

2.1 Beginning a sports career

Introduction

The career of a high performance athlete is marked by different stages and each of these stages has a value in and of itself, as each previous step is required to move on to the next. It can be said that, successfully transitioning through a stage, with all the variables that this success implies, is the key to being prepared psychologically (state of maturity matches what is to come) when facing future challenges. When we say "transition successfully" we refer to the athlete having the necessary tools to adapt to changes and to overcome the setbacks that may arise during their sports career in any area of their life.

A high performance athlete trains throughout their life and it is, precisely their training, that determines whether their career will be successful or not. To begin to understand what life is like for an elite athlete, their career will be divided into stages and the greatest number of variables that characterize each stage will be identified so that they can be understood. The coexistence of these variables and the harmony of their development is a complex task involving different people in different roles. Here we are faced with another challenge, and that is that as psychologists, no matter how well we work, the success of our work will be contingent upon the work of not only other professionals but also upon the subject-athlete's family. The main actors involved initially are: parents, friends, school, coaches, etc. Furthermore, depending on the economic resources of the subject-athlete's club, additional professionals may intervene, such as the institution's doctor, officials, support staff, etc. Therefore, during sports development it is vital to understand how to work in these kinds of environments, as well as understanding the complexity an athlete faces throughout a successful high performance sports career.

As you can see, a sports career is characterized by different phases or stages: initiation, learning, starting a sports career, competition in high performance and withdrawal from sports (Stambulova, 2007). Mapping a timeline and analyzing all the stages which a high-performance athlete works through is a very extensive task. Each stage includes a lot of psychological information, as a result of the complexity of a sports career which requires strong commitments and responsibilities from an early age that need to be maintained over time.

The context in which an elite athlete is shaped is a determining factor. Whether an athletic talent can develop all of their potential and thus achieve the best results possible, will depend on many factors, including: optimal guidance, physical health without any illnesses, psychosocial and psycho-emotional state, motivation, studies (De Knop, P., 1993). It can be noted that the socio-cultural context (environment) in which an athlete develops, inevitably conditions them as a person (Rius i Sant, J., 1995) especially in the first years of life.

In order to understand each element of this section in detail, the terms 'high performance' and 'elite' will be defined below.

Elite refers to a minority group of people who have a superior status to the rest of the people that live in the same society.

Within each society or culture, there are inevitably different types of elites. This is the result of the differences generated in societies in terms of the redistribution of resources. As different social sectors gain autonomy (art, economy, science, politics, etc.), sectoral elites begin to emerge and they will defend their interests and points of view, that is to say they will defend the traditional models.

In this sense, one of the main problems in modern societies is horizontal integration, to try as much as possible not to differentiate social strata. Additionally, this makes vertical integration challenging, that is, the attempt to break barriers by stimulating the flow of communication within a society. Different elites exist within each sport, for example: in a swimming team, the best athlete in each heat can be considered the elite of that club, and will be accompanied by the rest of their teammates that may have a lower level than them in terms of sporting results. Within this same team.

These matters have been studied since the beginning of civilization, taking as a starting point the terms or concepts of wisdom and virtue. It was only at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century that the notion of elite became relevant. The term refers to those who have been chosen because of their virtues which make them different to others.

High performance

The idea of High Performance is directly related to what is considered to be good physical condition or athletic physical fitness to develop certain skills. In this case, the concept aims to optimize the individual's capacities: coordination, socio-affective or emotional, psychosocial, cognitive, technical, conditional (endurance, strength, velocity) capacities. All athletes who optimally take advantage of their resources will therefore be closer to achieving positive sporting results and thus be closer to becoming a High Performance Athlete.

Sports career model

For years, a branch of psychology has been dedicated exclusively to the study and research of just one stage of a sports career, the transition or end of a career. Transition refers to when the subject-athlete stops dedicating their life to sports and begins their non-athletic stage. Most studies have been based on this moment, but it was not until a few years ago that psychologists became interested in studying all stages of an athlete's career, from the beginning to the end. This was the result of an understanding of how important it is to study the different moments in an athlete's career and how their peers and the environment impact on that career.

The term environment refers to what is close to the subject-athlete, everything that surrounds and influences the athlete directly. Using this definition, we can consider how

the following factors may affect the subject: affective, social, educational, geographic and ecological. (Ruiz, L., 1987).

