



# Transitioning to life after the Rio Olympics

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The Olympics are the pinnacle of an athlete's career. The sacrifices, dedication, commitment, time, energy and effort are necessities that all athletes know so well. The build-up is long, stressful and intense and the Olympics itself can be life changing whether athletes are successful or unsuccessful.

But what happens when the music stops, the caldron is extinguished and everyone returns home? Then all athletes, successful or not are confronted with the cruel reality of being back at home. Athletes now have more time on their hands without all the countless hours of preparation and training. The continuous feedback over time from others such as coaches, managers and support services also disappears and it seems as if there is nothing and athletes are likely to feel that they only have themselves to rely on.

The silence often brings an emptiness and then the gruelling questions start:

- Should I do this for another four years?
- Will I be able to survive financially if I do this again?
- When should/could I retire?
- Why do I feel so hollow and numb inside after the Games?
- What am I going to do when all the hype and publicity stops?
- When will my emotions and mood stabilize?
- Will I ever feel like "myself" again?
- What am I going to do with my life now?
- Should I be getting a "real" job?

These are all questions that athletes have tried to block out and avoid for the last four years. It wasn't necessary to think about this because they were so goal-driven and caught up in the structure and routine of training. All athletes eventually venture into a transitional period

whether they succeeded or failed at the Games.

When athletes were not successful they often have a burning desire to go out there and "make it right". However, is that the "right" decision or is that just an emotional decision to try and get rid of the hurt? They feel lost and then they go back to the sport because they feel that is the only thing they know best. Other athletes have the genuine desire to compete again.

When athletes were successful they are bombarded with praise from the media, sponsors and the public and commercial commitments may also increase. It therefore, seems unnecessary to entertain the questions immediately. However, the hype also subsides and after a while the "silence" and questions above appear and apply to them as well.

For many athletes their concept of self-worth is tied up with being an athlete. The adjustment and transition after Rio can be huge and if athletes are not ready for it, it can even be experienced as traumatic.

The transition is much harder if the decision of retirement is forced upon athletes for example, if they can't compete, make selection or get dropped from a team or squad as opposed to them deciding for themselves.

Transitions are challenging because they require athletes to change from "the known" to "the unknown". It changes one's assumptions about self and the world. This is a process that requires specific coping mechanisms. Transitioning athletes therefore, need to adapt to either another chapter in their sporting career (another Olympic cycle) or a new chapter in their life (a vocation or job). Both of these bring excitement, uncertainty, fear and expectations.

Here is some practical wisdom shared by athletes who have made some of these transitions already. It is supported by professionals working in the high performance sport context. It might be a worthwhile exercise considering these principles before making attempts to answer the questions above:



### Take time out!

Don't attempt to answer these questions straight away. Take a holiday, relax for a bit or spend time with loved ones, family and friends. The temptation to fill the void is strong but be careful. Rather be patient and spend some time giving back to yourself! Rather rest and recharge because what you have been through was emotional and intense.

### Use learned skills and coping resources to develop a clear plan or new goal!

Some athletes find it daunting and challenging to start thinking about a job or conventional lines of work because so far they devoted so much of their life to their sport. They even sometimes feel as if they are "cheating on their sport".

If this is the case it might be beneficial to address and confront the underlying anxiety as opposed to pretending everything is fine. A successful transition is reliant on a clear plan where athletes can use their competitive skills to good effect. Athletes learned extreme discipline, resilience, time management and goal-orientation over the years and now these skills can assist with this process of deciding where to go and what the goal should be. These are all coping resources that athletes gained in their sporting career and can now be used in the transitioning process.

Athletes who wish to continue for another four years should go back to the drawing board to plan and set new goals. This should be in conjunction with their coaches and support staff. They should set proper short and long term goals and map out how to approach the next four years.

In contrast, athletes who are considering retiring from their sport can seek career counselling services to map out their career path. They are starting with a new life chapter which can either include studies, further studies or writing a proper CV for job applications.

### Seek professional help!

However, when athletes allowed sufficient time to come to terms with their Rio experiences but still feel the following symptoms (nearly every day for a period of time) it will be responsible to seek professional help in the form of medical or psychological interventions.

- Decrease or increased appetite
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Depressed mood for most of the day
- Suicidal thoughts
- Irritability
- Anger outbursts
- Excessive crying
- Nightmares
- Feelings of restlessness, worthlessness or inappropriate guilt

In summary, sport can be the most rewarding and satisfying experience or it can be frustrating, hurtful and soul-searching. That is what life after Rio presented to all athletes. It forced athletes into a process of either transitioning to another Olympic cycle where they need to recover, refocus and rebuild or transitioning into a new life chapter.

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