

## A life of a former athlete after their elite career – a pilot study

### Život sportovce po ukončení aktivní činnosti – pilotní studie

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#### **Abstract**

*This paper reports on a pilot study of the Faculty of Sports Studies Masaryk University (FSpS) whose objective was to investigate psychosocial variables related to a managed, and/or unmanaged involution at the end of the athlete's sport career, and their transfer into an ordinary life after their elite sport's engagement period. Consequently, this study aims to propose a theoretical frame providing typologies of approaches to the solutions dealing with their career's ends, and the transition into their life after the career.*

*The theory of transition, i.e., the theory of transitional stages in the development of an athlete's motivational structure is a starting point for our research.*

*An unmanaged or unmanageable involution brings about personal problems of a different character making up for the athlete's loss of a social economic, psychosocial, and economic capital including loss of sport environment experience for the next generations*

*The observed pilot group consists of sixteen former top athletes in team sports, nine males and seven females. The participants are former professionals, currently non-active players of football, ice-hockey, basketball, and volleyball in the Czech, and/or Czechoslovak top competitions. The semi-structured interviews were chosen to collect data in the previously designed thematic areas such as the development and a course of their sport career, their family background, life or sport crossroads, their lifestyle, needs, goals, and their problem-solving ability in relation to their sport career and involution. The interviews were conducted by lecturers of the FSpS.*

*Data analysis was performed using categorical data sorting followed on by an observation of categorical clusters, and the development and trajectory of an individual athlete's life story.*

#### **Abstrakt**

*Príspevek seznamuje s pilotním výzkumem FSpS, jehož cílem bylo zjistit – definovat – psychosociální proměnné, které jsou ve vztahu ke zvládnuté či nezvládnuté involuci ve fázi ukončení sportovní kariéry a transferu do běžného života po etapě vrcholového sportu a vytvořit tak základ teoretického rámece, který bude mít charakter typologie přístupů k řešení ukončení kariéry a přechodu do života po kariéře.*

*Východiskem pro náš výzkum je teorie „transition“, tj. teorie přechodových fází ve vývoji motivační struktury sportovce. Nezvládnutá či obtížně zvládaná involuce znamená problémy osobního charakteru z různých hledisek, ztráty společensko-ekonomické a ztráty psycho-socio-ekonomického kapitálu a zkušeností nejen se sportovním prostředím pro další generace.*

*Sledovanou pilotní skupinou jsou vrcholoví sportovci z anticipačních týmových sportů (fotbal, hokej, basketbal a volejbal), a tvoří ji 16 žen a mužů. Oslovení probandi jsou bývalí (již neaktivní) profesionální sportovci z českých (československých) nejvyšších soutěžích. Prostředkem pro sběr dat byl semi-strukturovaný rozhovor, pro který jsme formulovali tématické okruhy na téma vývoje a průběhu sportovní kariéry, rodinného zázemí, životních či sportovních křížovatek, životního stylu, potřeb, cílů, a schopnost řešit problémy v souvislosti se sportovní kariérou a involucí. Rozhovory vedli odborní asistenti FSpS.*

*Kvalitativním zpracováním výsledků provádíme kategoriální třídění dat, sledujeme shluk kategorií, vývoj a trajektorii životního příběhu sportovce.*

**Keywords:** *sport career, process of involution, theory of transition, semi-structured interviews, life crossroads, categories, life story.*

**Klíčová slova:** *sportovní kariéra, proces involuce, teorie transition, semi-strukturovaný rozhovor, životní křižovatky, kategorie, životní příběh*

## INTRODUCTION

### The theory of transition

Leaving one's sport career – a life stage of involution and a transition into an ordinary life is a testing process for any athlete. They are losing their securities they have built their entire life upon, i.e., the identification with sports, knowledge about their sports environment, competitiveness, a high-standard level of physical performance, team work, their position in a sport team, and/or social status and media attention, financial rewards, as well as others. Loss of these securities can be felt as a significant stressor for the former professional athletes at all levels. In some cases, leaving sport has been conceptualized as a form of a “social death,” and the ex-athlete described as being prone to critical social and psychological conditions (Coakley, 1983). The professional sport is a very specific environment which affects not only the athlete's cognitive processes, but their emotional experience, aspiration level, social aspects of their life, and their own identity as well. This is the reason why the athletes frequently get into the unbalanced state and not all of them can manage the end of their career and a transition into an ordinary life. There have already been described certain factors in literature which contribute to positive adjustments to sports retirement, and also the factors inhibiting the process of transition (Kadlcik, Flemr, 2008).

