

Course Name: Sports Psychology

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CAREER TRANSITION IN SPORTS- SPORTS RETIREMENT AND COPING

Hello everyone, welcome to the session on Career Transition in Sport. And in this particular session, we are going to discuss about , you know, aspects which also influence an athlete's life, which is necessarily not the performance part of it, but how an athlete actually feels when he decides to leave the sport.

So, I want to begin this session with this quote, the quote which actually says that, , you know, “the world is round and the place which may seem like the end may only be the beginning.” So, I think what we have to also understand is the fact that , you know, everything that has a beginning also has an end. And even with the field of sport, athletes really enter the field of sport with a lot of ambition. They really feel that they would want to do a lot of things, they have ambitions that they would like to pursue. And at the same time, it also ends, right? A career in sport is short-lived. And since that also ends, how can an athlete actually transit and move towards life and actually relive life and embrace new opportunities and aspirations around life? That is something that we are going to do today.

So, I feel this topic is very close to my heart. One, because I think I did my whole research during my MPhil psychology on retirement from sport. And when I was doing my MPhil from Jain University, Bangalore, under the guidance of Dr. Chaitanya Sridhar, it was quite interesting how I came across this topic, you know. One, my father had retired from his government service. So it was almost 30 years of his investment in the field of his work. And I saw that, you know, he was missing his work quite a bit and how much retirement played an important role when it comes to having that work identity and letting it go.

I saw that there was some sort of difficulty also in the transition process. And I really realized and I became sensitive to people who actually retire after that. And around the same time, I came across a study on retirement from sport. You know, before that, I would only think that yes, athletes join sport and they are leaving sport. I did not really think about what kind of emotional impact or psychological impact does retirement has on leaving the sport.

But, you know, the more I read, researched when it comes to retirement from sport, I read about, athletes leaving sport because of career injuries, you know, athletes having to transition from sport to other areas of life, maybe because of education or maybe because of lack of performance. And I actually read about what kind of emotional impact it has on them. You know, some of them have a lot of difficulty because they love the sport so much and finding another passion becomes equally difficult for them. So, those were some of the insights. And after that, you know, I saw Sachin Tendulkar retiring and that had a huge impact on me and I was able to understand and sense what he must have felt around that particular time, because he started very young, you know, his career as an athlete, as a cricketer. And for him to achieve that particular level and to leave the sport, takes a lot of courage to do that. And also we had Roger Federer, recently who retired from his career and I was able to see how emotional, and so much of love and passion and commitment they actually have towards the sport.

With this in particular, giving you a little bit of orientation about it, let us just understand, you know, the definition of retirement from sport. So, retirement from sport is the process of transition from participation in competitive sport to another, you know, activity or sets of activities.

In the field of sport, we look at retirement as a transition, you know, of course, when we look at aging theories, they speak about how, you know, people leave their career and they are actually transitioning to the process of retirement. But here, we have a number of people who are very young. Athletes are very young and when they are transitioning or retiring from the sport, they are leaving the sport at a very young age. You know, sometimes that is the reason that, you

know, people may prefer to use the word “transition” instead of “retirement” also, but both of them are equally used terminologies.

So in the field of sport, if you actually look at it, performance, we always want to talk about performance in terms of, you know, how will an athlete make a comeback, especially after his injury? Or, we are thinking about, you know, how can you improve your performance? How can you make progress? How can you get better? How can your confidence improve? We do not really talk much about leaving the sport, although it is an integral part and integral aspect of an athlete's life. Because, it feels like if I speak about leaving the sport, that means that, you know, “I have to leave it”, right? So that fear is there to talk about it. There is a sense of taboo attached to it and, you know, it also makes people feel that there is a sense of fear which is attached to leaving the sport, that also makes talking about leaving the sport, a difficult aspect. So, let us look at some of the theories of retirement and understand the nature of retirement accordingly, giving you all the theoretical approach so that, you know, you understand the process and how the athletes feel when they are actually leaving the sport.

So, the first theory is of course Stages of Grief which was given by Kubler Ross. A number of theorists have used this particular theoretical approach in order to understand how athletes feel when they are leaving the sport. And what research has found is the fact that when people accept and embrace that, ‘yes, they are in the process of retiring, they are going to leave the sport’ and also accepting the fact that, you know, “I have left the sport, this has been such an integral part of me and this is no longer present in my life”, they cope better with the process of retirement. And apart from that, you know, to finally go through acceptance, there are a number of stages which athletes go through. They may be denying the fact that they have to leave, they may be angry, they may bargain, they may also experience sadness, and then finally, there can be acceptance. Although the stages vary, this is one of the theories which we can look at, especially when it comes to people leaving the sport.

Now let us listen to Vidushi, who is a student and who was also an athlete previously, on how her experience was when it comes to leaving the sport.

