Who am I without my sport?

Addressing Student-Athlete Transitions

It is inevitable that, at some point, every student-athlete will leave their sport. Some athletes will stop participating once their eligibility has expired. Other athletes will suffer injuries that will force them to discontinue sport participation. For the select few (2%) that make it to the professional level, most will have a very short professional career (e.g., the average NFL career is three years, three games). Numerous research studies have repeatedly demonstrated the difficulties student-athletes face when they are no longer competing in intercollegiate sport.¹

Time to plan for a transition

Set Your Sights on the Future

One of the most pressing concerns facing college athletes as they turn to the future is planning ahead. A large number of athletes do not come to terms with the end of their careers and fail to reflect on this reality once they graduate. Life will be much easier if athletes face this change and take it on in earnest!

Planning ahead means focusing on academics and relationships in addition to sports. Colleges serve to help young adults prepare for their roles in qualified positions and should be used to help you gain as much education as possible to help you later on. Athletes will have both educational and athletic mentors available to make the best of both worlds. It’s also important to focus on building meaningful relationships, taking the time to catch up and bond with both your peers and mentors.

Focus on Healthy Nutrition

One of the first ways to improve your outlook after college is to take care of yourself. For most athletes, this involves creating a healthy diet plan to account for the changes in both activity and caloric intake. Many students struggle with maintaining a healthy meal plan, as intensive training and diet controlling help to generate results. You may be faster and stronger, but you likely do not have the tools to sustain this level.

Unfortunately, the decline in healthy dieting also runs parallel with a decrease in physical activity, creating a two-fold concern for individuals transitioning out of sports. Many athletes struggle to maintain a healthy weight after college, requiring a fitness plan in addition to a diet plan. We recommend that you plan ahead and generate a plan to keep you healthy and happy.

Focus on Work Ethic and Accountability

One problem many athletes face is the imbalance of determination and grit on the field versus the classroom. Unfortunately, this mindset continues with students as they transition into the work world. Placing a focus on speed, reflexes, and other physical attributes was essential in dominating your sport, but the work world typically depends on much more mental work.
Rely on Your Skills

Athletes are known to be among the most critical individuals. You hold yourself to a high standard, and constantly look at your performance to measure worth. One way to gain confidence moving forward is to focus on your strengths as an individual, relying on the tools you've gained and honed over the years to help you excel in any environment.

If you want to generate success, you will need to take some time to figure out your strengths and weaknesses. Most workplaces are looking for competent, confident individuals who are open to criticism and improvement. By focusing on your skills, you can highlight your value as a professional. A few tasks to consider include:

- **Creating a training schedule** — While this calendar may not have a set game schedule or practice routine, you can rely on the strict structuring which followed you through college. Many former athletes struggle with the autonomy of life without a team or its obligations. We recommend creating a schedule to keep you productive and sharp while you fine-tune your career and other pursuits.

- **Relying on your strengths** — Dedication, hard work, perseverance: athletes have a lot of positive attributes which can transfer into the real world, yet many struggle to calculate their actual worth. Instead of doubting your abilities, focus on the skills you’ve gained in college and on the field.

- **Finding a mentor** — Most athletes thrive under the direction and guidance of their coaches. If it has been ingrained in you to ask for feedback and improve with the help of a mentor, now may be the perfect time to find coaching off the field.

How Counselors Can Help Athletes Transitioning Out of Sports

Regardless of the reasoning, it’s important to remember that transitioning out of sports is not an event; rather, it is a process.

“When somebody is invested physically and emotionally in their sport, and then they’re not participating anymore, they typically go through a grief process,” Dr. Kerulis said. “Even if they made the choice to leave the sport, they’re walking away from something that used to be an entirely encompassing aspect of their life.”

When leaving a sport, athletes of all ages may be at risk for mental health concerns that need professional attention from a licensed mental health counselor.

Mental Health Risks Posed By Transitioning Out of Sports

**ANXIETY**

fear and uncertainty about plans for the future or career paths

**DEPRESSION**

loss of identity and motivation, feelings of purposelessness
GRIEF

loss of activity, purpose, structured routines, and teammates’ support

DISORDERED EATING

changes in diet and exercise in a non-athletic environment

INSECURITY

loss of confidence or external validation from coaches and teammates

Source: Student-Athlete Transition After Sports, [1.2MB, PDF] External link: open_in_new, NCAA

Resources That Can Help

- The Moving On! Program
  - https://athletesmovingon.org/
- The Transition: Life After Sports Podcast
  - Fernando Alvarez, principal of JAG Insurance Group, recaps his journey from athlete to entrepreneur and how those worlds overlap, informing each other. In chronicling his transition from baseball to business, Fernie dispenses the knowledge and experiences that helped shape his success and hopes to inspire others going through their own transitions.
- Players Talk Live! Athlete Transition Life After Sport
  - https://www.audible.com/pd/Ep-8-Athlete-transition-life-after-sport-Podcast/B08X4X4B8V
  - The hosts of PTL life coach Chad Allen & NFL legends Eric King and Tommy Polley discuss the state of Iowa and Alabama having a bill on NIL, athletes transition out of sports and neutral help for student/athletes in the transfer portal.
- The Postgraduate Meal Plan
- The Former Athlete’s Guide to Staying in Shape
- The Transition: From College Athletics to A Post-Athletic Life
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