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Facilitating and Supporting the Elite Athlete-to-Coach Transition: Lessons Learned from Norwegian Coaches and Federations

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ABSTRACT

Elite athletic career termination is inevitable in high performance sport. Whether due to interest, injury, age or combination of factors, athletes will undergo a shift in their professional and personal identity. While retirement out of sport has been scrutinized to both understand and support athletes, we have not thought through what the athlete-to-coach, within-sport retirement, signifies for the person undergoing it and for our applied practice and lack the approach(es) for supporting it. Based on recent research advances, we build on a range of resources to be developed in supporting athletes during the transition and in the coaching profession.

KEYWORDS

Career transition; early career coach; elite athlete; sport psychology consultation

Knowing how fast athletes transit to coaching, justifies how demanding and confusing this transition is. We [athletes] are like kids leaving home and sport seems to be failing us as a good parent. (Sigurd Pettersen, ski jumping, winner Four Hills Tournament 03-04, assistant coach US Women’s ski jumping 04-05)

Knowledge and interventions on athlete retirement and post-career transition outside sport have grown considerably (Park et al., 2013). Only recently has post-career transition inside sport, where an athlete transits from training and competing to coaching, attracted researchers’ attention (e.g., Blackett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Chroni et al., 2020; Kavanaugh, 2010; Rynne, 2014). As the opening quote highlights, this transition is typically a rapid career shift, occurring with minimal support within the sport system leaving the individuals to adjust and manage on their own. As a discipline, the field of sport psychology is well suited to work within coach education and development and with the transition experience itself, yet to our knowledge, sport psychology-based interventions for supporting the elite athlete-to-coach transition are not common practice. Upon reviewing the literature, it has become apparent that as a field, we have not

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thought through the nuances of this within-sport retirement experience and what these signify for applied practice. The present paper aims to summarize recent research advances on the athlete-to-coach transition and share a range of resources that can inform sport psychology practice in support of the person-in-transit.

Effective coaching is founded on contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge and skills, along with a personal philosophy and understanding of one's values (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). This foundation forms the competence and knowledge base for being able to perform the core functions of a coach across a wide range of sport contexts (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2013). With the recognition of the complexities of the profession (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Jones et al., 2010), there is also the recognition that effective coaches need education and on-going professional development support (Dieffenbach, 2019). Unfortunately, an outdated mindset of 'you played, therefore you coach' still exists, and many retiring athletes are recruited into coaching without a well-developed foundation for coaching (Blackett et al., 2018; Rynne, 2014). Rather often, elite athletes are fast-tracked into coaching (accelerated accreditation route), yet the effectiveness of this pathway is still under scrutiny (see Blakett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Rynne, 2014). Rynne (2014) identified weaknesses, as well as potential bias, associated with privilege. In the case of one fast-tracked coach from an elite playing background, these related to everything from developing sports-specific knowledge and high level sports contacts, to gaining enhanced opportunities to develop through being in senior or leadership positions, learning from coaches as well as athletes, and being fast tracked, along with enhanced career prospects within coaching. According to Blakett et al. (2018), UK football and rugby elite players who are fast-tracked into coaching fall into two categories: the active coaches who purposefully prepare for post-athletic career coaching, and are well equipped to transition into a coaching role; and passive coaches who do not proactively prepare and often take on coaching reactively, while unprepared for it, upon conclusion of the athletic career.

What is the athlete-to-coach transition

Researchers have considered thoroughly the demands, barriers, and resources needed for coping and adjusting when transitioning to life outside sport (e.g., identity, education, planning, social support; see Park et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). However, the facets of the inside sport transition from being an elite athlete to that of becoming and being a coach appear to contain distinctive aspects that necessitate unique adjustments, coping, and support. Examples of these aspects are the very sudden reality of no longer being the flower or center of

attention, and instead becoming a gardener who must tend the needs of others, that your well-trained skills do not translate straightforwardly into something you can teach to others, or that as a coach you need to filter communication ensuring appropriateness for the receiving athlete (Chroni et al., 2020).

Informed by the sport psychology discourse, Chroni et al. (2020) described a distinctive case of athlete career termination where “the person transits from the training and competition realm as a competitor to the training and competition realm of the same sport context as a coach” (p. 2). This athlete-to-coach transition entails a shift from the athletic career as a competitor to the vocational career as a coach and demands that the individual undergoes adjustments related to identity, skills, and competencies while at the same time having to act and deliver on the coaching job. In studying the athlete-to-coach transition experience and the demands it places on the person-in-transit among Norwegian winter sport athletes, Chroni et al. (2020) found that while past athletic careers gave them a jump-start in terms of the contextual knowledge of coaching, the startup toolkit they possessed was insufficient for meeting the challenges of shifting from athlete-to-coach.

