



## Factors contributing to the quality of the transition out of elite sports in Swiss, Danish, and Polish athletes



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The aim of this study was (a) to compare athletic retirement of former Swiss, Danish, and Polish athletes; and (b) to explore the influence of factors on the quality of the transition. Based on existing transitional models, we developed a working model to investigate the predictive power of commonly assumed resources and barriers related to the transition (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013).

**Design and methods:** Former international elite athletes from Switzerland (n = 231), Denmark (n = 86), and Poland (n = 84) from 35 different sports completed an online questionnaire in their native language. Mean/proportional differences across countries were explored using ANOVAs and chi-square tests. For each sample, a multiple regression analysis was performed with 26 predictors on the transition quality, which was a component score of seven variables.

**Results and conclusions:** More differences were found among individual characteristics (e.g., educational level, athletic identity, confidence in skills), whereas athletes reported a similar pattern concerning retirement planning and voluntariness to end their career regardless of the context. The adaptation process following the career end was easiest for Swiss athletes and most difficult for Polish athletes. Results of the multiple regressions revealed both common resources (e.g., voluntariness) and barriers (e.g., athletic identity), but also factors that worked as resources in one context, but as barriers in another (e.g., high sportcareer income). We propose to avoid generalizations about resources and barriers influencing the transition, but to apply a culturally sensitive approach when studying athletic retirement in different contexts.

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### 1. Evolution in career termination and athletic retirement research

In sports science research, athletic career termination came into focus in the late 1960s. For the first decades, the main interest of researchers was to identify the nature of the retirement from elite sports and to understand athletes' reactions to sport career termination (Coakley, 1983; Hill & Lowe, 1974; Lerch, 1982; Mihovilovic, 1968; Pawlak, 1984; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Drawing on theoretical frameworks from thanatology and gerontology, the end of the athletic career was typically seen as a negative and traumatic (single) life event (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Lerch, 1982). Later

on, McPherson (1984) proposed a more process-orientated perspective on the athletic career end followed by an adaptation with a potentially positive or negative outcome.

For a long time, career researchers were convinced that the more their research findings could be generalized, the better. As a result, researchers focused on factors influencing the transition quality and found that individual characteristics (e.g., educational level, financial status, vocational and educational skills, and sports career achievements), pre-retirement planning, voluntariness of termination, and social support all facilitate athletes' adaptation to the post-career demands. On the other hand, an exclusive or strong athletic identity, injuries, and health problems were identified as common barriers to the adaptation (for reviews, see Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Stephan & Demulier, 2008). These findings were presented as universal and generalizable for understanding athletes' transitions, even though they were based on national samples and possibly influenced by

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scholars' cultural backgrounds (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009).

Following this first phase, a new line of thinking emerged, according to which the more research findings and practical recommendations could be contextualized, the better (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014; Stambulova, 2016). The discussion on the role of context could be seen as a new trend towards cultural sensitivity in sports career studies. Approaching culture with a positivist epistemology and nations as independent variables, cross-national studies (e.g., Schmidt & Hackfort, 2001; Seiler, Anders, & Irlinger, 1998) revealed both common and nationally specific patterns in retirement of athletes from different countries. Cross-national comparison of the transition out of sport was further explored in the *European perspectives on athletic retirement* (EPAR) project (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). These studies added a link between the factors that influence the transition and the corresponding socio-cultural contexts. In addition, they showed that the national context plays an important role when studying athletic retirement. Despite these findings and the call for more cross-cultural studies on athletic career termination (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2012), research on cross-national studies on athletic retirement is limited and only a few additional comparative studies have been conducted (e.g., Dimoula, Torregrosa, Psychountaki, & Fernandez, 2013; Park & Lavallee, 2015).

