

A balanced approach to excellence: Life-skill intervention and elite performance

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To become an elite performer in the modern world, individuals must discipline themselves to train and practice for many years. Usually they need to dedicate most of every day in pursuit of their dreams. More and more countries have been developing systems to identify this talent very early in life and are finding new ways to nurture it. The challenge faced by most elite performers is how to manage this intense focus and still build a resilience and capacity to meet the many transitions and demands required in both elite performance and life. These skills are more often than not under developed as a result of the myopic environment typically created for the elite performer. One of the most challenging transitions often faced is retirement. The basis of much research in this area has been undertaken in sport (Alison and Meyer 1988, Baillie 1993, Blann and Zaichkowsky 1989, Blinde and Greendorfer 1985, Lerch 1984, Lavallee *et al.* 1997). Other performance environments such as dance and music have also captured the interest of researchers (Davidson and Burland 2006, Burland and Davidson 2004, Patton and Ryan 2000, Saposnek 1995, Patton and McMahon 1999, Wallach 1988). This growing body of literature has led to some performance environments introducing early intervention programs to broaden the life-skills of the performer. The belief is that this will protect them from the uncertainty and anxiety about their futures and will result in fewer traumas when they have to deal with the transition from elite performance.

Keywords: transitions; life-skills; athlete identity; athlete foreclosure; self identity

RETIREMENT AS A TRANSITION

Social gerontological models of aging and thanatological models of death and dying have been used by researchers to better understand career termination

from elite sport (Atchley 1991, Lerch 1984, McPherson 1980, Rosenberg 1981, Freidman and Havighurst 1947, Rose 1962, Kuypers and Bergston 1973). These approaches can also be applied to a range of other elite performance environments, including the arts, dance, music, and acting industries.

The social gerontological perspective takes into account the following theories: Activity Theory, Disengagement Theory, Subculture Theory, Continuity Theory, Social Breakdown Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. Some of these will be discussed below.

Activity Theory (Friedman and Havighurst 1954; Havighurst and Albrecht 1953) maintains that as various activities are lost, the individual establishes new roles, and the maintenance of these contributes positively to self concept and life satisfaction. An important difficulty with this theory when relating to elite performance, according to Baillie and Danish (1992), is that it may not always be possible to duplicate the type of environment created within the elite performance context.

Disengagement Theory (Cumming and Henry 1961) was developed as a response to Activity Theory and suggests that the ageing process sees individuals mutually agreeing to withdraw from society and thereby providing them with the opportunity to enjoy life in the period after paid employment. This theory proposes that it is a function of both the individual and society that naturally occurs. When attempting to draw parallels with the elite performance environment, this concept is a difficult one as it assumes that the withdrawal is mutually agreeable between both parties, and this may not always be the case.

Continuity Theory represents a refinement of Activity Theory (Atchley 1977) and posits that, although activities and habits might alter or be replaced by others throughout our lives, these may not always provide the same meaningful experience. If individuals are capable of retaining the continuity of meaning in their activities, retirement is said to be less traumatic (Anderson 1999). In relating this theory to elite performance the challenge will be to find meaning in other activities when for so long many elite performers have characterized their lives around one specialized activity.

Additional theories worthy of consideration in the present context are Social Breakdown Theory (Kuypers and Bergston 1973) and Exchange Theory (Dowd 1975). Kuypers and Bergston proposed that with any role loss, such as retirement, the individual might become the recipient of negative external labels, leading to a breakdown in their social framework. Therefore, any major role loss is seen to have significant potential to impact adversely on self image. In order to limit the downward spiral that often results, they argued that a social reconstruction is typically needed.

Exchange Theory (Homans 1961) illustrated that retirement can be a positive experience if social activities and networks are considered and possibly redefined. He believed that if an individual can continue to maintain valued social networks then retirement should be an easier process. Rosenberg (1981) has suggested that this theory is the most applicable to elite sport as it is often the inability of an athlete to create these new networks that contributes to a difficult adjustment.

Social Breakdown and Exchange Theories appear to be most useful in the elite performance context as individuals who retire from these environments often require a social reconstruction of themselves. Application of these theories to date has demonstrated useful parallels (Rosenberg 1981), but further work is required. Continuity, Activity and Disengagement Theories may also have some relevance, but again, more applied research in the elite performance setting is needed to understand their true value.