Contemporary considerations on career termination and the athlete-to-coach transition

Athletic retirement has been approached through different models, both sport and non-sport specific (for a review see Park et al., 2013). Two transition models that were specifically developed for sport have been used widely (Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Both endorse a holistic view, treating athletic retirement step by step allowing for one’s resources and coping to come forward, and for an intervention to take place when one’s available resources do not meet retirement demands. The growing body of knowledge on athletic retirement has informed international initiatives aiming to support the transition and facilitate life after sport (e.g., Athlete365 Career+, International Olympic Committee, 2018), as well as regional guidelines (e.g., EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, European Commission, 2012). Such programs attempt to equip retiring athletes with education and/or employment experience for life after sport.

Some of the literature has focused on the process of fast tracking, as well as elements of it as these pertain to the person-in-transit (e.g., Blackett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Rynne, 2014). The emphasis of some of the fast-tracked pathway studies has been on unique elements, without focusing on the transition lived experience itself such as how the athletic past and the process may impact the new coach’s philosophy, behaviors, effectiveness or development (e.g., Blackett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; McMahon

et al., 2020, Rynne, 2014). Espousing the coaching role has also been highlighted as an expectation or obligation associated with high performance sport participation. Blackett et al. (2018) observed a sense of 'professional obligation' by elite players to participate in youth sport coaching based on their high-profile status prior to the end of their competitive playing careers. This valuation of 'player status' as a coaching credential has also been noted in subsequent work (Blackett et al., 2020). The Blackett et al. (2018) study also raised concerns about the systemic bias within the competitive worlds of football and rugby to fast-track what were identified as 'passive coaches', former high-performance athletes who had not actively sought to develop coaching skills. Despite the institutional perpetuation of fast-tracking selected individuals regardless of their preparation, Blackett et al. (2018) reported that both coaches who were identified as active and passive in their coach preparation efforts felt, in retrospective interviews, that early career coach education was essential. In Blackett et al. (2020), the researchers investigated how English and Welsh elite male football and rugby athletes transformed their identities when following a fast-tracked career pathway into a post-athletic high-performance coaching role. Their work was informed by the sport sociology framework, and they noted how challenging yet critical it was to develop a coach identity by defining a coaching philosophy that was different to the playing philosophy of one's previous life as an athlete.

Recently, concerns have also been raised about the fast-track or passive approach to athlete-to-coach preparation that may perpetuate incorrect, inappropriate, and even abusive coaching practices. In a unique case study examination of the coaching behaviors and beliefs of a fast-tracked coach, McMahon et al. (2020) pointed out the perpetuation of abusive practices that had been experienced and normalized during the coach's own athletic career, thus suggesting a perpetuating cycle of abuse. As noted in the authors' conclusions and within the broader abuse prevention literature (e.g. Bergeron et al., 2015), education is essential to breaking through the normalized acceptance of abusive behaviors, as well as to providing the necessary training for developing appropriate teaching and leadership skills.

Fewer than a handful of studies have looked particularly into understanding the lived experience of the athlete-to-coach transition of men and women in individual sports (Chroni, 2014; Chroni et al., *in press*; Chroni et al., 2020; Kavanaugh, 2010). Regardless of how planned or unplanned, prepared or unprepared the athletes were for the transition to coaching or whether the transition took place in Australia, Greece or Norway, they described the transition as an easy and comfortable one, considering the skills and experiences they had and could transfer to coaching, as well as their heightened sense of comfort with the sport and the lifestyle (e.g., heavy workload, extensive traveling) (Chroni, 2014; Chroni et al., 2020;

Kavanaugh, 2010). Going beyond the participants’ first round “rose-tinted lens” description of their transition experience, a number of concerns were identified when researchers probed further. Individuals who had transitioned from athlete to coach noted challenges and experiences that they were unprepared for, such as finding new motivation, lacking coaching education and competence, feeling side-lined when feeling fit to compete, accepting that not everyone is cut out to be a champion, regulating one’s emotions when athlete effort and emotional investment are low, communicating appropriately, shifting attention from me-to-we, translating well-trained skills into something one can teach to others, going from being the expert athlete to re-developing feelings of competence and self-worth as a novice coach. The rather unenlightened view of the athlete-to-coach transition as an easy, comfortable, and straightforward one may also explain the absence of research on it to this day.

