

By Choice or Circumstance: Supporting College Athletes Transitioning Out of Sport

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Abstract

Preparing college athletes for life beyond sports is crucial for their long-term success and well-being. Many college athletes dedicate a significant portion of their time and energy to their sport, often at the expense of exploring other career and personal development opportunities (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020; Manthey & Smith, 2023). When their athletic careers end, whether due to graduation, injury, or other factors, they may face identity crises, financial instability, and difficulty transitioning into the workforce (Hansen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to equip collegiate athletes with the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to prepare them for life after sports. This preparation can foster resilience, adaptability, and a sense of purpose beyond their athletic identity (Kidd, 2022). This commentary will explore the complex implications of sport retirement on overall social-emotional well-being of collegiate student athletes and suggest strategies to increase positive outcomes, utilizing the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a framework to explore the student athlete mindset about transitioning out of competitive sports.

Keywords: athletes, college student athletes, sport retirement, transition preparedness

Introduction

The end of the 2023-2024 collegiate sports season was marked by close to 1000 student-athletes drafted into professional sports. It also marked the end of athletic careers for hundreds of thousands of student athletes who will shed their uniforms for the last time and face the daunting reality of stepping into the world as non-athletes (NCAA, 2024). They left behind their identity as an athlete, which has defined them for years. This critical shift, often overlooked, can have profound impact on mental health, identity, and career prospects for student athletes (Hansen et al., 2019). This commentary uses the story of former collegiate student athlete Rose as a central case example to illustrate the key themes in the transition from sports for college athletes through the lens of self-determination theory.

Understanding Sport Retirement

According to the data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2024), the overall chance of a collegiate student athlete transitioning to professional sports is less than 3%. There are varying odds depending on the sport played, the number of athletes competing in a sport, and the number of professional opportunities in the sport. Given the smaller number of professional women's sports leagues, the odds are even less favorable for female athletes compared to male athletes. Despite these statistics, many athletes like Rose, a Division 1 rowing athlete, begin their college careers with high aspirations.

While the chances of going professional are very small, sports remain a fundamental part of growth and development for over half a million college athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2020). In

the NCAA's (2023) health and wellness study, 40-45% of female athletes cited planning for the future, financial, and academic worries as significant stressors in their college lives, compared to 25%-30% of male athletes. In Rose's case, these worries came even sooner: In her sophomore year, she began to doubt her performance due to chronic pain and her mental health; as a walk-on, non-scholarship athlete, she feared being cut from the team. Rather than wait for that possibility, she confided in her parents and close friends, who supported her painful decision to step away from the sport on her own terms. Afterwards, Rose found herself navigating college life without the support system she had come to rely on as a student athlete, including nutritional support, athletic trainers, training facilities, and medical care. With two years of college remaining, Rose had to independently seek out academic advising, career development, and mental health counseling. Despite these challenges, Rose demonstrated remarkable resilience and ultimately graduated a semester early. Her experience illustrates how student athletes who exit sport must navigate a complex identity shift while adjusting to new social realities (Smith & Hardin, 2020).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Ryan & Deci (2017), provides a psychological framework that examines human motivation, well-being, and personal growth. This framework serves as a lens for understanding how student athletes like Rose can be supported during and after their athletic transitions. SDT posits that individuals are driven to grow and achieve their fullest potential when three basic psychological needs are met, autonomy,

competence, and relatedness. The theory also examines how biological, social, and cultural considerations either enhance or undermine the inherent capacity for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Focusing on three key needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—this commentary will examine the support and resources that college athletes would benefit from to prepare for and cope with their transition away from sports being a primary part of their daily life.

Autonomy

Autonomy, as described by SDT, is the feeling of being in control of one's own goals with a sense of self-determination rather than being pressured by external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While Rose's decision to leave her rowing team was technically voluntary, it was driven by feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being cut. Her desire to take control of the situation reflected her need for autonomy in the face of growing pressure. Once off the team, Rose found herself isolated from the support systems that had previously shaped her daily life. Without access to the resources once provided, she had to navigate her college journey independently. Her story underscores the importance of colleges providing transition programs that affirm agency and offer ongoing support, even for those athletes who leave teams before graduation (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Retirement from college athletics exists on a spectrum: some athletes transition on their own terms, while others face retirement as a necessity rather than a choice, such as in the case of an injury. Previous research has found that collegiate athletes, while living independently from their families, often experience limited autonomy over their daily life decisions as they are heavily influenced by their

commitment to their sport and team (Manthey & Smith, 2023). To support autonomy as defined by SDT, collaboration between institutional academic resources, career planning services, and athletic departments should focus providing individualized counseling or programs that allow athletes to explore their personal interests and goals as they approach the transition experience (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023).