Ever since I was a little kid, I have been involved in some or the other sport. I have always just been into some or the other sport. Playing, that was just my identity. But when I decided that- I will leave sport, it was a big decision for me and it took a toll on me. Even like a year after leaving the sport, thoughts like, “did I make the wrong decision?”, “should I just drop everything and go back to my sport?”, would come to my mind. And all of the free time that I had would go into thinking such things. So first of all, I had to find a hobby to replace that, so that those negative thoughts do not consume. But it was a very difficult phase to deal with and it's not easy to get through it, because it was my whole identity. That's what I had been doing for so long. And it's a huge change when you decide to leave it. So, it was very difficult but I found a way around it.

Alright, now let us look at the Life Review theory. So, when we look at life review, basically, this is also one of the theories which is used in order to explain the retirement process in athletes. Basically, when we actually look back on our life, we can feel a sense of pride or we can feel a sense of failure; that, you know, “I could have accomplished this”, “I did not do this”, etc. etc. So even athletes, when they actually look back on their sports career, they can actually feel that, “I have accomplished so much, I am so proud of myself”, or they may feel that, “I did not do enough in my sporting career. I wish I was not that scared”, you know, “I did not have a good experience.”

So, those particular aspects make the whole process of retirement either easy or it can be difficult. So, how a person looks back at his sporting career plays an important role in the way a person feels about his retirement process. It plays an important role whether in the transition process, like for example, those who have a sense of pride and feel that they have accomplished all their goals, they feel their adjustment to retirement is much much better than those who have felt that, you know, “I really have to do much more than what I have achieved.”

Now let us look at the next theory. So Schlossberg's Developmental Model of Transition. According to this particular theory, transition, this is a well-known theory and basically according to this theory there are three interacting factors. One is the characteristics of

transition, characteristics of individuals and characteristics of the environment, and they play a huge role in how an athlete adapts to the life of the retirement process.

So, basically the characteristics of the transition includes, you know, what is the timing of retirement? What is the reason for retirement? What is the duration? is it very lengthy or is it a short duration? etc. All these aspects play an important role. And, the characteristics of the individuals are like, what is the age? What is the gender? What is the personality of an individual like? What are his coping skills like? that plays a role. And the last part is characteristics of the environment, that is nothing but does the athlete have the support system which is actually required, you know, to help him move through the whole process of transition?, and basically, adaptation of an individual depends on the resources and the deficits, in terms of these three factors which is actually present.

So moving forward, , you know, so Taylor and Ogilvie, actually came up with the Conceptual Model Of Adaptation To Retirement In Athletes, and they were of course influenced and they drew a lot of their theory from Schlossberg's model. So, they spoke about the fact that, , you know, there are different causes because of which athletes retire, it could be age, deselection or it could be injury and free choice , you know, and along with the causes, there are also perceptions of the retirement and apart from that , you know, the factors associated with retirement, like for example , you know, what kind of athletic identity does a person have? So, all these factors also influence, you know, adaptation to the retirement along with the available resources, like for example, whether the person has a good enough social support system, what kind of coping skills? All those things affect the whole process of retirement and that determines the quality of adaptation; whether an individual is going to have a healthy career transition or there could be a retirement crisis. And, if there is a retirement crisis, what kind of intervention can sports psychologists actually fit in to support the athletes. So, this model is very widely used and you can definitely look up more about all these theories and read more about them. So moving forward, you know, we are going to look at what are the factors , you know, which affect the process of retirement in athletes.

So, let us actually look at a case study. Here is the case study of a 25 year old athlete who is a tennis player, who plans to retire from his sport. What are the factors which affect his retirement? So, let us think about this person wanting to leave the sport. Let us assume that if this person wants to leave the sport, what are the things which will determine and, you know, affect the whole quality of transition from the sport? So, of course, I think like I have already mentioned, you know, causes and perception of retirement is so important because one of the things that we also need to understand is the fact that there can be multiple reasons for retiring from sport. It could be injury, it could be performance decline, it could be, you know, a person has accomplished his goals or her goals, or it could also be because, you know, of educational reasons etc.

In fact, in my particular research study we found that, you know, education was one of the highest reasons as to why athletes are preferring to leave the sport, especially, in the Indian context. And some of the research studies also have spoken about the fact that, you know, if there is injury or decline in performance and because of which athletes are actually leaving the sport, they may have a difficulty in coping or the transitory process. And apart from that, you know, what also research studies have found is the fact that how an athlete, even though there are multiple causes of retirement, how does a person think about that particular cause; does the athlete feel that he was left voluntarily? or there was a force because of which, you know, he or she left the sport?, and that basically has a huge influence on the quality of transition as well. In the research study which I did, you know, basically we found that, you know, 67.3 percent of athletes retired voluntarily and 32.7 percent spoke about forced to being retired. However, interesting aspect was that there was no real difference in the quality of life of athletes irrespective of being voluntarily or, you know, irrespective of what the perception was to retire, that is very interesting insight because other research studies also have found that, you know, those who feel they voluntarily retired, they cope better than those who feel that they are forced to retire.