This FSpS pilot study originated a part of a student research project MUNI/A/1299/2015. The aim of the project is to find out and define psychosocial variables related to a managed or unmanaged involution at the career-ending stage, and a transition into an ordinary life after the stage of top sport engagement. Furthermore we attempt to set up a theoretical frame providing typologies of approaches to the solutions dealing with the career's ends, and the transition into the after-career life.

Despite the fact that theories of involution have already been described in foreign literature, and that the athletes and all the people around sports (coaches, team mates, managements, family members, and sport psychologists) should be aware of the potential difficulties arising during the course of their transformation, very often the athletes are unready for the upcoming end of their career, or even for a sudden dropout of sport in case of an injury (Papaioannou & Hackfort, 2014).

Studies covering professional development and a transition phase from a sport career into everyday life began to appear in 1960s. The largest increase of these papers concerning their amount and quality took place since 1980s (Lavallee at al., 2012).

An investigation of this topic has been carried out all over the world, the number of studies on this issue is limited, though (Alferman & Stambulova, 2007).

An important step forward has been made in understanding the phenomenon of a transition in the course of a sport career as an analogy to a withdrawal from working career to the departure on retirement. That was why the theoretical framework was derived from thanatology (stages of dying) and social gerontology (studies on the process of ageing) (Wylleman at al., 1999). The result is that the phase of the career's end and the transition into the after-career life is usually presented as a negative and, even more, often as a traumatic life event. Schlossberg (1981) proposed a definition of a transition as an event leading to the change of presumptions about one's self and the surrounding world, thus requiring a corresponding change in behaviour of an individual in relation to one's self and the surroundings.

Current focus goes to the stage of transitions from junior to senior sport categories because there comes the main point in the sport career, which is to attain the top accomplishments in the period of adulthood: the reasons are clear enough – they are prestige and winning medals and records, as well as economic ones when considerable means were invested into the development of an individual. Another topic becoming more closely watched is a managed or unmanaged involution, that is the process of ending up one's sport career, and the transition into a so-called "sport retirement" (Wylleman et al., 1999, Suková, 2008).

The athlete's personal experience of the stages of an involution and a transition from own's career ending into the life while this stage is very often associated with stress and uncertainty whether or not a situation is going to change for better or worse, is important for mapping the end-of-career process.

As a matter of fact, a transition of this kind has a serious impact on the athletes calling for specific changes in their lives, such as a change of their lifestyle, an approach to one's self and the surroundings, communication with their neighbourhood, etc., so that they can successfully cope with the post-career period (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). The transition from one developmental stage into another may be either normative and can be anticipated (e.g., a transfer from a junior to senior category, to a higher performance level, to a higher weight category, a need to change specialization and so on), or non-normative which more or less cannot be anticipated, still it cannot be avoided. The involution transition period is drawing to a close of the career, and there can also come a non-normative, unpredictable transition, accounting mostly for an injury, but also a change of a coach whose strategy the player does not fit in, strategies of a team management related to changes in the team or sponsorship and so on (Stambulova, Wylleman, 2014). Studies gave evidence that the transition from an elite sport into an ordinary life is a dynamic, multidimensional, multilevel, and multi-factor process where a national culture has its important role (Stambulova et al., 2007).

Helena Sukova's research (2010) features prominently in the Czech Republic. Her efforts aimed at findings how former professional athletes perceived themselves, how they felt at the present, and how they were satisfied with their current life. The researcher herself notes that *"I was personally interested in whether or not they feel like venting their feelings, sometimes very delicate, or share and make them public, naturally, provided they would remain anonymous. In order to better understand the athlete's ways of thinking after the end of their career, there is need to grasp what is going on in the course of their active period in terms of mental and social processes when they are on the peak of their efforts."* (p. 7).