The Thanatological Models studied the process of death and dying. Introduced by Park (1912) these theories may also have implications for retirement from elite performance and incorporate Social Death (Kalish 1966), Social Awareness (Lerch 1984), and the stages of death (Kubler-Ross 1969, 2005).

Social Death assumes that individuals experience a loss of social functioning which results in those around them retreating from the relationship as though they have already died (Lerch 1984). This is sometimes observed in the elite performance environment when individuals feel a sense of isolation and ostracism prior to their retirement or when they sustain a career ending injury.

Why this may occur can be explained through Social Awareness Theory, which proposes that individuals have different levels of awareness: closed, suspected, mutual, and open. In closed awareness, terminally ill patients may not be aware of their impending death whilst those around may know. The reasons for this could include the doctors not informing the person and the person's non-acceptance of the inevitable outcome. When applying this to elite performance and in particular sport, it can be seen when an athlete does not know that retirement is sometimes imminent because the coach, management, and even team mates have not discussed it with them.

The concept of suspected awareness exists when a dying patient believes or suspects that death is a matter of time, and they engage others to either confirm or deny their suspicions. In the elite performance environment, many performers will pick up on changes in the way they are being treated and seek to determine whether they are about to be retired.

Mutual awareness is when all parties are aware of the impending death and everyone involved behaves as if nothing is going to happen. In elite per-

formance, the individual's career transition would not be discussed, but it is possible that they may sense a degree of isolation but cannot explain why.

Open awareness exists when all parties acknowledge that the patient is dying, and this provides everyone with a chance to discuss their feelings and thus gives the patient a greater sense of control. In terms of elite performance, individuals can begin to plan their post performance career. According to Rosenberg (1984), the most common awareness models seen in the sporting environments are closed and suspected.

Kubler-Ross (1969) created a psychological reactions model in an attempt to understand terminally ill patients. The stages of dying, as described by Kubler-Ross, include denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These psychological reactions have been used widely to describe retirement from elite sport (see Figure1).

The initial stages of denial and isolation see the elite performer refusing to acknowledge the decision that retirement is approaching. The anger stage may see the performer becoming quite disturbed about the situation. Bargaining will result in creating personal debates and negotiation in an attempt to stay connected to the impending loss. Depression will see the performer distressed and over anxious about the situation. Finally, the performer will acknowledge and accept the situation and be able to transition.

Coakley (1983) challenged the use of gerontological concepts and assumptions that retirement from sport is an inevitable source of stress. He indicated that the problem is not retirement *per se*, but the personal and social characteristics of the individual that affect the ability to adjust to changed circumstances.

The personal attributes of the elite performer and how much their self identity is connected to the performance environment will have an impact on the quality of the transition.

The time taken and the ability to transition through these stages, known as the grieving process, will depend upon whether the decision was a voluntary (own choice) or an involuntary one (e.g. injury or deselection). The athlete retiring by choice may go through the grieving process more quickly and with greater ease than athletes who have retirement forced upon them (Fortunato and Morris 1995).

These sentiments are also shared by Oglivie and Taylor, (1993) who believed that an elite athlete's adjustment to retirement will be smoother if the retirement is voluntary. In other words, the athlete makes the choice, is prepared for life after sport, measures identity on more than just sport, and has good relationships and a broad social support network.