So, now moving forward, let us also take a look at athletic identity. Basically, athletic identity is the extent to which, you know, an individual identifies to his role as an athlete, like for example, you know, athletes really invest a lot of their time, effort, energy in the sport and also

there is a recognition with individuals get because they are so involved in sport everybody recognizes them as “oh, he is , you know, he is into relay, he plays relay and he is a tennis player, or he is a cricketer” etcetera.

So, apart from just being a student or a person, there is also a different identity which is got by athletes because of , you know, their involvement in the sport and when person decides to leave the sport, that identity also somewhere goes away , you know, and that can be extremely difficult for those people who are heavily invested and also who identify themselves only in the athlete role , you know. So, basically let us say that in the study which we did, what we also found that those athletes who did not have hobbies or interest other than sport, they really had difficulty, especially, to cope with retirement because they felt extremely difficult to find alternative passion other than sport.

Now let us also look at social support. I think social support creates a sense of safety and , you know, can provide individuals with assistance required to ease the process of retirement. So, when athletes are actually involved in the field of sport , you know, their whole support system is mainly coaches, their athlete friends who are their teammates , who are training together and , you know, most of them also speak about the fact that how they have not been able to even go for social gatherings like college students. You may see them going out and hanging out with friends after their college, right? or probably hang out in college. But that is something that athletes do not have the luxury to do because they have a goal that they would like to achieve. There is an ambition there is a , you know, particular aspect that they know that they will have to achieve and these are some of the sacrifices that they have to make. So, the quality of social support also determines the transition to retirement from sport. Some athletes have also spoken about how difficult things can be, especially when there is no social support which is available and it can be more difficult when they do not continue to keep in touch with some of the athletes from their sport, like for example, with their teammates, if they do not continue to keep in touch with them, it can be difficult. And developing new friendships is also something that they can plan to do, like having friendship other than sport is also something that they can do even when they are involved in the sport and , you know, some of them also have spoken about the fact that how parents play an important role, especially for social support. The factor which definitely

affects is , you know, how much identity have you involved and invested in, what is the cause for retirement? and also the social support associated with retirement.

So, the other factor which also plays a role is , planning for retirement. So, most of the athletes , you know, do not really think about retirement from sport and basically, they do not think about how life can be actually leaving the sport? because like I said, that , you know, an athlete's life is filled with training schedules and they are extremely busy. So, when you do not really plan for retirement in terms of what you want to do after you leave the sport, it can be a huge stressful situation for people. In fact , in the research study we did, it was found that athletes who did not plan the retirement were almost 52 percent and those who actually planned the retirement were 48 percent. However , you know, it was also found that after leaving the sport there were 86 percent who said that they should have actually planned the retirement, they should have thought about what they had to do, especially when they actually leave the sport. And this was something. this is probably a lesson that a number of athletes who are planning to leave the sport can think about, can , you know, invest in and really think about what would you like to do after you leave the sport, because for some people it creates a very anxiety provoking situation to even think about leaving the sport, but the reality is that one or the other day everybody ends up leaving the sport. So, just having that particular thought, but not like really investing time in order to think about it, but at least consciously thinking about, “yes what can I, what do I even want to do even when I really want to leave the sport?”. I think that really helps because it gives you a number of opportunities, hobbies, like for example, there were athletes who spoke about the fact that, “okay, once I leave the sport, I am going to make sure that , you know, I am going to study further”, or there were people who spoke about the fact that, “yeah, I am going to leave sport and I am going to invest a lot of my time and energy in order to do my work or set up my own start up”, etcetera. So, there was some sort of a plan and that also involved some sort of a passion which came with the plan. So, that kind of helps people and this is an important factor , you know, regarding retirement.

So, now let us look at how people can cope better with retirement, what are the aspects which actually helped a number of athletes , you know. So, basically, let us just take a look at this particular case study. We can see that there is a 21 year old Taekwondo player, who has retired

from a professional career in sport after 10 years of participating in sport. What are the best ways that can actually help this particular athlete cope from retirement? So, in the study which I did, basically, we used the WHO Quality Of Life Brief Scale and , you know, basically these are the main factors which influence the quality of life and the coping, especially when people leave the sport. So, basically, physical factors also influence the quality of life. Environmental factors, social factors and psychological factors play a huge role in helping athletes cope with their retirement.