The primary social environment is where athletes develop their identity, self-esteem and motivation to succeed in sports. The role of parents is considered one of the main socializing agents. Garcia Ferrando (2002) found that 33% of Spanish Olympic athletes (considered to be high performance athletes) had been motivated and influenced, during their sports career, by their family, allowing them to focus on performance. From this, we understand that the family is the main pillar for athletic development and therefore that any failure within this link can cause problems in an athlete's career.

Considering the family context, there are other actors who interact with young athletes during their development. Just like the parents, the people from an athlete's immediate environment are also influential in the athlete's development.

The subject-athlete over time starts to feel like a little adult as a result of taking on significant responsibilities from a very early age. This gives rise to some of the first conflicts the subject-child-athlete begins to experience, among which we can mention, the early acquisition of responsibilities that they face: 1- Complying with training schedules. 2- Respecting nutritional styles. 3- Rest and sleep schedules. 4- Giving up weekends with family or friends for sports competitions. 5- Fighting against curricular adaptations to complete education, for those who decide to continue with their compulsory education, etc.

Society directly influences the life of the subject-athlete, not only due to the simple fact that an athlete is part of society, but also by how economic and educational policies influence an athlete's ability to remain involved in sports in the long term. A young athlete who aspires to achieve high performance, does not have the same opportunities living in North America, Europe, or Australia, as they do living in South America or Africa. Countries that have resources and policies designed specifically for this social group make it possible to increase the number of athletes. For example, a subject-athlete who lives in South America would have to devote a large part of their time to training if they are focused on a sport such as swimming. The specifics of the training methodology for these kinds of sports mean that a child that wants to compete at a regional level will need to train twice a day (at dawn and in the afternoon), as well as train in a gym. This is on top of their school day and extra-curricular schedule depending on the educational establishment. If the educational institution does not offer a program adapted to these children's schedules, they are faced with the reality of meeting demands that imply a very high level of responsibility and often this overload leads to young athletes quitting either their sport or their studies. That is why it is important that there be sports-educational policies in these situations, either with adapted curricular programs, sports residences or different types of scholarships to cover the expenses related to the lifestyles and particularities of some sports. In recent years, many countries (USA, Belgium, France, Spain, UK, etc.) have been investing in projects that include simultaneous dual training-educational and sports training-in order to ensure involvement in both areas is compatible. At the same time, in the sports community and different professionals in the field, there is a growing awareness with regards to the importance of plan A including a plan B (preparing for life after sport). There is also a

growing empathy and understanding in society, and more specifically, at universities and educational centers, regarding the particular characteristics of this population. This increased understanding in turn facilitates the possibility of athletes combining study with training hours, via flexible schedules or making extra resources available (academic tutors for athletes, online platforms, changing exam dates due to matches/competition dates) to work on preventing school dropout.

The school dropout problem requires in-depth study. It is the result of the education curriculum not taking into account an athlete's reality because they need to devote more time to training and this results in the athlete dropping out of school. The corollary of this is that in the near future, given that sports careers are mostly short lived, many young athletes will end up retiring from sports without any level of education. Many societies do not take into account this group of subjects who suddenly find themselves facing in this situation. This reflects two problems, on the one hand a system that is not prepared for such situations and, on the other, subject-athletes that do not have the tools necessary to enter the labor market. As psychologists this is an important area for further research.

