

# TRANSITION FROM SPORT:

A REVIEW OF PLAYER  
ASSOCIATION RESEARCH  
INTO RETIRED PLAYERS



# KEY FINDINGS

## AT A GLANCE

### Preparation



Education is important: Qualifications help to gain post-career employment.



Players who prepare for retirement transition easier to their next careers.



Sound financial planning is instrumental.

### Coping & Support

Close relationships and having another career to retire to, help players to cope with their retirement.

Support from family and friends was indicated to be the major source of support for players during the transition from sport.



### Health



The majority of players are satisfied with their subsequent careers.



To avoid identity foreclosure players need to develop in areas outside of playing sport.



Influences on players' mental health include involuntary retirement, career dissatisfaction, change in body perception, injury, physical health issues and loss of identity.



Players reported between 3 - 14 major injuries (depending on sport played) which impacts on their day to day functioning, finances, job selection and mental health.



The more injuries a player received while playing the greater the impact on their daily lives.



*Appreciate your playing days and enjoy your time in the game*

Advice from retired players to younger generations



### Gratitude

- **Deirdre Lyons**  
Rugby Players Ireland  
*Head of Player Development*
- **Lynsey Williams**  
Professional Cricketers Association/UK  
*Personal Development Manager*
- **Nienke van Gerven**  
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 **Disclaimer:**

The findings presented in this report are based on a variety of studies examining different topics across several sports using different methodologies.

Therefore, it should not be deduced that any one finding represents a conclusive outcome of a particular sporting discipline.

# About the Study

This study was conducted as part of the Action Plan 2017 - 2019 of the World Player Development Steering Committee. Its purpose was to review the existing body of past player research conducted by or for player associations with the aim to identify:

- ✓ Common trends and patterns
- ✓ Research gaps
- ✓ Differences and best practice in research design



# 24

Surveys /  
Academic Studies



# 18

Countries  
Represented

# 6972

Past  
Players



Australia, Belgium, Chile, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA



# 6783

 Male

# 189

 Female

# 290

Average number of participants  
per study

## Sports included:



Football



Cricket



Olympic Sports



Rugby



Ice Hockey



Australian Rules Football



Basketball

- Age of respondents ranged from 20 - 80 years of age.
- 16 studies recorded length of playing career of between 5 - 12 years.
- 10 studies recorded length of time since retirement. Figures ranged from 1 - 25 years with an average reported between 4 - 8 years.
- Only one study documented the participants' religion, and three studies reported some ethnicity data.

# Main Findings



## ***Education is important for life after sport.***

Players affirmed that qualifications gained before or during a career help to gain employment on retirement.

There was a huge variance in levels of qualification at entry to, and exit from, professional sport. Qualifications ranged from no schooling through to post-graduate level study. Timing of education varies.

- Between 27 - 40% had qualifications (academic or trade/vocational) before turning professional.
- About 50% studied throughout their professional careers, at different levels.
- Between 39 - 43% studied after retirement, or within 3 years of retirement.
- Footballers tend to leave education until the end of their careers or after they retire.
- Very few players studied online, however this trend seems to be changing.

The research found no association between study and level of sport achievement.

There was little data available on soft skills, interpersonal skills, employability skills, personal development and informal learning undertaken by players.



Players perceive that playing professionally impacts their ability to balance their sport with other commitments, mainly work and study. Studies suggest that between 21 - 50% of professional players in cricket and rugby had difficulty in obtaining balance in their lives. In football this figure is even higher with 90% of footballers indicating that obtaining balance in life is difficult.

- ***What is balance?***  
How balance was defined and researched in studies varied greatly. The different concepts used included balance of study with sport, balance in life, or a sense of balance in general.

***Up to 89% of players need to find work after finishing sport to maintain financial security.***

Between 33 - 50% of professional players reported making bad financial decisions. These include poor investment decisions, bad purchases, overly risky investment strategies, poor advice from financial planners and a lack of financial/business acumen.

- Players indicated a need for better financial advice and long term financial planning.
- Players had concerns about the financial burden of long-term health problems and surgery.
- Up to 68% report being satisfied with their financial situation, while 12 - 19% report being dissatisfied.
- More players reported that sport had a positive impact on their finances (up to 40%), rather than a negative impact (19 - 23%).
- In general, the longer a players' sporting career, the greater satisfaction with his/her financial situation.

***Players who prepare for retirement transition easier into their next careers.***

- Between 41 - 54% rated their preparation as good or excellent.
- Up to 43% felt partially or somewhat prepared.
- Between 10 - 23% felt poorly prepared for transition across sports.

There was a huge variance between sports regarding support for retirement. Between 7 - 50% of players report that they did not receive transition support or did not know where to find it. Players advised that planning for retirement should begin early in players' careers.