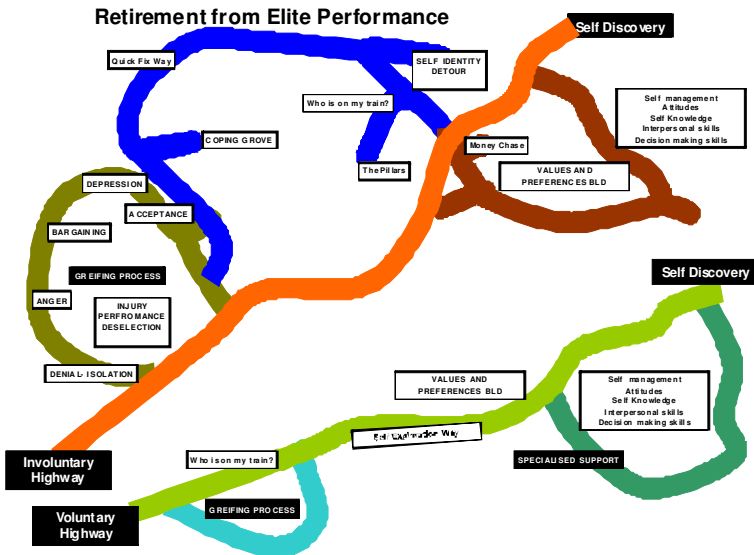


Figure 1. The process of dealing with both voluntary and involuntary retirement from elite performance. (See full color version at www.performancescience.org.)

Kleber and Brock (1992) found that adjustment difficulties might well be explained by how the athlete perceives the level to which sport has constricted their development. What the athlete believes could be reflected in several ways. They might see that engagement in sport prevented serious orientation toward a career and life beyond. It is also possible that sport may have promoted degrees of self-detachment and desensitization to the wider world, thereby leaving the athlete with heightened feelings of vulnerability as retirement approaches (Anderson 1999).

Whether or not the decision to retire from elite performance is voluntary or involuntary, qualitative analysis reveals that performers are frequently disadvantaged by a failure to plan for life outside the performance environment (McPherson 1980). If young performers can be socialized to perceive the value of planning for retirement during their elite performance careers, they might minimize or even avoid the trauma that is currently being experi-

enced by many individuals as cited in research and anecdotal reports (Danish *et al.* 1991).

Retirement from elite performance is a process rather than a single step. It often requires a change in how the performer views themselves and those around them. Clearly each performer would deal with retirement in a very individual manner.

Most elite performers do not prepare for retirement and lack the resources to deal with it, especially when their performance aspirations are not met, and generally experience some form of trauma as a result. Some researchers (Baillie and Danish 1992, Fortunato 1996) believed that these difficulties can be explained through understanding the concept of athlete identity.

The elite performer is often blind to the fact that their career can be brief, curtailed, or even unexpectedly terminated due to a wide variety of circumstances. It is therefore important that an early intervention plan is established. The implementation of such a plan may result in a less stressful time both emotionally, psychologically, and financially, both during and after their involvement in elite performance.

Brewer *et al.* (1993) proposed that if an athlete measures their identity on their sporting performance alone they will have difficulties in dealing with the many transitions associated with both sport and life. Saposnek (1995) believed that dancers experience similar challenges as a result of their early and enduring identification with their field.

One potential outcome of focusing on a particular element of life is that the performer can be distracted from giving due attention to matters peripheral and external to the elite environment. Importantly, this may lead them to foreclose on other aspects of their personal development.

Organizations responsible for elite performers should be encouraging them to develop skills outside of their performance arenas. This will help them minimize the risk of being left with feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in their current and future lives. A course of action that equips them to deal with a range of transitions they will face is a crucial element of both professional and personal development.

THE NEED FOR LIFE-SKILL PROGRAMS

One way of supporting the performer is through the introduction of life-skill programs which aim to up-skill the performer to deal with the many transitions that they are expected to face in both life and elite performance.

Navigating the Transitions to Performance Excellence

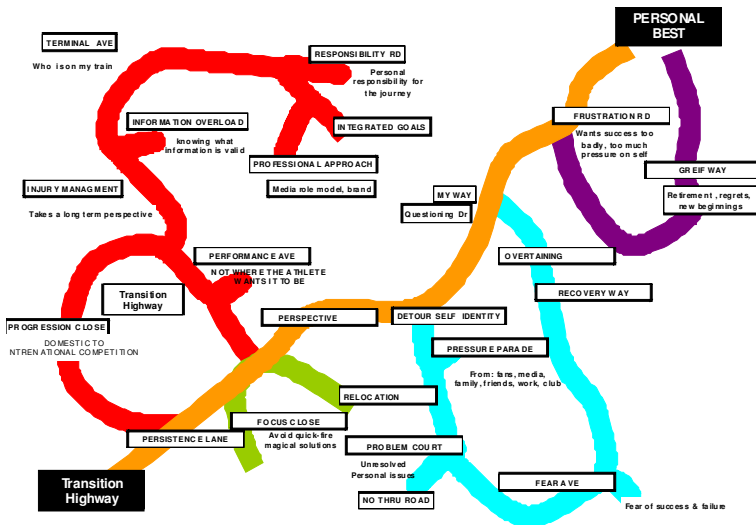


Figure 2. Transitions in elite performance. (See full color version at www.performance-science.org.)