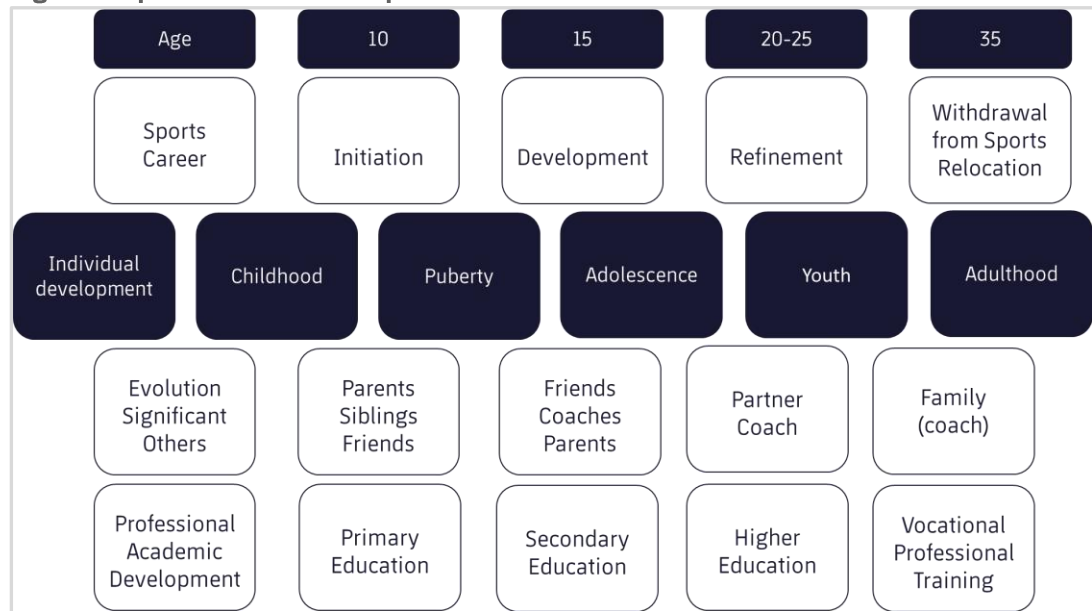
It is absolutely necessary that optimal cultural intervention strategies are developed. New challenges for support roles for sports careers, should take into account, for example, intercultural services (helping athletes to integrate into a new culture, if they need to travel to compete or change clubs), creation and expansion of networks for consultations or mentorship, and the development of comprehensive evaluation systems that reflect the specific values and cultural beliefs of athletes.

At the same time, in the collective imagination there is an idea that a high performance athlete can only achieve success in an athletic discipline if they focus on their training and competitions. If this happens, it can create a distraction for the athlete, which could lead them to finish their sports career without the tools necessary to cope with retirement. That is why it is important to implement sports policies with this goal.

Throughout a sports career there are four levels to consider; each of them with different stages and possible transitions between each of them (Figure 1).

The levels and their corresponding stages are: a) at the athletic level, which includes initiation, development, excellence and the retirement stage; b) the psychological level, which includes childhood, adolescence, youth and adulthood; c) the psychosocial level, during which the evolution of their surrounding relationships must be taken into account, starting with relationships with parents in the early stages, to a partner later on, plus ongoing relationships with coaches; and d) academic and vocational development, which includes primary education, secondary education, university education, and professional training and work. The intention is to start interpreting the subject-athlete on a global level and avoid simplistic views of athletes. As Balagué (1999) states "Being considered an athlete is a very important part of an athlete's identity when achieving high performance, but it is not everything. Athletes do not want to be seen as one-dimensional beings."

Figure 1. Sports career development model



Source: Wylleman and Lavalle (2003).

As mentioned previously, the difficulties of coordinating sports with non-athletic activities, such as academic studies, mean that high performance athletes often consider abandoning their sport as a way of reducing the pressure and stress caused by the simultaneity of different activities (Fernández, Stephan & Fouquereau, 2006, González, Álvarez, Cabrera and Bethencourt, 2007, Álvarez and López, 2012, Álvarez et al., 2014).

Thus, and as stated by Garcés & Carlin (2011, p.36), the frustration levels experienced by athletes can lead to interventions from the field of psychology.

The lack of compatibility of high performance and sports careers, with other non-sports areas of life, result in athletes not having the tools and skills necessary to achieve success in both their sport and their post-sports careers. The difficulties faced by a high level athlete when reconciling study and sport are due to a basic and fundamental problem: a lack of time. For most elite athletes, the higher the level they compete at, the more hours they devote to the sport. The obligations that the subject-athlete must fulfill for each commitment they take on in this stage means they have to dedicate time to it, for example at school whether it be submitting assignments and homework, taking exams, etc. as well as the basic characteristics of regulated training for their sport: training attendance, participation in competitions, sports meetings, consultations with the psychologist, etc. These are all fundamental aspects of the daily life of high level athletes. According to Torregrosa, Sánchez & Cruz (2004, p.220), "athletes systematically attribute these difficulties to a lack of flexibility in the system and insufficient consideration for high level athletes". Faced with this reality, athletes are forced to choose a path opting for either sport or school—if the subject-athlete is of school age. There are variables in the world of sports, in addition to those mentioned above, which also affect school dropout for elite athletes (Aquilina and Henry, 2010). Some examples include: the age of high performance (early or late); the particularities of the competitions and their characteristics (calendar and frequency); the costs associated

with being an athlete (amateur or professional) added to the agents responsible for providing some type of service (Higher Sports Council, Olympic Committee, Federations, Clubs, etc.). These impose limitations which the athlete has to deal with throughout their career (Henry, 2013; North and Lavalley, 2004).

