



*The great leap into the future.*

## **TRANSITION : LIFE GOES ON AFTER THE RACE**

When they retire from competition, top-level athletes often encounter many difficulties. Their years of training have cut them off from every-day realities, sometimes preventing them from acquiring any kind of professional training which will lead them into a job. This is why certain countries have set up advice and discussion centres for athletes who are going through this stage. The career centre for Olympic athletes created by the Canadian Olympic Association (NOC) is an example of what can be done in the field of re-training top level athletes. The centre, which offers a wide variety of services to Canadian athletes (orientation, practical and psychological help) has recently published a brochure, and we are reproducing some extracts from it here.

**R**etirement — ah, yes. A prospect that generates mixed feelings, worry, and wonder. I wonder what I am going to do now. I wonder if it will be a difficult time for me. I wonder what I will do with the rest of my life.

If you feel uncertain, are worried, or have mixed feelings as you face retirement, you are not alone. Almost all high performance athletes approach the end of their sport careers with some uncertainty, some fear or a sense of loss. It's understandable. After all, you've devoted a great deal of time to your sport in the past years. Most of your energy has gone into it. You have thought of yourself as an athlete. Probably there have been extensive periods of time when you have been training twice per day, spending weeks or months of each year in a training camp and travelling to competitions. Your wake-up times, eating times, training times, sleeping times, meeting times and competing times have all been regimented. A high percentage of your life has been scheduled around a single purpose or goal. All this changes when you decide to retire and, because of this, retirement from a high performance sport career almost always involves a period of adjustment, a period of uncertainty, a temporary down time. But don't despair. There is life after sport. You can have a relatively smooth transition out of your sport career and find a new way of life that is happy and productive, if you know what to expect and make the necessary plans.

### WHAT TO EXPECT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

And just what can you expect? After living such an intense, focused life full of achievement and high acclaim, what does happen to you ? There are a number of thoughts and feelings that you might experience. Normal, daily life outside of sport might at first feel quite mundane and not very meaningful. You might miss the feeling of being out there, the thrill and challenge of competition, the knowledge that you can handle it all and be one of the best.

You may feel uncertain or worried as you end your sport career because you are stepping out of something at which you are extremely good into something unknown or something in which you have not yet proven yourself. This uncertainty can temporarily lower your overall confidence and may make you apprehensive about the future. One athlete expressed the situ-



*Every champion cannot become a film star like Johnny Weissmüller, on screen a famous Tarzan.*

ation he faced as follows : "You go from being one of the top players in the country in one of the top teams in the world... you go from being extremely competent in something to now being just like the rest of the world. You have lost the edge". Another said that upon retirement she was "a little depressed. I was nobody all over again and I had been a somebody. That was a little sad, but I got into doing something really different that demanded most of my concentration, so I really didn't have a whole lot of time to get upset". What helped most was expressed as follows : "I realized that I was the same capable person even though I was no longer one of the best in my sport. I found that I could be happy within myself".

The removal of that important goal can leave you feeling temporarily without direction. If you didn't achieve your goal(s) you might be feeling :

---

an end. In a study we conducted on retirement from high level sport, almost all of the athletes interviewed (and these were Olympic medallists and world champions) felt they could have done better. It seems that even at the highest level, it is quite common for athletes to feel that there is always room for improvement, and most expressed a certain lack of satisfaction with not having performed to their ultimate capacity.

A flood of thoughts and feeling is quite normal and common for athletes leaving their high performance sport careers. It is important for you to recognize the feelings as normal and to prepare yourself to make the transition successfully to a new life outside of sport.

Remember, there is a life outside of high performance sport that can be equally exciting and challenging. Just give yourself a chance. It's not that you can't do it, it's just that it is unknown and you have not had the opportunity before. Once you recognize this and begin to draw on your knowledge of yourself and the skills learned throughout those years as a top athlete, you will be on your way. As Olympic Gold Medallist Sylvie Bernier said :

"Something I miss is the competition, the feeling of being on the board and feeling that you're great. No one can beat you, you're in your field, no one can touch you at that. It's a great feeling to know that you are the very best in something and that you are in complete control. What I miss about diving now and then is the power of perfection. I've been diving for most of my life and sometimes I miss that, but I know that I'm never going to lose the mental preparation I did. I know I'm going to lose the physical skills, but what I did to get there, I'm never going to forget that. I will never forget those lessons".

