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Struggling to Stay and Struggling to Leave: The Experiences of Elite Para-Athletes at the End of their Sport Careers

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Highlights:

- Some reasons for retirement are unique to para-athletes and targeted types of support are needed.
- Earlier generations of Paralympic athletes struggled to stay in sport due to lack of funding.
- Current Paralympic athletes struggle to leave sport due to uncertainty about future employment.
- Para-athletes were unprepared for the discrimination they encountered when seeking employment.

Abstract

OBJECTIVE: To explore the retirement experiences of elite para-athletes. Athletic retirement has long been of interest to sport psychologists. With a few exceptions, little attention has been paid to the retirements of elite athletes with disabilities. The research that has been done on para-sport was conducted in the late 1990s and the context of Paralympic sport has changed in the interim. **DESIGN:** An online survey was distributed to retired para-athletes (n=60) and qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive sub-sample (n=13). **SAMPLE:** The sample included 48 Paralympians (21 had medalled at the Paralympic Games) and 12 internationally competitive para-athletes. The group included 39 males and 21 females and was diverse in age (22 to 77 years of age), impairment history and impairment type (35 acquired impairments and 25 congenital impairments), and sport (24 different para-sports). **METHODS:** Guided by a subjective and transactional epistemological framework, data was thematically analyzed. **RESULTS:** Although most para-athletes leave sport for the same reasons as their able-bodied peers, certain reasons for retirement, such as declassification, are unique to para-sport. Para-athletes facing these types of retirements had particularly difficult transition experiences and could benefit from additional support. Para-athletes also reported that the increasing professionalization of para-sport, combined with uncertainty about post-sport employment opportunities for people with disabilities, made it more difficult to retire. **CONCLUSIONS:** Understanding the experiences of retirement that are unique to para-sport will permit sport psychologists and other practitioners to provide better and more targeted support to para-athletes.

Keywords: Para-athletes; Disability; Sport; Career Transition; Retirement

Struggling to Stay and Struggling to Leave: The Experiences of Elite Para-Athletes at the End of their Sport Careers

Introduction

The reasons for and circumstances of athletic retirement have long been of interest to sport psychologists and other practitioners. However, with a few notable exceptions, little work has been done to understand the transitions out of sport of elite athletes with disabilities. The work that has been conducted on the topic of how and why para-athletes end their sport careers was carried out in the late 1990s, when the context of disability sport was significantly different (Legg & Wheeler, 1998; Martin, 1996, 1999, 2000; Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996; Wheeler et al. 1999). At that time, the Paralympic Movement (defined in this instance as the informal collective of athletes, coaches, officials, sport leaders and others whose activities culminate in the Paralympic Games [see Bundon, 2014]), was just entering what Howe (2008) referred to as the third era of para-sport. This era is associated with a focus on high performance sport and contrasted with earlier eras that emphasized sport for rehabilitation and sport for participation (Howe, 2008). In this third era, the organization and delivery of Paralympic sport has become more professionalized and dramatic increases in funding have occurred (Misener, Darcy, Legg, & Gilbert, 2013). For example, UK Sport invested £72,786,652 in Summer Paralympic Sports during the 2016 Rio Paralympiad compared to £10,075,602 in the lead up to the 2000 Sydney Paralympic Games (UK Sport, n.d.). This investment has changed not only how the national sport governing bodies (NGBs) deliver para-sport programs but has also changed what is expected of para-athletes with regards to time spent training and the achievement of podium performances (Hammond & Jeanes, 2017). In research with able-bodied athletes, the singular focus on winning has been reported to promote the formation of strong athletic identities, but often at the expense of developing other aspects of the individual's identity (Cosh, Crabb, &

Tully, 2015; Sparkes, 1998; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). That exclusive investment in sport has also been linked to less time invested in preparing for post-sport careers (Aquilina, 2013; Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Cavallerio, Wadey, & Wagstaff, 2017; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Yet the implications of an increased focus on winning and a decreased focus on post-sport planning have not been researched in connection with para-sport and the implications for retiring para-athletes are not well understood. The purpose of this study was to explore how the current organization and delivery of Paralympic sport are informing the retirement experiences of elite para-athletes by answering the following research questions: (1) How are elite para-athletes transitioning out of sport and into employment or education? And (2) How specifically do disability and/or impairment impact upon this transition?

