

RETRAINING : TOP LEVEL ATHLETES SEEK CAREERS AS HIGH-FLYERS

Gone are the days of the “straw-brained Popeyes” who can think of nothing else except sport. For top level athletes, new job-training possibilities are opening up all the time outside the sports-related professions. Marketing and communications are in vogue.

By Luc Le Vaillant

Sometimes they fall asleep over their books, overcome by the fatigue of their bodies which, overworked in fixed training schedules, suddenly refuse to give the attention demanded of them. And yet, more than ever, top level athletes are anxious for education, desperate to ensure that the future is not left barren and to enlarge the range of possibilities open to them. Their lives turn into obstacle courses between the obligations of performance and anxiety about the future to avoid simply drifting into banality and nostalgia. And so, even despite the heavy eyelids and repeated absences, the teachers are still won over by “this eccentric and fragile population, these spoiled children whose personalities are already well-established, these individualists who cannot sit still but who are capable of devoting intense concentration to a problem or project”.

Since 1981 this “in-training education” has been defying the traditional approach of re-training the newly-retired. Working together, the State Department for Youth and Sport and the French National Olympic Committee (CNOSF) decided to take into account “the totality of the athlete as a person”; to become involved with their environment outside sport so as to enable them to escape the ghetto in which they were previously confined by a mixture of pride and resentment.

Until now, the athlete has been restricted to the job of physical education teacher, coach or masseur-physiotherapist for which appropriate training and specially-planned time-tables already existed at the National Institute of Sport and Physical Education (INSEP). But now the business world is reappraising the values of sport and athletes are discovering the world of money via sponsoring.



In 1982, the French Institute of Management (IFG) led the way. With a pepper and salt beard, watching jealously over and maintaining a constant dialogue with his students whom he always welcomes with: "We can discuss it if you like", Jean-Pierre Courdille, the driving force behind this initiative, has fond memories of this first encounter: "There were 17 of them, many at the end of their sporting careers. Some federations had sent along

developed by these athletes who are no longer reduced to making TV commercials for roller skates. There is pride in the fact that "these leaders within sport can remain leaders in life outside sport by meeting the requirements of bosses who need leaders in their firms."

Dominating the gathering is Daniel Sangouma (athletics), a new recruit, who nods his half-shaved head. "I'll never be a worker who's bossed around. I want a job as a manager; I want some action. I couldn't stand being stuck at a desk." The sprinter, who is tackling this new venture with the same explosive energy he put into winning a medal in Seoul, is looking to set up his own fitness studio.

Courdille gazes proudly at his list of former proteges now set up in business: the black judoka who has set up his own line of luxury clothing; the parachutist who wants to buy an aircraft; the tenacious walker who has won the support of journalist Anne Sinclair for his advertising programme. It is as if, having once tasted the delights of business, the athletes had little hesitation in swapping a risky career for a highly lucrative re-training programme. "Two thirds of them continue with sport" argues Courdille. He nonetheless acknowledges that the dynamism of someone with everything to prove, the attacking spirit of the athlete who arrives for a course of work experience with a firm clashes with the caution of the traditional executive, cloistered within his own universe, constantly under attack, stressed and threatened. Sometimes during the work experience courses these qualities lead to job opportunities which are difficult to refuse.

Annoyance tinged with pride for Courdille, Philippe Riboud (fencing), one of the "barons" of this training who set about launching the Association for Athlete Training and Instruction (AFIS). Very quickly the introduction of training in communications-related professions took over from the role of simply defending the "corporation". The first pupils were Muriel Hermine (synchronized swimming) and Gilles Quénehervé (athletics).

At the Department for Youth and Sport, they are delighted with this expansion which is being encouraged more and



After the rigours of competition comes the trial of finding a job in the world outside.

their "old faithfuls" by way of thanks for services rendered. They worked hard, studied administration, marketing strategy and management and used the opportunity to create or enter businesses".

In an overheated room at the Press Club, the big names in sport gathered for the signing of the agreement with the Department for Youth and Sport, getting the third IFG promotion under way. There are boasts of the "excellence strategies"

more. The department of “the life of the athlete” is striving to offer the widest possible choice. Computing, sales, applied biology, electrical engineering; the athlete can choose what suits him or her. After the period of special individualized training comes the case-by-case negotiation with universities to arrange timetables, organize extra “catching up” lessons, arrange staggering of courses, and special timetabling of examinations.