"When I was diving, sometimes I couldn't do something, I couldn't do a dive, or I couldn't "see" it. Sometimes it also happens in life. I am asked to do something. I think, "I can't do that. Don't ask me to do that". I sit down and think, "I said that before in diving, and yet I could do it, and my coach told me I could do it". I start to think about it. Sometimes if I have a meeting or a conference somewhere that I'm not used to, and I'm really nervous, I sit down and listen to music, or just concentrate on what I have to do. That's what I did in diving when I was nervous. I went off by myself and tried to relax and focus on what I had to do. It works in life too".

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH PERFORMANCE ATHLETE**

- very focused, absorbing career
- very high commitment
- relatively short term career
- constant pressure to perform
- very little thought given to what happens after sport career
- 'sport system' doesn't spend enough time thinking of athletes as individuals — incredible tendency to drop the veteran high performance athlete in favour of a young potential athlete.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPETING ATHLETES**

- Have some balance in your sport life. Despite the pressure and time constraints, it is possible and important to do quality training and to prepare yourself for the future (e.g. by going to university in the off-season, taking correspondence courses, doing part-time work, enjoying other interests, maintaining friends outside of sport). Remember, sport is a very important part of your life, but it is not the only part.
- Try to take full advantage of the opportunities that high performance sport offers you — travel, learning new languages, making new friends, etc.
- Do everything in your power to find a coach who deals with the "whole" athlete rather than just the competition part — who finds you a worthwhile person regardless of your sport performance.

*Twenty years after his victory in Grenoble, Jean-Claude Killy is still championing the Olympic cause and organizing the Games in Albertville.*



- Assess what you want from competition and from yourself. Learn what is best for you.
- Set your own goals for your sport performance. Your coach can and should be involved, but the goals should be what you believe you want to achieve.
- Try to find some time for relaxation and other activities. Actually schedule other activities into your overall program (e.g., leisure, social, educational).
- Use your sport expertise and experience. Let younger athletes gain from your knowledge and experience, talk to youth groups, talk to coaches, conduct or help conduct clinics, take coaching certification courses, coach, teach, get involved with sport governing bodies, develop programs, etc. Focus some of your energy in areas where you are already accomplished. Do some of this while still competing so that if it interests you the option is there for continuation or expansion after your sport career is over.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRANSITION

- Recognize that a down period, a period of adjustment, is likely to occur. After retirement, many athletes feel less satisfaction with their lives, less self-confidence, less control, at least for a period of time. But be assured there is a life sport, a life that for most athletes equals or rises above the overall satisfaction experienced as a high performance athlete.
- Recognize that your sport career has made you accustomed to having others take care of your needs. For example, coaches, physiotherapists, doctors and managers have taken care of things such as travel arrangements, scheduling of training, eating, sleeping, etc.
- A sense of loss, of missing the involvement, the competition, and the exposure, as well as experiencing feelings of uncertainty are all normal feelings as you leave behind your sport career. As one athlete said "It's human nature to feel that way. You can get over it but you can not get around it". A former world champion and world record holder said : "I felt a loss, but it's like going from high school on to something else, I know I'll never be back there again, and it would be foolish to keep going on at it".

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Know that there will probably be a down period, a period of readjustment. Perhaps plan an initial period "away from it all" which is relax-

ing, refreshing, and regenerating, whether it's a few days or a few months. You might want some time doing nothing, lying on the beach, relaxing, letting your mind go free, or you might want to do something active like go on a canoeing or camping trip.

- A new and absorbing involvement in something that you feel is meaningful and that can hold your interest will help immensely. It will help in re-directing all that energy and emotion that you have previously channelled into your sport career. Go to school, retrain for a new career, work, stay involved in sport as a coach or administrator, continue to compete but at a less intense level. Do something new or absorbing. It can take your mind off the losses associated with the end of your sport career; it can give you a renewed sense of personal control or purpose ; it can lift your confidence and your feeling of satisfaction with life.