Athletic Retirement and Reasons for Leaving Sport

Within the sport psychology literature, different ways of understanding sport retirement have been advanced and theories and models drawn from the fields of social gerontology and thanatology comparing the experience to retirement from the workforce and/or a form of social death (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Blinde & Stratta, 1992). In contrast to these largely negative portrayals of leaving sport, other scholars have described sport retirement as a form of rebirth (Coakley, 1983). However, while these works focused on retirement as a sudden and immediate break, more recent research has portrayed sport retirement as one of the many normative transitions that happen over the course of an athletic career (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). Understanding retirement this way, shifts the focus from the specific moment in which a sport career terminates to more holistic explorations of the athlete's career including how experiences throughout that career shape and influence the decision to leave

sport and the emotions involved in this process (McEwen, Hurd Clarke, Bennett, Dawson, & Crocker, ahead of print).

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations such as work and study commitments, loss of motivation, the politics of sport, decreases in performance, financial considerations, decreases in enjoyment, age, injury and deselection have all been reported as reasons (able-bodied) elite athletes terminate their sport careers (Lavalley , Grove & Gordon, 1997; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Taylor & Olgivie, 1994). Sport scholars have subsequently sought to further understand athletes' experiences by creating categories that position retirement as voluntary *or* involuntary, planned *or* unplanned, desired *or* undesired (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lavalley et al., 1997). Yet these binaries have been called into question because the distinction is not always clear and reasons for leaving sport are often interrelated (Alfermann, 2000; Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). For example, while some athletes 'involuntarily' retire due to injury, others continue to compete while injured until the pain impacts upon their enjoyment of the sport resulting in the 'voluntary' decision to stop. Recognizing this interplay between reasons for retirement, some researchers have proposed models that move from binaries to concurrently acting push factors (negatives experiences that drive athletes from sport), pull factors (attractive opportunities outside of sport), anti-push factors (attachment to the current situation, ie. the sport career) and anti-pull factors (perceived costs and risks about life after sport) (Fenandez et al., 2006).

In addition to academic engagement with the topic, the past few years have seen many high profile athletes go public about their retirement struggles and a renewed public interest in athletic retirement as part of a broader societal conversation about athlete welfare and wellbeing (Duhatchschek, 2016, August 29; Rumsby, 2017, May 9). The result has been increased scrutiny

of the high performance sport sector “rais[ing] challenging questions about whether the current balance between welfare and winning is right” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4). In a recently produced report to the British Minister of Sport, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson stated that “it is clear that the drive for success and desire to win should not be at the cost of individuals involved” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, the research evidence makes clear that, while athletes may experience poor mental health after they leave sport, interventions and protective measures need be taken *while they are still in sport* (Larkin, Levy, Marchant, & Martin, 2017).

Despite a growing body of research exploring athletic retirements and increased media reporting on the topic, few have considered the experiences of para-athletes. Wheeler and colleagues (1996, 1999) carried out a pilot investigation on the retirement experiences of 18 elite Canadian para-athletes and later interviewed 40 international para-athletes. They found that para-athletes shared many of the anxieties around sport retirement expressed by their non-disabled peers. Wheeler et al. (1996) also proposed five areas for future research consideration which they termed the ‘quintuplet jeopardy’ of para-athlete retirement: (1) loss of sport, (2) employment and financial issues, (3) overuse injuries contributing to a ‘secondary’ disability, (4) facing and coping with the original disability, and (5) issues associated with aging with a disability. These five areas, they stated, need further investigation as each has different implications for para-athletes than for their able-bodied peers. Martin (1996, 1999, 2000) also studied the careers and transitions of para-athletes and found that there are situations unique to para-sport that have implications for retirement. These included understanding that some para-athletes will have entered sport as a means of coping with an injury or as part of the rehabilitation program. In turn, leaving sport may raise unresolved emotions about the traumatic event and/or their identity as a person with a disability (Martin, 2017). Yet despite theorizing that para-athletes transitioning out of sport will