Vocational model

Defining one's vocation and the construction of a professional and life plan for high-level subject-athletes is a complex multifactorial process which is far from being one-dimensional. Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) and Lent, Brown and Hackett (2000) state that contextual and cognitive issues directly influence the vocational behavior of high performance athletes. Other authors, however, argue that it is a holistic process of personal and vocational identification that arises from the athlete participating in different contexts (sports, social, academic, vocational, etc.). The athlete's vocational growth is connected to their cultural and social context (society, economy, politics, etc.) and cognitive factors (motivation, realization, emotion, etc.).

A recent study looking at 94 Olympic athletes in Spain found that 31.9% of the athletes chose to exclusively pursue their sports career, while 51.1% combined studies and sports and 17.0% combined sports and work (Vilanova and Puig, 2013).

Self-efficacy

Cognitive psychology introduces the term self-efficacy and it is appropriate to examine what this trend suggests since it helps us to better understand the way in which to work with subject-athletes.

Self-efficacy is understood to be an athlete's ability to self-assess their capabilities – both intellectual and cognitive – those which allow them to carry out determined skills successfully. Blanco (2009, p.424) states that self-efficacy allows the athlete to ask themselves through self-assessment: "Do I have the capacity to do this?" Another variable within self-efficacy is *results expectations*. Lent, Brown & Hackett (1994) define this as everything that the subject-athlete does to analyze the results of the actions they undertake.

Self-efficacy and results expectations mean that the athlete sets their own goals to delimit the interests, objectives and actions of their professional and life project, using this as a guide throughout their career. It is argued that in this way personal interests and motivations are built on self-efficacy and expectations of the individual's results.

This process by which the athlete analyzes themselves reflects back to the athlete what they want (results expectations) with what is potentially probable (self-efficacy). It is essential that high performance athletes utilize what Savickas (2005) and also Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek (2008) define as abilities or strategies to adapt. These abilities or strategies are used to assume responsibilities with their tasks, in order to develop sound planning, put together their life plan, as well as to accommodate adaptation processes especially in professional, personal, sports and family environments, etc.

Special attention must be paid to constructing a professional sports process in parallel to an athlete's life outside of sports. As we have shown in the text, educating the subject-athlete in order to provide tools so they can make decisions about their life is fundamental. A multidisciplinary approach, bringing together the different professionals that work with the subject, is key to providing emotional support. Without this support, the athlete may become lost without knowing it, and therefore, if they do manage to have a successful sports career without this kind of support it may be due to chance or luck. A lack of multidisciplinary teamwork is one of the reasons why historically very few athletes have reached high performance level.

Irrespective of the demands of each particular sport, if coaches and other professionals that work with an athlete are well-prepared there is an increased possibility of the athlete achieving high performance throughout their career. Successful athletes are not only those that manage to combine their athletic life with their everyday life, but also those who are guided by professionals who know the basics of their profession and are aware of the emotional and psychological capabilities of their subjects. Professionals who are dedicated to the training of other subjects must take into consideration the emotional and psychological variables to be able to fully engage an athlete, using the tools necessary to provide support and career guidance. Coaches must not only be familiar with and master the competencies of their sport, but also be able to draw on knowledge of other areas to understand each athlete as a complex being. To date, there have not been any studies that have investigated the relationship between an athlete quitting sport and their coaches' ignorance. It is best not to hypothesize about this relationship, but it is a significant and interesting topic worth looking into.

Sports career stages from initiation to high performance

In this section, we will provide context with regards to the stages a subject-athlete goes through in order to reach high performance. Although this topic is most relevant to coaches, it is also important for all professionals involved in an athlete's training. Seirul-lo Vargas, Barcelona Football Club sports coordinator and physical trainer for the first division team for many years, will be taken as reference. He is not only considered to be a great coach at the international level, but also, the mentor of a training model that revolutionized the world of physical preparation in team sports.

Seirul-lo (2005) posited that, typically, athletes are inducted into sports based on models developed by professionals, in which exercise programs are proposed using a test which detects and selects talents prematurely, to indiscriminately apply this process, causing in many cases an athlete to quit a sport when the expected results are not obtained. Poor management of training processes which go against the true needs of players are covered up with the excuse that an athlete was not talented enough. An alternative is proposed that focuses on the athlete, on their needs as an individual being, so that the proposed tasks are situations subject only to the needs that the sports competition creates for the individual. With the understanding that the individual is a unique, open being, in continuous interaction with their environment.