- You can begin to transfer the skills you learned within sport to your new life outside of sport. It's time to set new goals for yourself, to analyze what opportunities there are for you, and to make plans for moving in that direction. You can set career goals, educational goals, personal goals, regarding family, friends, fitness, etc.



*Wadislav Tretiak, an athlete conscious of his responsibilities.*

---

## ATHLETES IN RETIREMENT IN THE USSR

by **VLADISLAV TRETIK**

MEMBER OF THE IOC ATHLETES COMMISSION

Former goal-keeper for the USSR ice-hockey team, Vladislav Tretiak is a member of the IOC Athletes Commission. This article is one of a series published in "Village Spirit", the athletes' newspaper in Calgary, in which several members of the Athletes Commission expressed their personal viewpoints on different sports-related issues.

**T**here is an established system in the USSR concerning pecuniary aid and stimulation, assistance in getting education, and securing jobs for athletes facing the end of their careers.

As a rule for providing higher levels of general education for athletes, necessary conditions are created during long-term training sessions. In sports camps special classrooms and libraries are provided. Experienced teachers from secondary schools, high schools and universities are invited to conduct lessons, Athletes have certain advantages when entering universities and colleges — they are granted scholarships.

Top athletes who decide to become coaches are able to enter special schools which help them make the transition from high sports activities. After graduation from these schools they are assisted in getting jobs.

Many former athletes become physical culture instructors and coaches in colleges

and schools. Some former athletes get jobs that have nothing to do with sports.

Nowadays mass media discuss the problem of paying allowances to sports veterans as they prepare for new careers. For instance, there's a special social assistance program for former athletes in the USSR.

On reaching pension age — 55 for women, 60 for men — former top competitors are granted a pension, subsidized housing and medical aid.

An important part of the program for retiring athletes is moral encouragement — they are helped to become active in sports unions, federations and committees and to become involved in labor and party organisations. They are also encouraged to be active in the various clubs and unions for veterans of sport. The best athletes are awarded honorary titles in these organisations.

• It's important that you stay physically active. The years of training 6-7 days per week have been demanding, and it's important to slowly ease your body to a less intense level of activity. You may want to continue in your sport, but not at the national team level. There is no need to turn your back on a sport activity in which you have become very expert. You can compete at the masters level, in local competitions or participate just for fun. Or you may want to try and

learn an entirely new physical activity that will keep you fit and mentally stimulated at the same time.

• Support from important people whose caring extends beyond your performance, such as boyfriends, girlfriends, family members and supportive coaches, can help with the transition process. It can be a great help simply having someone who will listen and lend support. This could be an ex-athlete who has gone through

the whole process. It could also be a professional counsellor, if you feel it would help in sorting out feelings and emotions. If you are having difficulty or if you've been forced to put an end to your career before you felt ready to do so, this may be particularly helpful.

### LIFE WITHOUT SPORT

- You will have made the adjustment by responding to new challenges and interests. All 28 top Canadian amateur athletes interviewed in our study on the effects of retirement recovered to a healthy, satisfying life, although a few took several years to do so. It is hoped that with a better awareness of what's involved in the process of transition out of a high performance career you will be in a position to make a swift and positive transition.

### AFTER TRANSITION

- Decide whether you want to and are able to contribute back to you sport.
- Maintain your focus on your new goals in life. You know you have the skills to achieve them over a period of time.
- Recognize the advantages that sport has given you — the exposure, the mental skills, the

experiences, the belief in your capacity to achieve a goal.

Your life as an athlete has stimulated you to explore some important aspects of your own potential. As you begin to make the transition out of sport, recognize that many of the skills you acquired through your sport career can now help you meet the challenges you face in new settings.

You know what you have been able to achieve within your sport career and how you were able to do it. In this sense you know yourself very well. It may take some time to attain the level of satisfaction or success you are now seeking outside of sport. If you draw upon the personal lessons you learned and the skills you acquired as an athlete, you will be well on your way to meeting new challenges and continuing to develop your individual potential in a variety of domains. What you do with the rest of your life is almost entirely dependent upon you. Look for the bright spots, cherish the good moments, stay positive and make the best out of what you have. We wish you all the best and encourage you to take advantage of the many new opportunities for personal growth which now lie before you.