encounter different challenges to able-bodied athletes and could benefit from additional, targeted types of support to assist them to cope (such as employment training programs that address the discrimination people with disabilities often encounter in the workplace), there has been little development in this area over the last two decades.

Philosophical and Theoretical Framework

The research sits within the interpretivist paradigm underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e., reality and truth are multiple and context dependent) and a subjective and transactional epistemology (i.e., knowledge is subjective and socially constructed) (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In keeping with the epistemological and ontological foundations of the work, the research was designed to engage directly with already retired para-athletes to hear their experiences of leaving sport. No preconceived theoretical frameworks were considered before starting the work as it was determined this would be inconsistent with aims of seeking to understand the topic from the perspective of the para-athletes involved. We were, however, guided by the previously cited literature and, in particular, the concept of retirement as one of the many normative transitions in an athlete's career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), the multi-faceted and co-acting reasons for retirement (Fernandez et al., 2006), and the 'quintuplet jeopardy' facing retiring para-athletes outlined by Wheeler and colleagues (1996; 1999). The research team also brought to the project our own knowledge, perspectives and experiences garnered from many years of participating in para-sport as coaches, volunteers, sport practitioners and disability sport researchers. We had ongoing discussions about our shared values, our reasons for undertaking the research and our expectations for who would benefit from the research. As a result of these conversations, we position this project within the field of critical disability studies (CDS) (Smith & Bundon, in press). For us, working from a CDS approach means being attentive to the processes and

structures that contribute to the ongoing marginalization and exclusion of disabled people from everyday life. We conceptualize sport as a everyday space where disabled identities are (re)produced and understand that the practices of the sport sector have the potential to further oppress people with disabilities and/or transform societal understandings of disability (Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). It was our intent, when embarking on this research, to use our findings to challenge conditions of disablism (the systemic oppression of people with disabilities stemming from negative assumptions about disability) and ableist culture (a culture which assumes ‘most’ people are able-bodied) (Goodley, Hughes, & Davis, 2012). While some may be unfamiliar with the idea of conducting research with the express intent of engaging in advocacy (ie. ‘challenging oppression’), this stance is supported by many leading CDS scholars who feel that research *should* be used to improve their lives of those who have given their time and knowledge to make the research possible (Kitchen, 2000; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Consistent with our philosophical and theoretical position, we also adopted a relativistic stance towards the issue of methodological rigor. Rigor has been described as a marker of excellence or quality sought through method (Smith & McGannon, 2017). While qualitative researchers demonstrate rigor in various manners including the use of member-checking, inter-rater reliability and/or the application of a criteriological approach these approaches were deemed incongruent with our ontological and epistemological frameworks (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Instead, and consistent with the aims of CDS scholarship, we propose two means by which the quality of our work be judged. First, we sought to be transparent in our practice and maintain a clear link between the knowledge produced (the findings reported, the conclusions arrived at, and the claims made) and the steps undertaken in producing this knowledge (the design of the project, the process of data collection, and the methods of data analysis). As disability activists have

frequently called out researchers for their parasitic practices that ‘take’ from disabled people without reporting back (Stone & Priestley, 1996), we attempted to have open and honest relations with participants. We communicated to potential participants our research aims, we invited them to ask questions of the team and ended each survey and interview with the option to share with us anything they felt ‘important for us to know.’ We also provided regular updates on the progress of the project. In the writing up of the research, we have been transparent by communicating the decisions made and actions taken during the research and providing details about the recruitment process, the demographics of the sample, the number and length of interviews, and the stages of the analysis. We have used direct quotes from participants so that readers can assess for themselves our interpretations and the appropriateness of our themes.

