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Patterns of sports-related and socio-economic resources at the end of the athletic career and their impact on the subsequent vocational career: A person-oriented analysis among former Olympic athletes

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Abstract:

Introduction: Successful careers in high-performance sport require great investments over many years by the athletes. However, being an elite athlete is not a lifetime job. Indeed, the average age of athletic retirement is soon after 30 (e.g., in Switzerland at around 31 years; see Kuettel et al., 2017). As a result, a reorientation at a relatively young age is required. In general, it can be said that most athletes are able to successfully launch a vocational career. When studied differentially, there are nevertheless differences between the former athletes (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003). While some athletes pursue a normal academic career alongside sports, others focus exclusively on sports and choose to stay in sports after the end of their athletic career, for example, as a coach. However, there are also athletes who have difficulties building a vocational career or are not satisfied with it. The question therefore arises how these different vocational careers originate. Hence, the aim of this study was to examine patterns of sports-related and socio-economic resources at the end of the athletic career and their impact on the subsequent vocational career.

Methods: Athletes were invited to this study if they participated in the Olympic Games for Switzerland between 1988 and 2012. A total of 638 individuals were contacted for the study, of which 341 participated (response rate 53.5%; 32.8% women, 67.2% men). There was no significant difference between respondents and non-respondents in terms of gender, year of birth, type of sports (i.e., summer/winter sports), success at the Olympics, and popularity. We surveyed the sample with an online questionnaire regarding their athletic, educational, and vocational career. In line with the person-oriented approach, we adopted a holistic perspective, allowing interactions between different aspects of an athlete's career, and considering former athletes as a heterogeneous group. More precisely, the LICUR (Linking of Clusters after removal of a Residue) method was applied to identify different developmental trajectories (see Bergman et al., 2003). This procedure included three steps: First an outlier analysis was conducted, whereby the squared average Euclidean distance of 0.8, calculated on standardized variables was used as a criterion to detect possible outliers. Second, hierarchical cluster analyses (Ward's method, average squared Euclidean distance) were carried out to find characteristic patterns of sports-related and socio-economic resources at the end of the athletic career on the one hand and characteristic patterns of vocational status on the other hand. We used the following six operating factors for the situation at the end of the athletic career: success in sports, popularity during the sports career, income during the sports career, highest educational qualification, average employment level during the two years before athletic retirement, parental socio-economic status. In order to characterize the vocational status five years after the end of the athletic career in sports, we used prestige, job autonomy and the vocational field as operating factors. Third, transition probabilities (i.e., OR) between the two cluster solutions at the two different development points were estimated.

Results: At the end of the athletic career, we identified six clusters of resources (i.e., 1: athletically successful, popular high earners; 2: athletically successful, popular academics; 3: successful athletes with little income and an average educational level; 4: less renowned athletes with excellent education and vocational experience; 5: work-experienced athletes with little education and a low parental socio-economic status; 6: less successful athletes with high parental socio-economic status). Five years after sports career termination we found five clusters of vocational status (i.e., 1: liberal professions or executive-level jobs outside of sports; 2: higher-level employees with high autonomy in sports; 3: mid-level employees with high autonomy outside of sports; 4: lower-level employees in sports; 5: skilled workers and lower grade white collar workers outside of sports). When linking the six resources clusters with the five vocational status clusters and calculating

transition probabilities, twelve distinct transition paths emerged. Thus, the different patterns of sports-related and socio-economic resources at the end of an athletic career influenced the probability of specific vocational careers. Specifically, it has been shown that individuals who had acquired many resources in one domain (e.g., popularity through sports) but had tended to neglect other areas (i.e., education, profession) were mostly full-time professional athletes. Athletes who had many resources in education, work, or family, but few in sports were more likely than other athletes to be employed in jobs outside of sports five years after their sports career.

Discussion/Conclusion: This study contributes to the discussion on career transitions out of high-performance sports (for an overview, see Park et al., 2013). Specifically, we examined patterns of sports-related and socio-economic resources at the end of the athletic career and their impact on the subsequent vocational career. While the existing literature often examined the influence of dual careers on the transition process (e.g., Barriopedro et al., 2018; Torregrosa et al., 2015), the present study shows that the subsequent career is also influenced by resources other than education and work experience, such as parental socio-economic status or popularity as an athlete. In particular, clusters that are characterized by a combination of various resources had several opportunities in working life, whereas the other two clusters fared less well. However, a lack of educational certificates could be compensated for by athletic success and popularity, provided that the vocational activity was pursued in sport. Overall, the findings suggest that the post-sport career is a phenomenon constructed from the resources available in a particular context. Thus, there is a significant relationship between the resources of athletes and their subsequent vocational career. These findings may help career counsellors to better understand athletes' career development options and provide services of ever-improving quality. There are several limitations of this study, especially the retrospective design or the limited generalizability of the results (Swiss athletes only).

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