

When is the end the end of an athlete's career:

Physical or *psychological* reality?

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We can commonly distinguish between two types of career termination. The expected end of an athletic career is seen coming and can be planned for. Included in this type can be the retirement due to age taking its toll on our ability to be competitive. The other type is the unexpected end of a career. This is unplanned and can include not being able to participate again due to a serious injury.

Calling an end to a career can be a difficult decision, and as can be seen in the amount of star athletes that retire and then make a comeback these days, it can be a difficult decision to live with. The research seems to indicate that the unexpected termination can be especially difficult, though many athletes also struggle with the transition of participating and then retiring, even if it was well planned.

Two components can be investigated when sport participation is considered, namely the physical participation and the psychological components involved.

Firstly, there is the physical participation in a sport. Athletes tend to follow distinct training routines requiring much dedication, often for many years, and after terminating a career, what is the time and routine

replaced with? Added to the routines of physical participation, some earned a living from sport, and the end of a career results in termination of income. The reality of the situation is that very few athletes earn the amount of money that they do not have to have alternative plans for when they end their careers. Working cleverly with your money or having another source of income when ending a career is a reality for most.

Helping the transition from physical participation to non-participation can include having something new that is worked towards. A new goal per se. This can be energising, help to keep focus and will replace some of the time that went into training, almost acting as a distraction from what's no more. If financial income is relevant, then another source of income is an important consideration for any athlete.

Secondly, ending a career also has a strong psychological impact. People assume different identities and can have numerous identities at any given time. People understand their experiences, decisions and actions based on what identity they assume. You can be an athlete, a team mate and a father/mother at the same time. When physical pain is experienced and the athlete identity is assumed,

someone might immediately consider the impact this might have on her training or upcoming competition. If a man assumes the father identity, and the same pain is experienced, he might consider how this will impact his movements while playing with his kids this weekend and not be too concerned about the impact of this on his ability to gym for a few days.

Psychologically athletes tend to develop strong identities with being an athlete. This is not surprising considering the investment of time and effort that is put into your sport. Even when not actively busy with sport, the athlete identity will still have its influence. What to eat while in a restaurant is influenced by assuming the athlete identity. This is done because we know that this has an impact on our ability to perform the next day. If your expectation is to live up to some level of performance then your decision in the restaurant will make sense to you, though not always to a friend as he/she might be assuming a different identity.

Research points to the necessity to plan for the psychological transition from an active sporting career to termination of your career. When the training and competition stops, does the athlete identity stay? A person might experience an imbalance



between the athlete identity they still assume and the sudden change in experiences that are not athletically related anymore. Suddenly the same choice in the restaurant does not leave you with such a sense of content anymore because there is no training that can be affected. This imbalance can cause psychological distress. Doubt, boredom, regret, anxiety, even depression can be the result if such distress persists. If a match can be found between your daily experiences and the identity assumed, a greater sense of content might be experienced. Some choose to keep similar experiences that match strong identities, and for example move into coaching roles within their sports. Some might also participate in their sport but just at a social level. This may even buy some time to develop your other identities and over a course of time move into another direction. Others have strong identities that were developed while they were still actively involved with sport, and move towards this as their dominant identity when they end their career.

It is generally regarded to be psychologically healthy to experience variation in your life, and so doing develop different identities. Each identity will offer a different outlook on your experiences, and maybe offer a way towards more positive experiences.