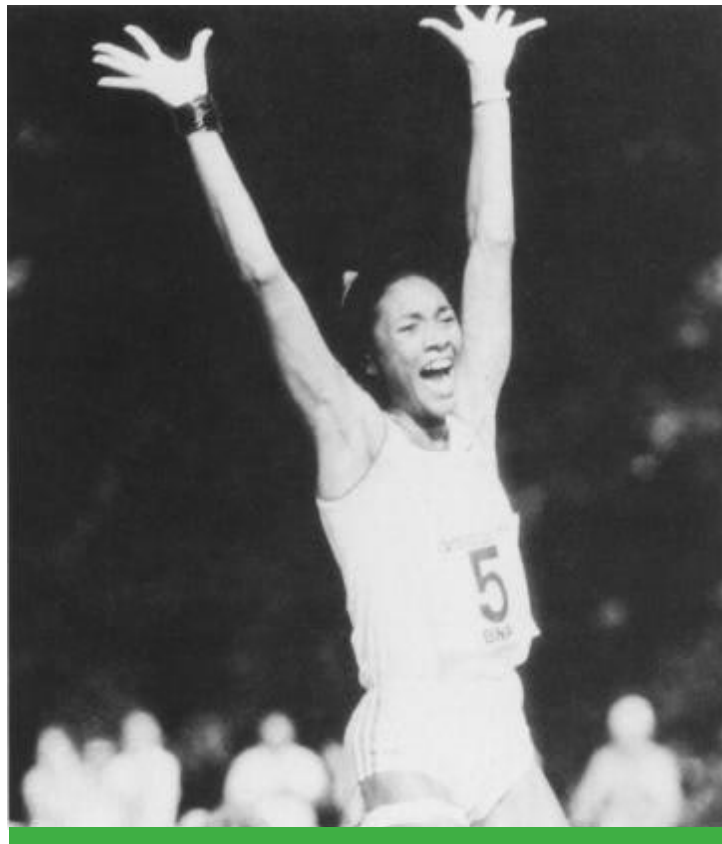
No academy is spared, few channels left untried. “*The show is well on the road*”, says a delighted Jean-Michel Guillaume who has been the driving force of this department. “*The wishes of the athletes are becoming increasingly well covered. To the point where you sometimes wonder if you aren't being over-protective. But no. The federations are pretty poor at passing on the information and sometimes the national technical directors who have learnt their trade by in-the-field experience restrict athletes from studying, fearing that they will be put out of a job in the long term.*”

Developments in the INSEP reveal this change. 10 years ago nearly all baccalauréat-holding athletes trained for careers in sport. Today this number is only 50%. While Fabien Canu (judo), Joël Bouzou (pentathlon) or Philippe Omnès (fencing) have not given up the idea of passing on their knowledge, there are many who are opting out. Commerce is the most popular choice, with communications a close second. On the initiative of Jacques Marchand, president of the sports journalists union, the INSEP and the Journalist Training Centre (CFJ) have joined forces to start training those who will be the PR officers and sports chroniclers of the future.

Talkative, rattling a whole collection of black bracelets on her wrist, Maryse Ewange-Épée (athletics) does not for a moment share the doubts of those at the INSEP who see communications as “*a pretentious facade and a lot of hot air*”. She starts to get excited: “*I don't want to be a gym teacher or a secretary I've always liked writing and I've freelanced for 'L'Equipe' and 'Midi-Libre'. I've started a novel which will be set in the world of athletics, but I'm finding it difficult to keep to*

the five pages-a-week target I've set myself. I think it's possible to combine the two; to be credible both in sport and journalism”.

In this corner of a cafeteria which looks like some kind of down-market nightclub, Maryse begins a passionate appraisal



of the impact of her studies on her attitude to competition: “*I can't say that it's helped me jump any higher, but I have learned patience. All last season I worked to achieve the qualifying standard for the Games and made it only at the last minute. But by being involved with something other than sport I was able to put things in perspective, to stand back and wait for it to come*”. And then, before you can say Jack Robinson, Maryse is off in her “climbing” shoes. It's training time.

L. L. V.

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Describing powerful emotions.