The main areas of employment indicated are business, sales, retail, trade and construction and starting their own business. A large proportion of players work in a sport related or somewhat related field to sport (figures range from 35 - 54%).

Using past players as role models / mentors to share their varied experiences and pathways to give benefit of hindsight was recommended.



## Post Career Employment

***Some players struggle to find full-time work after their careers. Study or work experience facilitates the job search.***

There was a large variance among players that found full-time employment post playing. Numbers ranged from 52 - 95%.

Some players indicated that since retirement they have insecure jobs or need regular work. Up to 35% found it difficult to get a job.

Players who studied (up to 54%) or undertook meaningful work experience (up to 46%) reported that they took less time to find a job post retirement.

Satisfaction in the post-sport career was measured.

- The majority of players were immediately satisfied (44 - 77%), while for some it took six months (8 - 22%) or more (up to 47%). These figures are higher when the player involuntarily retired (up to 60%).
- The age of the player at retirement may have an influence, with older retirees tending to move into a second career quicker than younger retirees.

Up to 54% of players indicated that their professional sports career has helped them to find a second career, while others cited the skills acquired through sport as useful after retirement.



## Decision to Retire

***Players who retire involuntarily struggle more with transition.***

Between 33 - 53% of professional players across sports retire involuntarily. The main reasons include:

- Career ending injury
- Chronic injuries and pain
- Couldn't get a contract
- Couldn't play at level they wanted
- Conflict

Almost half of all players retire on their own terms. Reasons cited include:

- Achieved goals
- Desire to pursue a second career
- Financial reasons (could earn more in a second career)
- Couldn't play at level they wanted

### ***Achievement of Goals.***

Between 39 - 44% of players feel they have achieved their goals. The overwhelming majority of players rate their playing experience as positive and are proud of having played sport professionally.



Having employment, and satisfaction with that employment is a major factor in the transition experience. Players who took advice also experienced better transition.

While up to 52% of players rated their transition as easy, between 20 - 45% of professional players across sports rated their transition experience as difficult, or very difficult. Many players feel not in control, with up to 27% struggling in the first three months, and 60% taking six months or longer to feel in control of their lives.

It is important that players understand the transition process takes time. Having a second career helps, but it is not the only factor in a successful transition. A strong message from respondents was to raise 'more awareness of the difficulty of transition'. Conducting exit interviews and following up post retirement with players was recommended.



### ***It is important to develop in areas outside of playing.***

Up to 75% of players were satisfied with the identities they developed post retirement. However, one in three former professional players experiences problems due to a lack of identity in retirement, and felt they lost a bit of who they were.



Injury is seen as part of playing professional sport, with an average of 3 - 14 major injuries reported by professional players during their careers. The number of injuries varied greatly between sports.

- Between 20 - 36% of players had to retire due to injury.
- Between 37 - 60% require or anticipated requiring ongoing treatment for sport related injuries sustained while playing.
- Several studies have linked injury and on-going issues from injury and surgery to players experiencing distress, anxiety, sleeping disturbance and adverse alcohol behaviours.
- Current players feel less pressure to play when injured.

Injury frequency, severity of injury, time out of the sport, concussion, site of injury (e.g. ankle, shoulder, knee) and impact on health (physical and mental) were the most common areas investigated. Due to the nature of the different sports involved, injury prevalence and patterns differ greatly.



***The more injuries players receive while playing, the greater the impact on their daily lives.***

- The higher the level played, and/or longer the career, the higher are the chances of surgery.
- Chronic physical problems may restrict players entering professions they desire post-playing.
- There is a huge variance in reporting of how playing affected post-career health. Between 17% - 71% reported being affected in their daily life from a previous injury or pain.
- Up to 65% of players exercise regularly, but up to 27% rarely exercise.
- Less players smoke than normal populations, with some studies suggesting that alcohol consumption is slightly higher.

Areas that have been researched include: risk indicators for cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis, joint pain, impact of injury on day-to-day functioning. Research suggests osteoarthritis is higher in retired players than the general population.



***Life events are based on the observation that important life changes, whether positive such as marriage or the birth of a child, or negative, such as the death of a spouse, induce stress.***

Retired players who experienced a life event show a higher risk of distress, anxiety/depression, adverse nutritional behaviour and sleep disturbance. They are:

- 4.5 times more likely to report sleep disturbance with three or more recent life events.
- 1.7 times more likely to report distress with two life events or more.

It is important to consider that players who are transitioning may also be experiencing other life events at the same time, which may increase their levels of distress.



It is reported that between 10 - 45% of players experience mental health difficulties – these difficulties included anxiety, depression, distress and addiction, referred to as Common Mental Disorders (CMD).