Two rounds of coding and analysis led Chroni et al. (2020) to the development of an empirical model titled, “Athlete-to-Coach Transition Journey in Norwegian Winter Sports” (Figure 1). The model entails three phases: career shift, re-identification, and professional development. Career shift is about why and how one exits the athletic career and enters coaching, as this experience often occurs simultaneously and within the same setting. Re-identification is about what is happening in the uncertain and ambiguous space and time of going from having been an athlete to becoming a coach and discovering a new identity and role. Professional development is about growing in the coaching profession. While similarities with post-career transitions outside sport exist, related to the career shift and professional development phases, the researchers pointed out that the re-identification phase has not been acknowledged previously. In this phase, the person is challenged to re-negotiate the familiar territory of self, others, sport, coaching, training, and competing within the new context of the

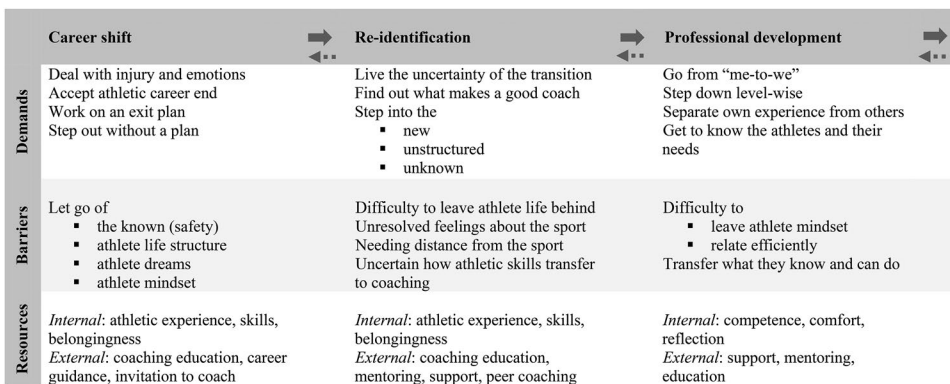


Figure 1. Empirical model: athlete-to-coach transition journey in Norwegian winter sports (Chroni et al., 2020).

coaching profession. The model encompasses contextual and chronological elements that frame the athlete-to-coach transition journey, and while its phases seem conventional and portray a rather linear transition, in real life transitioning athletes take multiple steps back and forth.

Chroni et al. ([in press](#)) expanded their work to learn what could support the athlete-to-coach transition by talking to sport federation officials involved with the recruitment and hiring of elite athletes as coaches. It appears that recruitment prospects are identified for having a whole package of coaching essentials (e.g., knowledge of the sport, professional and international skills, coaching education, athletic and coaching experiences), personal attributes which they exhibit early on as athletes (e.g., initiative, leadership, compassion, eagerness to learn, love for the sport), singular dedication to the sport (coaching as a priority, family allows them to focus on coaching), and lastly, for being well known by the recruiter from the time they were athletes. The officials noted that the resources offered by federations to elite athletes transiting to coaching are provided both formally and informally, upon hiring, during early stages of coaching, and then on an on-going basis. They reported supporting newly recruited coaches to empower a stable start (bringing the early career coach into a suitable team setting, providing clear and precise guidelines and education), to aid in essential skill development (coach the coach, communities of practice, mentoring), to facilitate their holistic well-being (engaging with the coach as a person), as well as to enable on-going professional knowledge development (further national and international learning opportunities). Interestingly, none of these resources were noted as being structured or pre-decided; they were offered as necessary (Chroni et al., [in press](#)).

Researchers have suggested that post-career adaptations may take as long as a year and every athlete lives a different transition experience (Alfermann, 2000; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Chroni et al. (2020) shared in their limitations that some of the early career coaches interviewed, who had transited only the year before, had not reflected much on the lived experience of their transition. Beyond limiting their study's findings, this may also suggest that individuals who had not yet processed their own experiences were asked to utilize their unprocessed experiences and knowledge to mold the skills and lives of the athletes they coached. Blackett et al. (2020) further support the value and importance of self-assessment and awareness in the development of an honest professional identity to help individuals make personal, best-fit career decisions. While there is a need for more research on this transition, particularly as it relates to current approaches, practices, expectations, as well as on the coaching experience and career longevity of those transiting from athlete-to-coach, recent research advances suggest that there is a need for professional support (Blackett et al., 2020; Chroni

et al., *in press*; Chroni et al., 2020). Our concern here, from an applied sport psychology perspective, is that little attention has been paid to supporting the person in transit with intrapersonal skill development or value clarification, as these relate to the development of the professional coach identity (Blackett et al., 2020; Hassanin & Light, 2014) and the role of the coach (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2013). Based on demands, barriers, and resources of different phases identified in the literature, the next section shares a range of ideas that may be applied to facilitate and support the athlete-to-coach within-sport transition. It is critical here to also acknowledge how both sociologically and psychologically driven studies enrich our evidence-based knowledge and can inform the support provided.