Competence

For college athletes, the transition from sport is a compounded life event. They may also be experiencing a combination of other life transitions, such as the completion of their academic experience, preparing for further education, seeking to enter the job market, or moving to a new community or back to their home of origin (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2019; Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). In SDT, competence is defined as feeling capable, skilled, and believing that one's efforts can lead them to experiences of growth, accomplishment, and success through their own actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Leaving the rowing team was an emotionally taxing decision that left Rose feeling like a failure and disappointment. Once she made the difficult choice to step away, she abruptly lost her access to resources including nutritional support, physical trainers, training facilities, and priority medical care. She no longer had athletic performance as a measure of success and had to rebuild her sense of self-worth. By independently networking with academic advisors, professors, campus social organizations, and a mental health professional, Rose gradually began to recognize her strengths beyond sport. She developed a new confidence in her academic abilities and ultimately graduated a semester early.

While the NCAA does have general

requirements for member institutions to provide personal and professional development programs for athletes, there is not a standard curriculum for these programs, and institutional funding levels vary (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Rose's experience highlights need for increased intentional programming and mentorship to empower student athletes to define success beyond their sport (Hansen et al., 2019; Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Recent studies have found that programs focusing on identifying mental health concerns, creating a supportive environment that eliminates stigma, and incorporating career planning and development prove to be most beneficial to prepare student athletes for their transition (Hansen et al., 2019).

Relatedness

The third psychological need as outlined by SDT—relatedness—is described as the need of individuals to have a sense of belonging within social communities and feeling cared for by others while also caring for them (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Many individuals influence collegiate student athletes, including coaches, administrators, athletic trainers, faculty, family, friends, and teammates (Saxe et al., 2017). In the context of SDT, relatedness may include strong peer relationships, mentorship from coaches for both their athletic and personal development, and loving connections to family members. Feeling connected and valued by others during the major life change of transitioning from sport is essential for psychological well-being and motivation (Raabe et al., 2020). Moreover, athletes classifying their retirement transition as positive had at least one form of social support (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020). Without intentional programming or structured guidance, Rose struggled to navigate campus life as a non-athlete. The sudden

loss of structure and connections led to increased anxiety and stress. Fortunately, she received strong emotional support from her parents and, with constant encouragement, was able to make new connections that she found to be pivotal in her adjustment to being a non-athlete college student.

Post-Sport Adjustment

For student athletes like Rose, the adjustment to a post sport lifestyle can be a transformative, yet disorienting, period. The loss of structure, identity, and embedded support systems forces athletes to reevaluate their goals and develop new routines (Klueh, 2019). In Rose's case, her sense of autonomy was tested as she had to make decisions about her academic and personal future without the guidance she once received from her coaches and trainers. She also had to develop new strategies to navigate campus resources, build connections, and plan for a life beyond athletics. Despite her initial setbacks, Rose reclaimed a sense of purpose and motivation when her basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—were actively supported (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research supports the idea that athletes who receive intentional support from coaches and academic staff in the form of mentorship, career development, and open spaces to express the need for mental health support experience positive transitions (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023; Smith & Hardin, 2020). Moreover, institutions that create environments where athletic and academic growth are equally emphasized and the development of transferable skills such as time management, leadership, and organization are supported, athletes are better prepared for the transition (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020). Rose's story brings to light the importance of designing holistic

transition programs that prepare student athletes for a successful transition out of sports and equip them with the necessary tools to thrive beyond the game.

Conclusion

The transition out of collegiate sports represents a complex and deeply personal journey that challenges a student-athlete's sense of identity, belonging, autonomy, and competence. Through the lens of SDT, this commentary explored existing literature

and the case of Rose to highlight ways in which athlete autonomy, competence, and connection can be supported throughout the transition experience. The data highlighted from the NCAA (2023) demonstrates the high levels of anxiety and stress faced by athletes, as they navigate the transition from sports to other career paths. Research findings underscore the necessity of providing holistic support systems that prioritize mental health, career planning, and the development of transferable skills.

There is a pressing need to enhance awareness, comfort, and trust in re-

sources offered and available to collegiate student athletes as they prepare to transition away from sport. Social workers can play a central role in this process, acting as advocates, educators, and therapeutic supports and validating the athlete's identity beyond sport. The supplanting of social workers into roles within athletic departments and teams would foster environments to help collegiate athletes transition smoothly into life beyond sports, ensuring their overall well-being and success.

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