The reasons for this paucity may be found in three main challenges when studying athletic retirement across cultures. The first is to understand the transition out of elite sports as a multidimensional process with a number of factors interplaying, including national identity (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). This multifactorial approach demands that several relevant theoretical frameworks for studying athletic transitions (presented below) are combined with an ecological perspective. The second challenge is to apply a “cultural turn” perspective (Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013), which means that athletes' transitions should be studied within particular socio-cultural contexts applying culturally informed research instruments and models (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). As response style in questionnaires can be influenced by cultural dimensions such as power distance or uncertainty avoidance (Harzing, 2006), drawing conclusions, especially regarding “soft” variables measuring perceptions and attitudes, should be done cautiously (Brislin, 2000). Consequently, regression techniques are recommended for cross-cultural studies, as they are considered less sensitive to cultural bias than the comparison of means across samples taken from different contexts (Ember & Ember, 2009). The third challenge deals with the position of the researchers who are infused by their own culture (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Therefore, cross-national research projects require researchers' cultural awareness and, in particular, demand negotiations about terminology and linguistic aspects (Ryba et al., 2013; Si & Lee, 2007).

Although many elite athletes live their sporting lives across national borders and cultural contexts (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014), their transition out of elite sports often takes place within a specific national context. While athletic career transition research moves towards context-specific and culturally informed studies (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014), cross-cultural comparison studies seem increasingly relevant for coaches and sports psychology practitioners within the field of globalized elite sports. Consequently, there is a need for more systematic knowledge about both context-specific factors and common determinants of a successful versus difficult transition out of elite sports across national borders and cultural contexts.

This study is related to the EPAR project and compares former Swiss, Danish, and Polish elite athletes in terms of processes and

outcomes of the transition out of elite sport. Furthermore, it examines and compares the contribution of transitional characteristics on the quality of the transition in these three contexts. To compare the transition out of elite sports across nations, we built on existing career transition models (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) which consider the transition as a process and where several factors influence the adaptation to a new life or career situation.

## 2. Career transition and retirement frameworks

Schlossberg's *Model of analyzing human adaptation to transition* (1981) comprises characteristics of the individual (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity/culture), the situation (reasons that triggered the transition, timing, control, assessment, and duration), and the pre- and post-environments (circles and functions of support) that are seen as influential when determining adaptation success. A transition (caused either by an event or non-event) results in a change in assumption about oneself and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). The *Conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes* (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) focuses on causes for career termination, as well as factors and available resources related to the transition that determines the adaptation quality (a healthy transition versus a retirement crisis). In the case of a crisis, a need for psychological intervention is outlined. The *Athletic career transition model* (Stambulova, 2003) considers the transition as a process of coping with specific demands. Effective coping (i.e., successful transition) is achieved when an athlete is able to use/develop necessary resources and to avoid/overcome potential transitional barriers. Ineffective coping (i.e., crisis transition) occurs when the athlete is unable to cope effectively due to a lack of resources and/or insuperable barriers. A crisis transition demands an intervention. If effective, the intervention leads to a (delayed) successful transition. In case of none or ineffective intervention, athletes face negative consequences of the transition. Athletes' transitions can be understood as critical periods between different phases on the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial level of an athlete's career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011), as these periods come with specific demands athletes have to cope with to successfully continue their career or effectively adapt to the post-sport life (Stambulova, 2003). The *Ecological model of human development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was associated along with the transition models in order to be able to interpret the findings of the cross-national comparison about athletic retirement. Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) helps to understand that the individual transition is embedded in a specific context and is influenced by macro-level (e.g., the socio-cultural context of a society, the country's economy), meso-level (e.g., federations, clubs, and support systems for athletes), and a number of micro-level systems (e.g., family, friends, coaches, and teachers) in which athletes are involved.

### 2.1. Working model of factors contributing to the quality of transition out of elite sports

We combined the elements from the above-described frameworks to develop our working model for studying the transition out of elite sport (Fig. 1).

Transition demands (e.g., adjustment to a new lifestyle, dealing with bodily changes, adapting to a new social environment) create developmental conflicts between “what the athlete is” and “what he/she wants or ought to be” (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007, p. 717). Potential resources and barriers that facilitate or hinder a

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