The second criteria by which our work can be judged is by the extent to which it accomplishes our stated goal of producing research that directly and indirectly benefits people (in this case ‘athletes’) with disabilities and contributes to more inclusive practices. While we acknowledge this can only be assessed in retrospect, as a starting point we would point to recent changes at the English Institute of Sport that have been informed by this work including the creation of a para-athlete advisory group and additional training for Performance Lifestyle (PL) practitioners working with para-athletes in the areas of career planning, employment law and issues of (de)classification (Bundon & Ashfield, 2016).

Material and Methods

The design for this project was multi-method and included a survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey questions were developed by the research team drawing on the previously cited literature. Once the survey closed, the research team analyzed the responses and then developed the interview questions. This approach is aligned with Gibson’s (2016) description of

mixing methods for the purpose of complementarity. Projects with complementarity designs use multiple methods to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and “the true strength of this approach is aggregation of the strengths of each method” (Gibson, 2016, p.388). Online survey methods were selected because these allowed us to hear from a large and geographically dispersed group of retired para-athletes. Additionally, like in Braye, Dixon and Gibbons’ (2013) similarly designed project exploring Paralympic sport in the United Kingdom, these methods were chosen in order to capture detailed responses from diverse participants.. The interviews subsequently provided us with an opportunity to further delve into issues raised by survey respondents providing more richness to the data. The design of the project was reviewed and approved by the research ethics board of the host university.

Online Survey

An online survey was created using Bristol Online Surveys (BOS). BOS is compliant with all UK data protection laws and also meets UK accessibility requirements. The survey included 13 sections and 22 questions (and 55 sub-questions) and asked athletes for demographic information including the history of their sport participation (years in sport, type of sport, etc.), the history of their impairment (congenital or acquired, stable or progressive), their education and employment history (including whether they worked or studied while in sport) and their current employment or education status. Conceptual questions pertaining to their reasons for and experiences of leaving sport were also included. Para-athletes were asked about when, how and why they made the decision to end their competitive careers, what types of services and support they accessed during their transition, and their advice to current para-athletes regarding preparing for sport retirement.

Inclusion Criteria.

Criterion-based sampling was used (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To participate in the survey athletes needed to be at least 18 years of age, have represented Great Britain at a Paralympic Games or other international para-sport event and/or have been an elite para-athlete receiving direct funding from UK Sport in the form of an Athlete Personal Award. The final criteria was that athletes must have retired from international competition. As we were interested in if the experiences of athletes leaving sport may have changed over time, we set no limits on ‘time since retirement’ and recruited athletes from earlier Games.

Recruitment.

Organizations that provide services for or support to elite para-athletes were asked to circulate survey information to their constituents. This included UK Sport (distributes funding to athletes preparing for international competition), the British Paralympic Association (selects, prepares, funds and manages the Great Britain and Northern Ireland Paralympic Games team) and the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust (works with current and retired elite athletes to mentor young people). These organizations distributed information through email newsletters and/or shared links to a project webpage on their social media networks. It should be noted that most organizations do not update contact lists for athletes once they have left sport and/or had their funding terminated so it is unclear how many retired para-athletes were reached through these channels. Contact information for athletes was never shared with the research team. Rather potential participants were asked to contact us if they wanted further information. Social media was also used as a recruitment tool with the research team sharing the link to the project page on their own Facebook and Twitter accounts and those of their institution.

Semi-structured interviews

A subset of 13 of the 60 survey respondents participated in follow-up, semi-structured qualitative interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to provide more depth and detail around the topics previously addressed in the survey.

Recruitment.

The online survey included text informing participants of the full project design and stating that some survey respondents would be contacted by email to request they participate in follow-up interviews. They were also informed that, if contacted, they would have the option to accept or decline to be interviewed. Fifteen participants were contacted for an interview and 13 agreed to participate and signed consent forms.