### **Biodromal approach – the way-of-life strategy**

A life-course approach or exploration of ways of life is an interdisciplinary approach focused on the study of human lives from birth to death which has been developed in the past forty years mainly in the field of humanities or human sciences – anthropology, demography, economics, sociology, and developmental psychology. The ways of life are studied not only from the perspectives of personal characteristics, individual actions or motivations and the influence of social environment, but also in a broader context of historical and institutional changes (Bednář, 2009; Dudová, 2011). The passage between life stages, so-called transition stages, are important because the fixation or on the contrary loss of motivation towards remaining in the activity on any level occur in these transitional stages.

A primary movement expansion comes first at the beginning of a sport career followed by a phase of selective self-assertion, and stabilization of sport mastery as a phase three (Válková, 1990). If an involution is to be managed successfully, then there is need to regard the course of a sport career as a biodromal project of every participant of the research. The framework of respec-

tive factors remains, their contents change, though (Bednář, 2009). One's life perspective comes out of their experienced present rooted in the past, and at the same time affecting views of the participants on the anticipated major events in the future. These facts arise from the analysis of crisis stories of elite athletes according to Stambulova et al. (2009): a group of crisis-transformation symptoms such as loss of self-respect, prolonged – chronic emotional distress, susceptibility to a mistake and failure, disorientation in decision making, dysfunctional behaviour and further on, a classification or a typology of critical stories results from it covering a relational crisis, a crisis of readaptation, overtraining, or a moral crises.

### **Dual career**

A personal management to promote the attractiveness for acquisition new quality staff members used to have an agenda of care of retired employees. A factor of care of retired employees in a given company was identified as a significantly positively perceived benefit (Bureš, 1967).

As occupational and sport psychologies are close to each other, this concept came over into the field of sports as early as at the end of 1980s. Among the first to point out at this issue were Svoboda a Vaněk (1982).

Much attention has been given to the transfer of transition theories in a sport practice in the respective stages since 1990s. This “boom” was prompted by a FEPSAC 1999 monograph (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alferman, 1999). The authors underline in their conclusions that relevant characteristics of managed ‘athlete’s retirement’ encompass interventions in all the transitional stages, counselling and pre-retirement programmes. As evidence they state that-time existing programmes of sports communities or universities in Canada, Australia, the U.S.A., but also in Belgium. All of them possess a unifying element of education no matter that the contemporary terminology was different (Athletes Education Program, Athletes Career Program, Talent Education, Sports Career Assistance Program) (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alferman, 1999, 22–24). The term of a parallel career and later on accepted in sports psychology as a dual career was taken over again from occupational and a managerial psychologies. The topic of Dual Career was given a substantial support by the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (EYCS) and in 2005 it was adopted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) at its the meeting agenda in Lausanne. More precisely formulated recommendations were presented in the “EU Guidelines of Dual Careers of Athletes: Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Dual Careers in High-Performance“, approved by EU experts on 16 November, 2012 in Brussels. There was an independent section of the FEPSAC congress in Bern in June 2015 dealing with the topic of “transition and dual career” followed up by a journal special issue.

Even the athletes in the Czech Republic started to be aware of the mere fact of the life after career, and that apart from their sport career there is also some future to be addressed. Unfortunately it was frequently happening no sooner than before their career was about to end up. Not only the questions of building-up their personality and socialization through the elite sport were those they experienced and experience as a big problem, but they went one better to mention the absence of any practice of a bigger importance, either occupational or a practice concerning their life in an ordinary, not an ivory-tower-like environment. The major part of the athletes end up their career at the age when their peers have already accomplished both their education, and/or professional training. With this in view they are in need of a support which, to a high degree, rests with the national and/or regional institutions, educational institutions, sports associations, clubs, and private companies.

The topic has been taught for many years within sports psychology lessons at the coaching clinics of team sports, Licence A degree, in the Czech Republic. The strategy of systematic dual career building was formulated as late as in 2014 via the project of the Czech Olympic Commit-

tee (COC) supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (<http://www.olympic.cz/text/dual-career>). A systematic strategy on national, regional or local levels for dual career issues had been missing by then, and as the project is still at its start, systematic cooperation and the development of relations on all the levels are only just appearing, more particular programmes of a dual career and services for athletes are still missing (Nová, 2016).

