

# Sportspeople can face retirement identity crisis

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New research shows how top-level sportspeople can struggle to adjust to life after retirement, with their identities continuing to be defined by their former careers.

The research, published in the journal *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, illustrates how some athletes struggle to adjust socially and psychologically following retirement. Previous studies have shown that in the most extreme cases it can lead to depression, eating disorders and substance abuse.

The study was led by Dr Francesca Cavallerio of Anglia Ruskin University, who worked alongside Dr Chris Wagstaff of the University of Portsmouth and Dr Ross Wadey of St Mary's University.

Dr Wagstaff said: "Adapting to retirement is difficult for many people in society and this is particularly the case in elite sport. Such environments are characterised by very clear social and cultural expectations. In order to be successful, athletes typically conform to and associate success with these cultural norms.

"This study showed that, unfortunately, when athletes retire many struggle to identify with anything other than their sport, which for many, has been the principal focus of their life for many years. Therefore, sport organisations must do more to support the non-sport lives of their athletes."

Dr Cavallerio, a Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Sciences at Anglia Ruskin University, interviewed female gymnasts who had retired from elite-level competition and found that their stories followed one of three narratives or storylines: Entangled, Going forward and Making sense.

For instance, some former gymnasts who were identified as entangled had their identities completely defined by their former athletic self and the values instilled in them when they competed. They struggled to adapt to life after gymnastics and suffered from low confidence, low self-esteem, and a lack of drive towards new goals and experiences.

The going forward former athletes were able to develop different identities to that of a gymnast at the same time as they were competing at a high level. Once their gymnastics careers were over, they were able to make the most of what they had learnt in sport to help their future development.

Those in the making sense group fell somewhere in between, not confident enough to be going forward but struggling not to remain entangled in their former life. Future experiences were likely to decide whether they would more closely follow the going forward or entangled narratives.

Dr Cavallerio said: "Sport continues to embrace the early identification and development of talented athletes. In many sports, the age at which people begin training at a professional level is getting younger.

"Our study shows that how athletes are treated and influenced at a young age can have an effect on how they deal with retirement.

"The issues we observed should be of interest to clubs and governing bodies across a range of sports. On a practical level they should be encouraging [young athletes](#) to develop a non-sporting identity at the

same time as a sporting [identity](#), and have a range of interests and friendships outside of their sport."

**More information:** Francesca Cavallerio et al, Adjusting to retirement from sport: narratives of former competitive rhythmic gymnasts, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2017.1335651](#)

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