More specifically, these transitions are defined as events resulting in changes in assumptions about oneself and the world and which require a corresponding change in behavior and relationships (Schlossberg 1981). Figure 2 outlines most of the common transitions that elite performers will face at some stage. Each transition requires a range of skills that must be learned if the individual is going to sustain and meet their performance and personal objectives.

Transitions are either voluntary or involuntary in nature and performers need to develop a variety of skills so that they can successfully move through the various transitions and issues they confront.

The ability to move through and cope with each of the above transitions, which at times can be multi-phased, will depend on how well the situation can be normalized. To be able to do this requires an awareness of both self and the performance environment. The performer should therefore be encouraged to learn early in their careers about the real performance environment within which they will be expected to function. Such knowledge and

take up of early intervention programs that enable them to be better prepared are highly recommended.

The quality of the adjustment to the many transitions will often be dependent upon the following: individual characteristics, socio-economic environment, type and nature of the transition, developmental issues, athlete identity, and identity foreclosure.

The pressure placed on the performer to focus solely on their performance often means that when they need to deal with a transition they only have the capacity to draw on a limited set of experiences. As many performers begin their journeys at a young age, unless a broader perspective on life is developed, their true potential as an elite performer may never be realized.

Developing life-skills during the performance journey enables the athlete to take control of the important aspects of life and provides an even more intense ability to focus on the performance dreams. As well the transition into retirement from elite performance is often smoother. This perspective is still not fully understood by many coaches, teachers, and administrators, despite the ongoing resources spent on helping performers who are unable to progress through the transition process.

Developing the self in a holistic manner creates a stronger base from which to operate and enables the performer to draw on a broader range of skills to cope with the transitions. This integrated approach is essential in order to provide the right attitude, knowledge, and skills. The pillars that make up the self may include performance goals, personal development, family, friends, professional development, and social connections.

The performer should be encouraged to set goals in all areas of life and know what their personal strengths and weaknesses are both within and outside their performance environment. It is also important that they seek, and can interpret feedback from a range of sources, including coaches, teachers, umpires, media, spectators, team members, opponents, officials, family, friends, peers, and supporters.

The performer needs to understand that being assertive and developing effective interpersonal communication skills in both their performance arena and life will give them a greater capacity to influence their environment.

Effective time management is a skill that is often not picked up by performers early enough in their careers. This can be quite common as most of their time is structured and managed for them. In the modern environment, performers need to embrace technology to better manage the often competing demands.

Creating confidence in personal presentation and public interaction can also assist the performer to deal with the public and to take full advantage of what this can offer.

Managing personal income, financial planning, and budgeting can also help the performer take full advantage of their financial situations and ensure that their future has been planned for adequately.

Many performers may be fit, but few can claim to also be healthy. Personal health and fitness knowledge is important so that they can sustain their commitment to performance for as long as possible. Nutrition, recovery, performance psychology, injury prevention, drugs, and an understanding of the human body will give important knowledge that can sometimes be the difference between success and failure.

THE ELITE PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT

Organizations responsible for elite performance should create an environment early that educates elite performers, and those aspiring to be at the elite level, about what to expect. They should also drive a culture throughout the environment that promotes a balanced approach to excellence. This is a critical factor in assisting the performer to process and adjust to transitions such as retirement, injury, and poor performance and many others mentioned above.

These organizations should foster an open door policy enabling informal contact to be maintained after the performer retires and, where possible, utilize their skills to assist others.

Organizational policy, practice, and culture must support the introduction and implementation of an elite performer's life-skill program. The program should be created on the basis of identified need, be flexible enough to ensure that it is individualized, incorporated into the overall assessment of performance, and is thoroughly consistent with the balanced approach concept.

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