This is an ideal construction that must be adjusted to the real situation of each player or at least to each group of players, so that initiation to the sport favors achievement of the

desired results in later stages, without being led by the urgency of the immediate and precocious results that can only be a consequence of the athlete's own talent rather than being the purpose of these initial phases. Each player must make a personal plan for their athletic life, adjusting this to their needs and achievements. This is the only option for athletes who want to obtain optimal results in the key moments of their sporting career. Beyond that their personal talent and luck will define the exact validity of the process and how it is adapted to the player (Seirul-lo, 2005).

The basic rationale for the initial phases is fundamentally physiological, but psycho-social aspects are also considered, especially in the justification of methodologies and the conditions for how tasks are applied.

In the A stage of initiation, phases are divided every two years, because the physio-psycho-social processes are quickly and significantly modified at this young age. Meanwhile in stage B, the phases are every 4 years, following the Olympic cycles which are possibly the priority goal at the high performance stage and they can be adjusted biannually for the world championships in some of the specializations. Establishing a lifelong sports project is subject to the individual's maturing process and development, and the suggested ages are only approximate, but in any case they are valid for most individuals.

In the C stage, the ages outlined are even more approximate. In certain sports and in the male category, approximations are used more than in other sports or for the female categories. In any case, this is an ideal proposal that should be understood as a trend of reference that each individual should modify according to their achievements and interests (Seirul-lo, 2005).

Sports career stages

A. From initiation to practice.

B. Achieving high performance.

C. Decreasing functionality.

Each of the three stages occur over 10-12 years and are subdivided into phases:

A1-. Nonspecific regular practice phase (5-7 years of age).

A2-. Polyvalent general training phase (8-10 years of age).

A3-. Multilateral oriented preparation phase (11-13 years of age).

A4-. Specific initiation phase (14-16 years of age).

B1-. Specialization phase (17-19 years of age).

B2-. Refinement phase (20-23 years of age).

B3-. Stability and high performance phase (24-28 years of age).

C1-. Performance conservation phase (29-34 years of age).

C2-. Compensatory adaptation to performance reduction phase (33-38 years of age).

C3-. Functional readaptation for non-competitive performance phase (30-41 years of age).

All athletes must be guided through their careers with a plan which anticipates and avoids frequent errors which can occur when sporting events are not precipitated and the most important criteria for individual optimization are not respected (Seirul-lo, 2005).

Next we will try to briefly describe each of the stages. As mentioned above, we are working through content aimed specifically at coaches, providing context regarding the reality faced by athletes which will lead to improved professional work and interventions in the future.

A-1: Regular practice in addition to what the child does at school. At least two sessions outside of school practice, by school practice we mean Physical Education classes.

A-2: Generic training continues to create a strong foundation of motor skills capable of meeting the motor function prerequisites of all athletic specialties.

A-3: Gradually implement practice oriented towards sports and then towards one specific sport where the athlete demonstrates greater efficiency. This is the start of an athletic specialization.

A-4: The athlete, already focused on one specialty, is guided towards the acquisition of specific techniques and tactics of a global nature in this sport, later specializing in a specific position with the goal to become a real talent, depending on their personal capacity.

B-1: Start working in a dedicated manner in the athletic discipline. Training now takes up the majority of the athlete's time.

B-2: This is the stage where all focus is on refining the athlete's talent.

B-3: Stage where high performance is the protagonist. Life revolves around the chosen sport.

Phases C 1-2-3 are aimed at maintaining optimal athletic performance and beginning to consider retirement in the best possible way.

Analysis and differences between individual and team sports

Numerous studies show the differences between the sports careers of subjects who dedicate themselves to team sports as compared to individual sports. There are obvious differences between both types of sports. Research focuses on how an athlete's sports career is managed in terms of their readiness for non-sports activities.