Sampling criteria.

Maximum case sampling was used to identify athletes for interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Maximum case sampling consists of the research team defining in advance the dimensions of variation in the population that are most relevant to the project and then systematically contacting individuals that can speak to the most important possible variations of these dimensions. From the survey responses, the research team determined that the most important dimensions of variation included: gender, sport, impairment type, time since retirement, reason for leaving sport, duration of sport career, education and employment history and present employment status. The interviews averaged 63 minutes in duration for a total of 13.8 hours. All interviews were conducted by phone or over Skype, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. While some have questioned whether phone or video call interviews provide the same quality data as in-person interviews, a recent study by Rathwell, Camiré and Young (2016) found no difference in depth, vividness, nuance or richness when comparing Skype and in-person interviews. In her research, Bundon (2017) found that these technologies have infiltrated our daily

lives to the point where many individuals do not distinguish between online and offline communication. For these reasons, the research team was confident in our decision to conduct interviews in this manner.

Data analysis

The survey responses were exported from BOS into an Excel file. The interviews were transcribed as Word documents. Survey responses and interview transcripts were assigned an identifying label and participant names were removed. All data were analyzed using an iterative hybrid thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process includes six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of preliminary codes using the research questions to develop initial ideas (inductive codes) and notes of what is ‘interesting’ in the data (deductive codes), (3) searching for themes by sorting codes, (4) reviewing themes by searching for negative instances or alternative understandings, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) identifying which themes are important and how they explain the phenomenon. We refer to this approach to thematic analysis as ‘iterative’ in that it is described in six steps for the purpose of clarity but in application some stages happen concurrently and steps are revisited as many times as deemed necessary. It is ‘hybrid’ in that it includes the use of both codes identified by the research team during the design phase (ie. closely linked to the research questions and the review of the existing literature) and codes developed as we immersed ourselves in the data. This approach to data analysis aligns with our relativist and subjective stance in that it recognizes that codes and themes are not fixed, final or complete but are useful ways of organizing accounts to go beyond description and provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The management of data was facilitated using NVivo 10 software, with node reports exported as Word files and memos further

annotated during subsequent readings by research team members. In reports, presentations and manuscripts identifying factors have been removed.

Sample description

Survey participants.

Sixty para-athletes completed the survey including 48 Paralympians (17 had competed in one Games, 17 in two Games, seven in three Games and seven had competed at four or more Games). Twenty-one had won medals at Paralympic Games. Of the remaining 12 respondents, 12 had represented Great Britain internationally and/or were recipients of UK Sport funding. Twenty-four different sports were represented. The age range of survey respondents was 20 to 77 with an average age of 45. Five athletes had retired in the year preceding the survey, 19 in the past one to two years, 13 in the past three to four years and 23 had left sport five or more years prior to the survey. The sample was also diverse in terms of gender and impairment type including 39 men and 21 women, 25 athletes with congenital impairments and 35 with acquired impairments. In analyzing the data, the research team observed what appeared to be differences in the reasons for and circumstances surrounding retirement based on the 'era' in which the athlete had competed. To explore these differences in more depth and better understand how the timing of their Paralympic career may have impacted their sport experiences, we divided the 48 Paralympians into groups based on the year in which they made their final appearance at a Paralympic Games. Cohort 1 included 14 Paralympians whose final appearance was Sydney 2000 or earlier. Cohort 2 consisted of 12 Paralympians who last competed at a Paralympic Games between 2002 (Salt Lake City) and 2010 (Vancouver). The largest group, Cohort 3 retired from sport after either London 2012 or Sochi 2014. We then compared the responses of each cohort *within* the previously identified themes.

Interview participants.

In total, 13 para-athletes participated in the interviews including six men and seven women. Twelve were Paralympians and one had competed internationally for GB. They came from the sports of sailing, boccia, swimming, archery, rowing, wheelchair rugby, goalball and judo. One participant had retired that same year, six in the past one to two years, three in the past three to four years and three had been retired for more than five years. The average age of interviewees was 31 and the group was diverse in terms of impairment type.

