planning, diversification of career transition services). A clear need remains to examine the effectiveness of the service provided by these programs in terms of outcomes (e.g. job placements made) or changing behaviour, not only in view of furthering our understanding on how best to help the personal development and performance of athletes through the provision of sports career transition services, but also in view of accountability. From this perspective, we need to consider the inclusion in career transition programs of experts which are also significant to the athlete's successful coping with career transition. This includes experts in the fields of sports medicine, sports physiotherapy, financial management, human resource and personnel management etc.

Furthermore, there exists a clear need for the development of a specific methodology to evaluate athletes' perceptions of the transitions occurring throughout their sports career. Finally, while the focus on transitional research has been put in athletes' development, it becomes important to acknowledge the development of the athletic career with the role significant others, including coaches and managers, play. Future research may therefore be directed towards the identification of not only the career development of coaches and managers, but also of the relationship with the development of the athlete's athletic career (Wylleman et al., 1999).

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