Recommendations for sport psychology practice

Sport psychology consultants are well suited to support athletes in the development of the essential skills for initiating and journeying a successful transition into coaching. In alignment with best professional practice (e.g., Silva et al., 2011), prior to working with athletes in support of their within-sport career transition, sport psychology consultants should consider examining their own biases related to the profession of sport coaching and expectations regarding the professional preparation of coaches and the ease of the athlete-to-coach transition. Sport coaching has been defined as a complex profession bringing together educational and leadership skills as well as requiring both experiential and contextually based skills and knowledge (e.g., Dieffenbach, 2019; Duffy et al., 2011). Understanding the realities and demands of the coaching profession across sport contexts, the need for adequate and appropriate professional preparation, and the emerging coach development literature (e.g., Campbell & Waller, 2020; Silva et al., 2020) will help sport psychology consultants in two ways: first, in understanding their role in supporting individuals within the coaching profession; second and most importantly, in supporting the retiring athletes with exploring and understanding their within sport transition expectations and biases as they seek to enter the coaching profession.

In supporting the athlete-to-coach transition, sport psychology consultants should be mindful of individual realities with regard to one's reason(s) for exiting the athletic career and entering coaching and the context of the transition considering the societal and sporting culture(s). Consideration should be given to helping retiring athletes examine and understand their own sport histories, including their relationships with coaches. This will help retiring athletes realize and examine patterns of healthy and unhealthy beliefs and behaviors and reduce the perpetuation of potentially harmful

practices as identified by McMahon et al. (2020) or as Blackett et al. (2019) noted, the unconscious repetition of potentially outmoded and toxic coaching practices. Attention should also be given to examining the resources one can transfer to life after sport, the sport employer's role, and engagement in the transition, as well as the distinct facets that characterize the transition process.

Table 1 presents a simple, forthright overview of resources that athletes need to develop or transfer from the athlete- to the coaching-context while taking into consideration the transition phase and the involvement of different actors. The table organizes the resources within key areas and acknowledges that both internal and external ones are needed. The core challenges concern the occupation of coaching, personal aspects, relational aspects, and contextual ones. Accordingly, four key areas of the athlete-to-coach transition should be considered when working with elite athletes preparing to transit to coaching or early career coaches who recently transitioned to coaching. In providing support for developing and/or transferring resources from earlier life, in addition to the sport psychology practitioner, we also name actors that commonly support this transition, including mentors, communities of practices, and the organization employing the coach (see Blackett et al., 2020; Chroni et al., 2020; Chroni et al., *in press*). It would be advantageous for these actors to work collaboratively; unfortunately, this will not always be possible, hence it is important to be

Table 1. Athlete-to-coach challenges and resources to facilitate the transition, considering the supporter and phase of the transition.

| | Resources (internal and external) | Supporter | Phase |
|--------------------------------|---|----------------|--------------|
| <i>Occupational challenges</i> | Prepare to plan for how to lead, grow, and develop the athletes and the sport (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O* | CS, RI, PD** |
| | Develop strategies to handle intensity, pressures and load of the work (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Seek international coaching (learning) experience (external) | M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| <i>Personal challenges</i> | Put the athlete and athlete development first (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Prepare for coaching; going beyond the athlete side of training and competition -- setting is same, context is different (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Prepare for the new role that is beyond self (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Prepare to work with former peer athletes -- moving from peer role to advisory role (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Embrace learning as opportunity to grow as person and coach (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Develop confidence in your own knowledge and thinking and dare to share it (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Separate own athlete experience from the athletes (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Go from "me" to "we" (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Learn to regulate own emotions (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |
| | Accept that athletes already know a lot (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Find personal harmony between life and work (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | RI, PD |
| | Developing coping strategies for dealing with stressors inside and outside sport (internal) | SPC, M, CP, O | CS, RI, PD |

sensitive to the realities of the setting. The primary focus here is to draw attention to resources that mainly fall within the work of sport psychology consultants. [Table 1](#) also situates the phases of the Chroni et al. (2020) empirical model during which different resources need to be developed related to the stage and context of the individual's transition, bearing in mind that right stage support is crucial to a successful transition experience. Practitioner awareness of the differences in the resources, demands and barriers required at different phases is essential for providing appropriate support. Further, it is important to recognize that the dynamic and personal experience of the within-sport transition is not a linear process. Plateaus, as well as back and forth movement through the phases may occur, requiring practitioners' awareness, creativity, and support.