Results and Discussion

In the section that follows we address four thematic areas drawn from combined survey and interview data: (1) the multiple, concurrent and complex reasons elite para-athletes leave sport, (2) the increasing professionalization of para-sport and the implications on when, why and how para-athletes retire, (3) the challenges and discrimination para-athletes face in leaving para-sport and entering the workforce, and (4) suggestions to better prepare para-athletes for their transition out of elite sport. These themes are brought into conversation with the previously cited literature on para-athletes and sport retirement.

Multiple, Concurrent and Complex Reasons for Sport Retirement

The survey asked respondents to select from a list of 12 reasons for leaving sport all that applied to them. The list was drawn from the previously cited literature on the most frequent reasons for leaving sport among athletes generally (Fernandez et al., 2006; Lavalley et al., 1997) and the research team added three ‘para-specific’ choices including: ‘my classification changed and I was no longer eligible to compete,’ ‘my class was eliminated from the Paralympic Games,’

and ‘my sport or event was eliminated from the Paralympic Games.’ Table 1 includes the survey responses.

Table 1

Survey Responses to ‘Reasons for Leaving Sport.’

Reason for leaving sport	Number of respondents that selected this option
I felt it was a good time to retire.	32
I had achieved my sport goals.	17
I wanted to spend more time with family.	17
I was deselected or not selected to the team.	14
I wanted to pursue an employment opportunity.	13
I left because of illness or injury.	12
I needed to earn more money.	11
I lost my sport funding and could not afford to continue.	7
I wanted to pursue an educational opportunity.	3
My classification changed and I was no longer eligible to compete.*	3
My sport or event was eliminated from the Paralympic program.*	2
My class was eliminated from the Paralympic program.*	2

Note: *indicates a reason for leaving sport unique to para-sport

Earlier research reported that elite athletes generally leave sport for multiple and cumulative reasons (Alfermann, 2000; Fernandez et al., 2006; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). This is consistent with our survey findings with 39 respondents selecting more

than one reason. When asked in a follow-up question in the survey to elaborate on the circumstances of their retirement, most indicated that their reasons were not only multiple but acted in concert. For example, one para-athlete who had competed in two Games replied:

I felt that I had achieved all of my goals and was ready to start a family and get married following a lifetime of training and competition. My decision was confounded by a reduction in my funding following not achieving Paralympic gold despite competing with a significant injury. Additionally the performance centre moved from where I had located to and I wasn't prepared to relocate again.

Another Paralympian wrote:

I thought it was a great time to retire after 2012. I wanted to be at home more as well as to go into business for myself. I didn't see much changing for the next cycle in terms of the team's results. I believe that if you're an international athlete, you should give 100% to the team all of the time... The things that I mentioned about led me to conclude that I was ready to retire and let others step in.

The above quotes include what Fernandez et al. (2006) have termed *pull factors* (desire to get married, start a family, spend more time at home, go into business) and *push factors* (reduction in funding, need to relocate, predictions of future team performance). Being simultaneously pushed from sport and pulled towards other opportunities was consistently reported, and even survey respondents who selected a single reason from the list generally elaborated in their written responses. For example, one athlete selected only 'I had achieved my sport goals and was ready to retire', and then wrote:

I came late to sport and having always worked I was fortunate that my employer allowed me to go 'part time' in order to qualify for London. After the games and my return to 'full time', it became clear that it wasn't possible to train enough and work. Although my place in the team was still 'safe', I didn't want to continue if I wasn't competitive.

In the above example, the retirement thought process included weighing the feasibility of staying in sport against employment demands and an assessment of the likelihood of future sport success. Indeed, many of the participants spoke to the increasing competitiveness of para-sport, the growing pressure to win medals, and the challenge of matching (or bettering) the performances of younger or newly recruited competitors. Their comments are consistent with Wheeler et al. (1996) predictions that the growing popularity of Paralympic sport would have implications for how and when para-athletes retire.