Research varies as to whether professional players have a higher risk of experiencing CMD than the general population, however professional players have at least a similar, if not a slightly higher risk of experiencing mental health issues.

Retired players report a greater prevalence of CMD than current players. Some of the influences on poor mental health in retirement include:

- Involuntary retirement (involuntarily retired players were twice as likely to report symptoms of distress)
- Changes in body perception (e.g. weight gain, muscle loss)
- Career dissatisfaction
- Relationship issues
- Injuries
- Osteoarthritis
- Loss of self-confidence and identity

The occurrence of symptoms of CMD was not related to the number of years that players were retired from professional sport. Nor was it related to education level.

A recurring theme in the research is the call for greater support to be made available throughout all stages of the playing career and beyond. Players believe that it is important to raise awareness about symptoms of common mental disorders among retired players.



***Close relationships and having another career to retire to, were the main factors cited that helped players to cope with their retirement.***

Up to 74% of players said that they coped well with retirement, however about 1 in 4 players cannot say that they coped well.

- Some players experienced relationship problems, gambling and other addictions as well as aggression issues.
- Up to 23% experienced alcohol or substance abuse, and up to 58% report adverse nutritional behaviours.

Having employment, and satisfaction with that employment is a big factor in shaping the transition experience. While the majority of players was satisfied with their careers after retirement from sport, approx. half of all players across sports preferred their life as a professional sports person.



***Family and friends were indicated to be the major source of support (reported by 75 - 83%).***

- The majority of retired professional players are married (74 - 81%) with children (average is 2).
- Divorce / Separation rates range from 6 - 24%.

The majority of retired players who have experienced a marriage or long term relationship breakdown, acknowledges that their involvement in professional sport contributed to this. Some studies have found that relationship breakdown is more prevalent in the first 5 years post retirement.

Past players' friendship groups often consist of a mixed group from sport and non-sport related fields. After ending their career, the contact with sport related friends can decrease or even stop altogether. Loss of contact with teammates was listed as a factor associated with poor transition while many players report that they miss the camaraderie of professional sport.

Former players believe communication with current and/or retired players is important - suggestions include past players being involved in mentoring/transition programmes, a past players business alumni and social events. Given their pivotal role, educating partners and family should be part of personal development programmes.



## Involvement in Game

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***The majority of former players stay involved in their sport in some capacity (voluntary and paid positions).***

Between 55 - 84% of former players questioned were still involved in the sport in some capacity. This included a mixture of paid and voluntary roles, including coaching, playing the sport still at some level, administration roles, selectors and umpires.

It appears that the longer players have been involved in their sport, the more they are likely to stay involved.



## Difference in Playing Levels

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***Studies suggest that the transition experience can differ depending on level played.***

Players who played at higher levels, or who had longer careers (10 years +), were more likely to be prouder of their achievements, reported greater satisfaction with their playing career and their current financial situation. They were also more likely to stay involved in the sport. Internationals were less likely to have negative health consequences, experience less long term injury and take better care of themselves. However, research also suggests that they found their transition more difficult.

Studies differed however in whether international players were more or less likely to have work lined up, be in control within six months, earn more in their second careers compared to their non-international playing counterparts and take up coaching qualifications.

# Summary of Findings



Education is important for life after sport.



Playing professional sport can impact a player's sense of life balance.



Players need to find work after finishing sport to maintain financial security.



Players who prepare for retirement transition easier to their next careers.



The majority are satisfied with their subsequent careers.



Players reported between 3 - 14 major injuries (depending on sport played) which may impact on their day to day functioning, finances, job selection and mental health.



The more injuries a player incurred over the career the greater the impact on her or his daily life.



Players who experience one or more life events while transitioning could experience higher levels of distress, anxiety/depression and sleep problems.



Players who retire involuntarily struggle more with transition.



Having employment, and satisfaction with that employment, positively impacts the transition experience.



It is important for players to develop in areas outside of sport.



Some of the influences on players' mental health include involuntary retirement, career dissatisfaction, change in body perception, injury, physical health issues and loss of identity.



Close relationships and having another career to retire to, were the main factors cited that helped players to cope with retirement from sport.



Support from family and friends was indicated to be the major source of support for players during the transition from sport.



Former players want to stay involved in their sport, and the majority does so in some capacity.



The transition experience can differ depending on the level played.

