

Complex career transitions and the role of athletic identity in professional sport

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1. INTRODUCTION

Determining the influence of a strong and exclusive athletic identity on career decision making for professional athletes was the primary aim of the current study. Previous research has shown that when athletes associate strongly with the role of being an athlete, career transitions can become very complex (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Off-field support networks that help athletes make decisions about their careers beyond sport are important because a career-ending injury, deselection or retirement can occur at any time (Stambulova, 2010). Even though athletes receive extensive vocational support and are involved in career development programs, many professional athletes experience personal trauma as they transition into a post-sporting career (Lavallee, 2007). The study therefore investigated the difficulty AFL athletes experience in deciding upon a career beyond professional sport and the importance of the support provided by the player development manager (PDM).

2. METHOD

Participants

Thirty-four male athletes from the Australian Football League (AFL), aged 19 to 34, completed an online survey. The years of playing experience in the AFL level ranged from 1 to 17 years (number of games ranged from 0 to 334).

Measures

The Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ; Gati & Saka, 2001) was used to measure the level of difficulty associated with making a career decision. The CDDQ consisted of 34 items, and responses were recorded on a 9-point Likert scale. Examples of items were *It is usually difficult for me to make decisions* and *I still do not know which occupations interest me*. The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) was used to measure athletic identity. Examples of items were *Sport is the most important part of my life* and *I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport*. The Player Development Manager Rating (PDMR) on the importance of PDMs on career decision-making consisted of 18 statements related to the perceptions of the importance of the specific role of the PDM. The statements were based on Australian Football League Players Association (ALFPA) and AFL club documents (e.g., PDM role descriptions) and consisted of three main themes: (a) balance, (b) perceived importance and (c) player support.

Procedure

Permission to approach the player development managers was provided through the Australian Football League Players Association. The PDMs at all AFL clubs were then offered an information session to outline the purpose of the research and to assist in recruiting participants for the research project. All athletes then received an invitation from the player development managers to be involved in the study via email. Attached to the email was a direct link to the online survey. The duration of the survey was 15 minutes.

3. RESULTS

Results were analysed across three different phases of an athletic career: early (0 to 3 years), mid (4 to 7 years) and late (8 or more years). Contrary to previous research, athletes reported high associations with athletic identity and low career decision-making difficulty: no differences exist among career phases and career decision-making difficulty and athletic identity.

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A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the career phase (early, mid and late) on athletic identity (AIMS), career decision-making (CDDQ) and the perceptions of player development managers (PDMR). There were no significant differences at the $p < .05$ level in CDDQ scores, AIMS scores, and PDMR scores for the three phases of football experience: $F(2, 31) = .83, p = .45$ for CDDQ; $F(2, 31) = .067, p = .94$ for AIMS; and $F(2, 31) = .34, p = .72$ for PDMR. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .05 for CDDQ, .004 for AIMS and .02 for PDMR. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of career phase (early, mid, late) on the subscales of the CDDQ; namely, lack of readiness, lack of information and inconsistent information. There was no significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in CDDQ subscales: $F(2, 31) = 1.57, p = .23$ for lack of readiness; $F(2, 31) = .27, p = .76$ for lack of information; and $F(2, 31) = 1.10, p = .35$ for inconsistent information.

The relationship between athletic identity and career decision-making difficulty was investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a weak correlation between the two variables, total AIMS score with total CDDQ scores: $r = .05, n = 34, p < .01$. There was a low positive correlation between total AIMS score and the lack of readiness subscale, $r = .17, n = 34, p < .01$; a small negative correlation for the lack of information subscale, $r = .15, n = 34, p < .01$; and a small positive correlation for the inconsistent information subscale, $r = .18, n = 34, p < .01$.

4. TABLE

Mean scores on CDDQ, AIMS and PDMR for career phases

Career Phase	n	CDDQ M (SD)	AIMS M (SD)	PDMR M (SD)
Early	14	131.88 (30.78)	37.78 (2.26)	101.86 (9.64)
Mid	10	111.39 (47.09)	38.30 (4.99)	99.30 (7.69)
Late	10	130.92 (48.62)	37.70 (4.90)	102.00 (7.39)
Total	34	125.57 (41.34)	37.91 (3.93)	101.15 (8.31)

Note: Higher scores indicate more career decision-making difficulty (scale range: 1 to 9) and higher athletic identity (scale range: 1 to 7), and a high composite score on the Player Development Manager Rating indicates the level of perceived importance (scale range: 1 to 7).

5. CONCLUSION

The participants in the current research identified strongly with being a professional athlete. They showed low career decision making difficulty and the perceived importance of career support provided by the PDMs was reported as essential to the athletes' ongoing professional and personal development. Identifying core elements that deter potential crises in career transitions for professional athletes supports the need for future examinations into how elite athletes are optimally prepared for life beyond sport.

6. REFERENCES

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