By way of introduction, it can be observed that subject-athletes who play individual sports accumulate more training hours throughout the year than subjects dedicated to

team sports. We will not go into the reasons for this difference in training volume because it is not the focus of the topic we are currently examining. In sports such as swimming, for example, for a subject-athlete already at the national level, they will train twice a day for two and a half hours (2 h 30 min) per session, plus approximately one and a half hours (1 h 30 min) of gym training and probably some extra meditation exercise. The total training volume is 8 hours per day, to which we must add non-athletic activities such as school and everything that demands. On the other hand, in sports such as soccer, for example, subjects at the national level only train two hours (2 h) per day, and occasionally one hour (1 h) of exercise focused on injury prevention, strength, kinesis, etc. With these two examples we can extrapolate to other individual and team sports. In this way we can begin to identify the different realities subject-athletes face depending on the type of sport they are engaged in, and thus apply this information to how they need to manage their lifestyle.

Based on the above, we could suppose that athletes who play individual sports could have an education level (both completed and in progress) that is lower than that of athletes who play in team sports. In addition, athletes in individual sports perceive the combination of sports with studying as more difficult. The "economic" variable also needs to be taken into account. In team sports the social repercussions are much higher, as are the economic expectations and the statistics indicate that there is higher academic training in individual sport. This is because the possibilities of making a living from the sport are lower (economic expectations) and athletes are conscious of the need to study while they are active, even though the pace of the course completion is not the same as for a "normal" student (by "normal" we mean a non-athlete). On the other hand, in sports with greater economic retribution (soccer, basketball, etc.) athletes are less educated because they invest all their time in sport. Another variable to take into account is time commitment, since when we compare different individual sports, swimming for example has a high training load, making it impossible to combine sport and studies, while athletics, for example, despite its workload, leaves more room for time to study.

Authors such as Stambulova (2010) have found that the average age of high performance athletes is 22.7 ± 6.7 years. According to Park, Lavalley and Tod (2012), the stage between the ages of 16 to 26 years is when subject-athletes encounter the greatest difficulties in finding a balance between their sports career and academic activities.

Garcia Ferrando (1996) worked on a study which involved different generations of high performance athletes that had competed at the Olympic level. In this study, the author found that subject-athletes who engage in individual sports (swimming, tennis, athletics, gymnastics) achieve lower study levels compared to team sports athletes (soccer, basketball, volleyball). It is typically assumed that in the future, athletes will have increased opportunities to find a job compared to the rest of the population (Conzelmann and Nagel, 2003, Muniesa *et al.*, 2010), nevertheless, the reality is that individual sports athletes will actually find it harder to get a job. For all these reasons, individualized advice is necessary, based on the athlete's characteristics and each athlete's given sport (Vilanova and Puig, 2013).

Gallardo (2015) introduces the role of the sports tutor, who guides, advises and counsels the subject-athlete throughout their educational-sports career. This is an interesting

option as long as the support role is provided as part of the school system, because for a typical family, an expense of this size would not be financially feasible.

Using sports psychology for high performance sport, we begin to understand the dynamics of a sports career and that achieving an elite level depends not only on understanding variables and psychological theories, but also each subject's given sport. Numerous criticisms can be made of professionals who do not get involved in the study of sport, which is a complex and dynamic sector. The characteristics of the elite world, ranging from media pressure, pressure to obtain Olympic brands, sponsors, endless work-training days, the loss of social life, travel, absence of friends and family in difficult moments when said moments demand maximum concentration and emotional stability, missing out on the national team, injuries-illnesses, the impossibility of planning a life outside of sports while involved in sports, etc. These are just some of the major issues that make up high performance sports and that a subject must deal with from an early age.

Sports psychologists typically work with subjects who, despite their young age, often have more experience than the professionals themselves. They have traveled the world, they have been through situations of maximum psychological-emotional stress, they have been away from their loved ones, etc. This means that the professionals working with the athletes and children may provide support through experiences which they themselves have not had. This does not mean that you can only work with an athlete if you have extensive worldly experience, the point is that it is essential to understand an athlete's reality when providing support services to them. Whilst an athlete may always know more than the psychologist, it is the psychologist's job to understand the context and thus provide tools to guide the athlete, as well as to have and maintain a more holistic and transversal perspective that, at times the athlete may not be able to see as they are focusing all their attention on reaching the athletic goal in the short term. Whether a psychologist, a tutor and/or a life coach, discussions about the professional training that these roles must engage in can be addressed at a later point. For now what must be highlighted is the importance and need to prepare for an athlete's withdrawal from the very first day an athlete is active. Rather than treating it as an isolated stage it should be part of a process in which each transition is worked through to reach this last step with the skills and feeling of sufficient self-efficacy to face retirement as a challenge and not as a trauma.