And of course, this came from the data of , you know, WHO quality Of Life Scale which I administered and also from a number of interviews people have actually spoken about. So, these can be used as tools in order to cope better with retirement. For example, with respect to physical aspects which actually influence the quality of life, when athletes are involved in the field of sport, they are very fit. In fact, even in the research we did, a number of people spoke about the fact that , you know, they had to train more than 20 hours every week. So, their lifestyle was extremely active and their energy was always channelized , you know, in some way or the other and , you know, they had a lot of energy throughout the day because their schedule was extremely busy.

However, when they actually left sport, what changed was the fact that they were no more physically active. Some of them drastically reduced from 20 hours of training per week, when they were participating in competitive sport to , you know, less than 3 hours and some of them also did not even exercise because it reminded them of the sport. And that of course, affected the quality of life of their physical health to a very large extent. So, some of them who coped better, also spoke about the fact that , you know, how they actually kept themselves physically fit throughout. Like I remember this one particular athlete speaking about the fact that she knew that she was going to leave sport and she had seen , you know, her family members who were also in competitive sport and they did not , you know, they were not physically active. So, she said that , you know, she consciously made an effort to remain physically fit and active. She spoke about the fact that she kept herself active throughout the day and that really helped her cope with the retirement process. So, this is something that you could also think about,

especially if you want to leave the sport and how you could engage back in some form of fitness after you leave the sport.

The second, I think we have already spoken in the factors, but to cope better I think social relationships are extremely important, encouraging relationships, supportive relationships where you can actually express your feelings. I think one thing that people also do is the fact that, you know, you do not really share your feelings in terms of how you feel, especially to non-sporting friends. Maybe talking about it to them, to those people who you feel are more understanding of the particular situation could also help you, you know, cope better because they may understand about how passionate you have been. Also, parents being sensitive, also helps, especially in developing social relationships. I remember this one particular athlete who was a cricketer and who was leaving the sport and his wife was extremely supportive during the whole transition process and she used to tell him that, "I know how much you miss the sport and how much you love the sport. So, you can take your time and you can grieve and you can go through the whole process of transition to cope better with the retirement". So, I think, nurturing safe relationships are extremely important for athletes to have, especially, during these times and also social relationships, in terms of having relationships with the coaches and also the teammates could really benefit in coping better and rather than isolating and suppressing oneself, I think, sharing the feelings really helps in order to cope better.

Of course, the environment plays a role. Having financial stability helps a lot of athletes cope better because, you know, having that financial stability gives you a sense of control, in terms of what to do and also using the learnings from the sport. I think, one of the things that a number of athletes forget is the fact that you can learn, you have been learning so much from the sport. Sport is one of the most unpredictable and uncertain, you know, fields because anything can happen; you can win, you can lose, you know, your presence of mind is so important, you learn how to work with teams and you make better decisions. So, the learning from the sport is immense. So, remembering to translate what you have learned from the sport to the other areas of your life, you know, gives you a sense of courage, confidence and conviction to actually work in any environment.

So, remembering that is important. And , you know, and psychologically there are certain things that you can do, like for example, in even in my research study, we found that, you know, those who felt that they are good at other things other than sport, they , you know, had a better transition process and those who actually quit in a very slow manner, maybe they took some time, maybe a year of thinking or 2 years of thinking, before the retirement. I think they really felt more in control of the situation because they felt that, “I am making this decision voluntarily and planning for retirement”, and acceptance that, “yes, this is what it is going to be like”. Having an alternative passion other than sport. I think all these things really helped athletes cope better with retirement. And also given a few coping strategies, like this is a quote from one of the athletes which I have used even in my research study. Basically the athlete spoke about the fact that , you know, how he coped with retirement; was the fact that , you know, he got into work and he started off his own company, then, you know, job became an alternate passion and then it became a main passion and that way he was actually coping better with retirement from sport and he actually left sport because of a major injury and this is how he coped. Also there was this one cricketer, who had been the captain of his club team. So basically, he spoke about the fact that , you know, “helping and guiding others also helped me because even when I was sitting outside and watching it felt like I was playing through the people who were actually even part of the team. So helping them and guiding them , I really wanted the team to go up. So that way, I was able to still keep in touch with the sport. So I continued playing”. In fact, there are a number of coaches who have transitioned better from being players, also because they were so passionate about wanting to support, help and guide athletes in a lot of , you know, supportive manner.

Last but not the least, I think, keeping in touch with the sport also has helped athletes to a very large extent, like for example, this particular athlete spoke about the fact that , you know, “I keep playing for the club, it's not as high strung or competing at a regular tournament but the guilt goes away when I represent the club”. So I think, keeping in touch with the sport and sharing your feelings with your loved ones, apart from that, developing alternative passions, having hobbies, interests and , you know, things which really give you meaning, even keeping in touch with the nature, doing things which you are really passionate about, really helps you take

care of your mental health and also helps you cope with transitioning from sport in a very better manner.

With this, we finished the theoretical part on transition in sport; career transition in sport. In the next section, we will be having a discussion. With this, I complete the session. Thank you.