There are common goals of EYCS, IOC as well as COC to fulfil the efforts and ambitions of the dual career programme and to secure a complex support of the elite athletes even after the end of their active career when they have to handle their further career development. This support is to underpin their smooth transition from the stage of a sport career into an ordinary life. It is based on three pillars: education, counselling, and job placement on a labour market. Education strategy offered by the COC within its dual career programme is divided in two categories: short-term educational courses involving intensive training sessions, regular courses, e-learning courses, and long-term educational programmes in liaison with some of the partner universities providing a university degree. This programme is designed for the elite athletes having represented the Czech Republic internationally. The biggest support goes to the major event medalists of Olympic Games, world and European championships (<http://www.olympic.cz/text/dual-career>).

### **The goal of the study**

The submitted study focuses on the stage of transition between the end of a career and an ordinary civil life start (Coté, 1999). The goal of this study is to find out subjectively perceived, still particular psychosocial variables in elite team sports athletes in their phase of stabilization, a managed or unmanaged involution when they are trying to make their career longer, and/or at their ultimate withdrawal to “sport retirement” (Válková, 1983). It is a pilot study with a limited number of participants and results being processed, and as such it has to be understood only as partial.

## **METHODS**

*The research participants* were the former elite athletes of team sports, because there is a chronologically longer top career in team sports with more media attention and, as a consequence, also higher economic wealth than in other sports. We chose four team sports – football, ice-hockey, basketball, and volleyball. The addressed participants used to be professional athletes of the Czech, and/or Czechoslovak highest competitions with respect to the gender representation: 9 males and 7 females, 16 in total. Among them there were 4 athletes of the same sport in proportion – four players of football, ice-hockey, basketball, and volleyball, and they all had been at least three years after their withdrawal from their active sport career (no professional contract). The research sample was purposive due to the given criteria involving players from the whole Czech Republic. All of them gave their consent their data to be included in the study and be published anonymously.

**Tab. 1:** The research participants

	Sport	Sex	Education	Length of career	Sport Level	Work Contract	Coach
1.	volleyball	M	University	9	repre	Self-employed	No
2.	volleyball	F	University	22	repre	Employed	No
3.	volleyball	F	University	28	repre	Self-employed	No
4.	volleyball	F	University	20	repre	Self-employed	No
5.	hockey	M	Secondary	33	repre	Self-employed	No
6.	hockey	M	Secondary	28	extra league	Self-employed	Yes
7.	hockey	M	Secondary	30	repre	Self-employed	No
8.	hockey	M	Secondary	21	extra league	Employed	No
9.	football	M	University	22	extra league	Self-employed	No
10.	football	M	Trade Training	35	extra league	Employed	Yes
11.	football	M	Trade Training	20	extra league	Unemployed	Yes
12.	football	M	Secondary	30	extra league	Self-employed	No
13.	basketball	M	University	25	repre	Unemployed	No
14.	basketball	F	University	22	rep, olymp	Self-employed	Yes
15.	basketball	M	Secondary	35	repre	Self-employed	Yes
16.	basketball	F	University	23	repre	Unemployed	No

In the group of the addressed sportsmen there were 11 males and 5 females from four anticipatory sports – volleyball, hockey, football and basketball. All the people interviewed had finished their sports career at least five years before, the length of their career varied between 9 and 35 years, from which their career in the highest competitions of the relevant sport was 13 years on average. There were also 9 national team members and one Olympian in this group. At the time of the interview 3 were unemployed, and 5 of the ones employed worked as a coach.

The way the athletes were selected and then addressed was an important part of our research. The familiarity principle was used in this phase. That means that the persons addressing the selected athletes and later on making interviews were people with credit in the given sport – former players, coaches, and as such they were trustworthy and more acceptable for our sampled athletes (cf. a snowball sampling).

We chose semi-structured interviews for the data collection as *an instrument* to explore psychosocial variables related to the process of managed, or unmanaged involution (Hendl, 2004). We chose this method because it lets us get as deep as possible in the problems we want to explore. Our first step was to design problem areas in the interviews and questions to be asked in which we were going to elicit their life and sport stories.

