

The skills developed through sport will be a legacy of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games



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As the demands associated with high-performance sport have increased over the years, so has the interest in the skills developed by athletes during their sporting careers. Elite athletes are required to maintain a wide range of skills, but also have the ability to acquire new ones. A greater understanding of how they are able to do this will have implications for wider society, with elite sport serving as a model for the maintenance and enrichment of an individual's skill base.

The UK Skills for Sustainable Growth National Strategy¹ states that a prosperous economy depends on the development and adoption of new skills. Individuals need to learn and retain a broad range of diverse skills and also to acquire new ones in order to function successfully in a changing society. Otherwise innovation and new technologies will be threatened or we will fail to make the most of them.

Advancing knowledge in this area can identify the factors associated with the capacity to retrain, increase the effectiveness of reskilling for new work environments and accelerate skill-based learning through the development of training programmes. Such research is highly relevant to a workforce increasingly required

to be adaptable and to an ageing population who need to learn new skills associated with technological advances as well as to military veterans making the transition to civilian life.

I have studied the impact on athletes who make the move to other careers after they retire from sport.² The research aimed to help athletes plan for their lives after sport and found that high-level sporting competition plays an important role in developing transferable skills such as communication and time-management. However, I also found that athletes who focus exclusively on their sport can become role-restricted and find it difficult to change career. The athletes who were better prepared for life after sport managed to balance their education and career development alongside training and competition.

Due to the potential difficulties associated with

retirement from sport, several programmes have been developed by governing bodies and sport institutes around the world to assist athletes. Research² that my colleagues and I presented as part of the launch of the Academy of Social Sciences has changed the way athletes are supported through these programmes. (You can read more about it in *Making the Case for the social sciences: Sport and leisure*³ and in the report: *Supporting a UK success story: The impact of university research and sport development*⁴.)

The findings of this research have been used to train advisers to work with retiring athletes. It has also been used by programmes worldwide to assist active athletes to manage their lifestyle and enhance their ability to compete at the highest level while at the same time developing transferable skills that will benefit their future. The research underpinned an athlete



retirement support programme recently developed by the Irish Institute of Sport assisting over 200 athletes.

Because there is no doubt that athletes can face considerable problems at retirement. Michael Vaughan, the former England cricket captain, recently presented a documentary on the subject. He told BBC Sport's Marc Vesty:

"One of the big things that comes across in the documentary is that we all get addicted to the sport we play and there's not many who can do without it. I certainly couldn't do without the cricket.

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"Former Arsenal and England captain Tony Adams calls football a 'drug'. Open champion Darren Clarke says the same about golf and that's exactly what it is: a drug. It's what we do, what we know everything about and what, probably aside from our families, we wake up in the morning still thinking about."

Retirement from sport is just one of many transitions that athletes will face. This results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and requires a corresponding change in behaviour and relationships. Examples of other transitions in sport include injuries, relocation and changes in competition level. Athletes may also experience a number of transitions, including changes in employment, in relationships, and in recognition.

The intensity of training and commitment that athletes make to achieve success can have

negative consequences, and research suggests that as many as 20 per cent of athletes experience psychological difficulties following retirement.

Research on retirement from sport can help us to understand retirement from other high performance and demanding domains such as business and politics. Indeed, athletes and politicians have in common the possibility of a sudden, unexpected and very public retirement, whether through injury or electoral defeat.

The words of ancient philosophers appear as relevant today as they were more than

2000 years ago. In 400 BC Plato wrote that *"To be merely an athlete is to be nearly a savage"* while a few centuries later the philosopher Epictetus stated *"A person wishes to conquer at the Olympic games...I also wish indeed, for it is a fine thing...but observe both the things which come first, and the things which follow."* Elite athletes need to have a balanced life in order to perform at their best, rather than focus exclusively on being an athlete. Athletes should also consider their life after sport during their playing careers in order to make the transition out of sport a smooth one. If so, one of the legacies of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games could be the skills developed by the competing athletes which will be transferred to new domains or wider activities after they retire from their sport.

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... we all get addicted to the sport we play . . .

– *Scotland's University for Sporting Excellence.*

The research presented in the article is featured in the British Psychological Society's Public Engagement Project, entitled, 'Going for Gold: The Greatest Psychological Show on Earth'. <http://www.bps.org.uk/going-for-gold>

The Project was launched on 18 April 2012, 100 days before the opening of the Olympics, and is releasing 100 features (articles, videos and podcasts, an experiment where participants see the world through the eyes of a judo player preparing for a competition) associated with psychological phenomena that will be seen in the Olympics and Paralympics by spectators.

References

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- Michael Vaughan quote: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/17953358>



University of Stirling graduate Nick Hatchett completed an MSc in Sport Management and worked as the University Tennis Co-ordinator whilst ranked No 5 tennis player in Scotland.