With regard to core challenge areas, sport psychology consultants can help prepare pre-transition and early career coaches to manage occupational challenges by helping them explore and understand the full scope of the professional expectations and responsibilities and in exploring their expectations and bias about both the profession, as well as expectations for transitioning into the profession. Strategies can then be designed to facilitate the development of one's coaching skills and identity, as well as to recognize and handle the intensity, pressures, and workload of coaching, along with being in position to embrace the internal responsibilities of planning, caring about and for, and developing athletes and a sport system.

Personal challenges associated with this transition center around shifting focus from self to others. Transitioning athletes may struggle both with the loss of the spotlight, as well as developing the skills to work with goals and motivations of others (Chroni et al., 2020). Consultants can assist those facing the athlete-to-coach transition through opportunities to explore the role shift from being responsible solely for one's own health, well-being, and performance to being responsible for the health, well-being, and performance of others. Opportunities also exist to help the individual develop and expand the leadership skills necessary to foster individual investment within a team setting to support both individual and collective goals. Assisting with the recognition and reframing of transferable skills and knowledge that a retiring athlete brings into coaching is an important area of resource development for managing challenges.

In their new role, the importance of being able to work and communicate with others also presents a challenging shift due to leadership expectations associated with coaching. Additionally, for many transitioning athletes, the shift from athlete-to-coach involves not only a change in title, but also a shift in the power dynamics within the sport milieu and with preexisting relationships with other athletes, coaches, and sport leaders, for which the individual may need assistance navigating (e.g., Blackett

et al., 2020; Potrac et al., 2002). Developing professionally appropriate relationships, which will look different from their former peer-to-peer and athlete-to-leaders relationships adds the burden for effective relationship building and re-negotiation on an already stressful transition process. Exploring, understanding, and identifying the essential skills for managing interpersonal relationships are important areas to be addressed when supporting a new coach who has recently transitioned out of elite sport.

The fourth main area of challenges in which consultants can offer assistance is associated with the contextual nature of coaching. Effective transitioning from athlete-to-coach requires the development of the ability to make challenging and well-reasoned decisions, engage in continual professional development, convert the silent knowledge (see tacit knowledge in Polanyi, 1998) acquired as an athlete into coaching tools, and perhaps most importantly, the patience, skills, and support necessary for transitioning (Lyle & Cushion, 2010; Schempp et al., 2006). These challenges present a wide range of opportunities for practitioners to explore and support through their consultation work, for instance via facilitated self-reflection on decision-making parameters and processes or on adjusting existing competences so they are suitable to coaching.

In closing, the within-sport transition of athlete-to-coach is not an overnight shift despite the fact that, particularly in the case of fast-tracking, it may appear to be. Immersion into coaching can present even the most seasoned elite athlete with what feels like an entirely new world in which their role, responsibilities, and relationships have all shifted (e.g., Chroni et al., 2020; McMahon et al., 2020; Rynne, 2014). Special attention should be paid to the second phase of re-identification, when the individuals become aware of the realities of the shift in their being(s) and doing(s). Negotiating a coaching identity requires the individual to reflect on a coaching philosophy that does not coincide with the playing philosophy espoused as an elite athlete (Blackett et al., 2020). As with any major transition, the development of skills and resources to facilitate work-life balance and management of life stressors may be an important part of the consulting. Further, establishing a supportive consultation relationship with the emerging coach can provide them with a critical and professionally safe sounding board for exploring their new role, as well as examining the transition from their previous role, while facilitating their effectiveness as a coach and caring for their personal well-being.

The resources needed to support the within-sport transition experience presented in [Table 1](#) are most likely not exhaustive and most certainly do not address all the unique elements of each person, sport, and setting. Nonetheless, these resources address a gap in the athlete-to-coach within sport transition experience regardless of the individual's entry pathway

and with consideration given to shifting the whole person from being an athlete to becoming a coach, both as an identity and with the skills and resources necessary for the job. Sport psychology consultants working with elite athletes considering or undertaking a transition into coaching or early career recently transitioned coaches ought to keep in mind that the shift from competing to coaching is not a simple change of wardrobe. Elite athletes and early career coaches need to be given time and space, as well as the resources and support necessary to shift from one life to the other, one identity to the other, one mindset and skillset to the other. In this transition journey support appears to be highly needed and appreciated and is where consultants can provide their care and expertise.

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