# TOP TIPS

## FROM PAST PLAYERS

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### Prepare

- Think ahead, plan and prepare
- Gain work experience and qualifications
- Sport isn't everything; you are a long time retired



### Support

- Use your Player Association
- Use your sporting networks and other past players
- Develop strong family support and friendships
- Seek out emotional and psychological guidance if you need it



### Finance

- Look after your money
- Don't waste all your earnings
- Become financially prudent



### Network

- Network, make contacts and seek good advice
- Use your status and experience to open doors
- Consider working with a mentor



### Gratitude

- Appreciate your playing days
- Don't forget to enjoy it
- You'll miss it when it's gone

# Further Research

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## Research Topics and Methods

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- Female professional players and their experience of transition.
- Skill development including interpersonal skills, employability skills, informal learnings and personal development and their impact on transition.
- Areas of employment and skills needed for those employment sectors.
- Sense of control over retirement decision, how decisions were reached and how players communicated with, and were communicated by, management and medical staff.
- Other transitions/life events experienced by players while transitioning from sport.
- Change in attitudes towards mental health and accessing support.
- Differences between transitions and levels played.
- Culture at club and support of personal development and career after sport.
- Impact of close relationships and social networks on transition.
- More qualitative designs and focus group studies.
- Greater co-operation between associations and/or sports to compare language used and how questions are phrased.
- Most surveys are self-reported - triangulating data with information from family, friends, clubs, player associations may provide different perspectives.
- Measuring impact of Player Associations on players' transitions.
- Greater use of population norms to compare research findings against.

# Information

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## Methodology

All World Players affiliates were contacted to submit recent research on transition from sport. Inclusion criteria for this report meant that studies on past players had to be commissioned, conducted or approved by Player Associations. 24 studies met the criteria. Using the results of Park, Lavalley & Tod's (2012) systematic review of players' career transition out of sport, a framework was developed using the key themes found in their research. Each member of the review team was assigned between 3 - 5 studies based on their background and expertise. Each study was numbered and key findings relating to each theme were recorded in a spreadsheet until the main findings were documented. Where themes not contained in Park et al.'s research were identified, a new theme was created. In total 16 key themes emerged from the current research and are presented in this report.



## Studies / Research Papers\*

1. ACA - Australian Cricketers Association. Past Players Survey (2012). O'Connor, D.
2. PCA - Professional Cricketers Association. UK (2013). Gibbons, A.
3. ACA - Australian Cricket Association. Past Players Survey (2016). O'Connor, D.
4. An Exploration of the Value of Career Planning to Recently Retired Professional Cricketers in New Zealand (2014). Reid, L.
5. NZCPA – New Zealand Cricket Players Association - Past Player Survey (2017).
6. Professional Footballers Australia (PFA) Retired and Transitioned Players Report (2015). O'Connor, D.
7. Dopo Carriera, Indagine sul Ritiro di un Atleta Professionista Dallo Sport Attivo (2017). AIC and UNLab.
8. Are level of education and employment related to symptoms of common mental disorders in current and retired professional footballers? (2016). Goutterborge et al.
9. Mental health in retired professional football players: 12-month incidence, adverse life events and support (2017). Van Ramele et al.
10. Prevalence and determinants of symptoms related to mental disorders in retired male professional footballers. (2016). Goutterborge et al.
11. Mental and psychosocial health among current and former professional footballers (2015). Goutterborge et al.

12. Risk and consequences of osteoarthritis after a professional football career: a systematic review of the recent literature (2015). Goutterborge et al.
  13. SNB (France) Transition: The Life after Professional Basketball (2014). Mouillaud, M.
  14. Study of Retired NFL Players (2009). Weir & Sonnega.
  15. Four-part study: AFL careers and injuries: Perspectives of former players; Health Behaviours of Past Australian Football Players: Comparison with the General Population; Lifestyles of Past Australian Football League Players: Comparison with the General Population; Mental Wellbeing of Past Australian Football League Players (2013). Uni of Western Australia.
  16. A prospective cohort study on symptoms of common mental disorders among current and retired professional ice hockey players (2017). Goutterborge et al.
  17. The prevalence and risk indicators of symptoms of common mental disorders among current and former Dutch elite athletes (2016). Goutterborge et al.
  18. Prevalence of osteoarthritis in former elite athletes: a systematic overview of the recent literature (2015). Goutterborge et al.
  19. Osteoarthritis is associated with symptoms of common mental disorders among former elite athletes (2016). Schuring et al.
  20. Rugby Union - Ireland, England and Wales Past Player Survey (2013). MRM Solutions.
  21. NZRPA – New Zealand Rugby Players Association Retired Players Survey (2012).
  22. RUPA – Rugby Union Players Association (Australia) Past Player Survey (2012).
  23. Prevalence and determinants of symptoms of common mental disorders in retired professional Rugby Union players. (2016). Goutterborge et al.
  24. Forced Retirement from Professional Rugby Union is Associated with Symptoms of Distress. (2017). Brown et al.
- \* We are aware of a Professional Players Federation commissioned survey for cricket, rugby and football conducted in 2018 but this was not fully available in time for this review.



O U R V A L U E S

Inheritance

Leadership

Support

Legacy



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