

# Helping elite athletes adjust to life away from the spotlight


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## MORE THAN SPORT

A social-identity intervention to support transitions out of elite sport.


5-part digital program harnessing social identity theory to help athletes manage the identity changes that take place when they transition out of elite sport.

Identity matters




Preparing

Groups build identity




Powering

Mapping identities




Positioning

Managing identities



Planning

Sustaining identities



Persevering

**APPROACH:** A qualitative **acceptability study** exploring athletes' experiences with MTS. The study included **25 athletes from three countries** (the United Kingdom, Australia and Belgium) and a wide range of sports (both individual and team). Interviews with the athletes were analysed using **reflexive thematic analysis**.

**RESULTS:**

- ✓ **Value of the Program:** important, engaging, and helpful.
- ✓ **Engagement with Program Elements:** most elements are helpful, with minor changes needed.
- ✓ **Time and Place for Identity Management Programs:** relevant to different career stages, to non-sporting transitions, to both individual and team athletes, and to additional audiences including coaches.

**CONCLUSION:** Athletes emphasised the program was much-needed, with largely **positive** responses indicating a strong level of **acceptability**. Results suggest that MTS, and the social identity approach more generally, has an important part to play in **supporting athletes** in their transitions out of elite sport—helping athletes come to terms with **identity change** to help them adjust successfully to a **life beyond sport**.

*"I haven't experienced this type of support after retiring....if I experienced this programme in advance, I would be much better for my planning of the career transition...this engagement is good for athletes"*

[Athlete 1, Male, Belgian, Speed Skater]

Credit: *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2024). DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102697

University of Queensland research is supporting elite athletes in adjusting to life after retiring from sport. Dr. Tarli Young from UQ's School of Psychology evaluated a digital intervention program developed by UQ researchers and collaborators in Scotland and Belgium, to help athletes transition from a professional sports career.

The research is [published](#) in the journal *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*.

"Many [elite athletes](#) struggle with [mental health](#) after leaving sport," Dr. Young said.

"It's a major life change as it often requires a complete reconfiguration of identity, and in some cases can result in [psychological distress](#) and poor adjustment to [retirement](#).

"Our team developed More Than Sport to address these issues and help athletes prepare for and plan their future identities and [social connections](#) outside of elite sport.

"The data highlights how retiring can impact an athlete's identity, their relationships inside and outside of sport, and how to manage social connections to support them during the transition."

More Than Sport includes retired elite athletes sharing their experiences of retirement, interactive activities and encouragement to reflect on social connections and their sense of identity.

The program has been trialed with 25 former and current elite athletes from Australia, the United Kingdom and Belgium with recruitment currently underway for a second larger trial.

"Feedback about the program has been overwhelmingly positive," Dr. Young said.

"Many participants said it helped them understand why they were struggling to adjust to retirement, and they were relieved to know they weren't alone in their experiences."

More Than Sport was developed using data from research led by Professor Catherine Haslam that identified the identity changes and associated experiences of adjustment by retired athletes.

"Some transitioned well, and others struggled to come to grips with who they have become after retiring from sport," Professor Haslam said.

"We found athletes who had multiple or diverse social groups outside of their sporting identity navigated the transition to retirement a bit easier.

"For many athletes, sport is the center of their world and when the time comes to retire it's common to experience a range of setbacks including loneliness, depression and [low self-esteem](#).

"There are very few interventions that zero in on the challenges of identity change and its management with a view to supporting athletes as they transition away from elite sport.

"Programs such as More Than Sport are important to support athletes with a smooth and positive experience as they navigate retirement."

**More information:** Tarli Young et al, More than sport: A social-identity intervention to support transitions out of elite sport, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102697](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102697)

Provided by University of Queensland

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