We needed to find out which categories and their combinations possess a decisive influence on the aforementioned processes in order to formulate a definition of psychosocial variables related to a managed, or unmanaged involution in the end-of-career stage and a transfer into an ordinary life after the stage of elite sport. When formulating the topic areas we were dwelling on thoughts about the family environment, elite sports, education and the athlete's personality, and their combined effects out of which then the variables related to a successful solution of a transition from the sport to other careers may be inferred including the foreseen life turning points.

*The process of interrogation* was carried out by trained interviewers having been tutored about how to hold semistructured interviews and how to ask supplementary questions. Generally they were the lecturers of the FSpS. The principle of familiarity was, as we saw it, laid as a foundation stone for the atmosphere of safe, comfortable interview holding for the athletes and interviewers. We obtained an informed consent with which we then recorded the interviews on a mobile phone

or a Dictaphone for further analysis and later transcription and processing. All the interviews were realized from February to May 2016 in a friendly open atmosphere. Some athletes got on to up to very personal, intimate topics. Their willingness to answer was high in almost all the cases. The average length of interviews was one hour.

*The data processing* was carried out using categorical data sorting, i.e., the statements from the text (in their broader context) were sorted and categorized, and their frequency, categorical clusters, and development and trajectories of life stories were observed. Psycho-social variables and their context owing to a managed or unmanaged involution were then possible to formulate out of the categorical data. Categorization of the communicated units, experience, ideas and their combination enabled us to catch multidimensional meanings, contexts, unexpected phenomena and to deduce explanations of processes and their values for a particular life story of the given individual telling their story which had been lived through.

### **Partial results**

The theory of transition is the basis for the pilot study. Therefore the partial results from the processed interviews so far are arranged in the respective stages accordingly.

**Early specialization** ranks among the decisive categories. An early engagement in a single sport, say in 6–7 years of age fills up a complete free time period of the young athlete who has hardly any other hobby and is affected with asymmetric load on their organism, etc., as well as a one-sided pressure from their family and reference environment is negatively felt.

**Fast acceleration** of the sport career: youth sport prodigies tend to be “made older”, thus “skipping over” their age categories, which may speed up their sport development to the detriment of personal maturation. Very often a big contrast between their sport level and their underdeveloped personality maturation level appears.

It is not rare that so-called **life crossroads** at which the athletes may get free of their will may have a decisive influence on managing or unmanaging the involution. It happens non-normatively as a change of the owner of a club or a coach and alike, or normatively as a fault of their own, eg. a drop in their performance due to an injury, sickness or a suspended career.

A whole scale of variables comes out of the athlete’s **personality traits** – their reluctance to solve their life or sport crossroads, finding loopholes, relying exceedingly on some external support, a syndrome of loneliness opposed to an active approach, willingness to address conflicts, and, above all, their own responsibility.

**A subjective perception of the athlete’s position** in the society linked not only to an economic reward but also to the identification of the personality with their sport accomplishments, and realistic self-reflection ranks to the most important factors with a potential to affect attitudes and functioning of the athlete during the involution period and their search for a place in the society.

Of other categories which became apparent when processing the interviews, there were mainly the psychosocial states, everyday habits (daily regime), a job placement after career and on that account a very common loss of a position in the society, as well as issues of professional development and education. The last area showing significant potential for managing or unmanaging the involution was the family background, the athlete’s closest family relations with their original or new family, and good partnership or friendship.

## CONCLUSION

Seeing our results up to now it can be said that the placement problem of former elite athletes into an ordinary life in our country has not been duly explored and solved yet. The solutions of how to handle this stage of life are affected by psychosocial variables which often decide about whether or not the involution at the stage of the end of career can be managed and the transition into an ordinary life after the period of elite sport engagement can happen.

This is why there is need to go on in profound explorations of the athletes' life stories either of the generations already gone to the "sport retirement", or those who are currently heading towards this crossroads of their life. This generation can already be influenced by the present projects of the COC. Then we can responsibly respond to the actual needs of the athletes using, e.g., the concept of educational programmes meant not only for the athletes but also for the coaches and club managers, applied contents of the workshops and lectures offered in educational programmes and personal consulting.

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