In total, seven participants in the survey selected one or more of the 'para-specific' reasons for retirement. As there is no existing data on rates of declassification or athletes who leave sport after being reclassified into fields where they are less competitive, we are not able to comment on whether our sample is representative. This said, it maybe that this work resonates with readers or research in the future, thereby potentially displaying naturalistic generalizability (Smith, 2018). Futhermore, though only seven chose these responses, other para-athletes used the open-ended questions to explain that their impairment had impacted upon their decision to leave competitive sport. For example, one athlete explained that the deterioration of her physical condition had made her less competitive precipitating her retirement:

[It was] mainly due to the fact my condition was worsening (but probably not enough to move me down a class) and therefore I was becoming less competitive in my class and

whilst my skills were improving I was unable to improve on my personal bests because I was physically getting worse and compensating for that. It was a good time to stop because I realised the difficulty of me physically being able to maintain training hours required to make the 2016 Paralympic Games...

The above example is provided because it highlights the additional complexity of para-sport, where athletes' retirement decisions may be influenced by the progression of the impairment that qualified them for Paralympic competition in the first place. By definition para-athletes start their athletic careers with an injury or an impairment. In many cases their conditions are stable and do not negatively impact upon their physical health (for example, an amputation or a vision impairment). In other instances, their impairments are caused by underlying health conditions or medical diagnosis that are not stable (for example, an athlete may use a wheelchair due to degenerative conditions that impact their muscles or joints) and the progression of the condition could precipitate their retirement from sport. The stories heard in the project also fit with empirical evidence that para-athletes may become injured through sport participation and that this injury, when compounded with the original impairment, has a disproportionate impact on their overall wellbeing (Burnham et al., 1993; Bloomquist, 1986; Fagher & Lexell, 2014). For example, an able-bodied athlete might decide to continue to compete with a shoulder injury whereas an athlete who uses a wheelchair might decide that it is not worth the risk of not being to independently wheel and leave the sport. Thus the cumulative impact of these 'secondary disabilities' need to be accounted for when considering the retirement of para-athletes (Wheeler et al., 1996).

It is also important to note that to date there is no existing literature on para-athletes forced into retirement because of (de)classification. While this option was selected by only three participants, those who were in this position reported very traumatic and unsettled transition experiences along with difficulties in coping indicating this is an important area for further work. Their stories shared many characteristics with other reports of forced and undesired retirements. For example, para-athletes who were (de)classified out of sport spoke of having no control over the situation and feeling powerless. This is similar to how athletes have described retirements due to injuries (Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Knowles, 2015) and it may be that sport psychologists and other practitioners supporting athletes can draw on this literature. However, while there may be some similarities, there are also elements where the para-athletes experiences depart from those of non-disabled athletes. Our participants described feeling isolated because most people do not understand the classification system and how or why an athlete might be reclassified. They felt that others thought they must have been cheating or intentionally misrepresenting their impairment status and that they had finally been 'caught out' by the classifiers. Whereas an injured athlete might reasonable expect sympathy, these para-athletes felt shamed and this further contributed to the trauma of their experience.

The para-athletes also made many comments about how their NGB responded when they were declassified. The para-athletes perceived that their NGBs were unfamiliar with retirements dues to classification issues (as there is no equivalent in 'able-bodied sport') and thus under prepared to support para-athletes in these situations. While one para-athlete reported being initially angry with her association for their lack of support, in the interview, she reflected that the situation was probably new to her NGB as well. She said:

I think at the time I was all sort of emotional but looking back rationally I think well actually they didn't really know what to do either. They had no mechanisms in place for transitions [due to declassification]. And really I suppose they did the best they could. It wasn't what I needed at the time. But I would really like it to get better for others in that position because I would hate for them to go through what I did.

The examples offered illuminate the need for retirement research that is para-sport specific. The existing literature addresses forced retirements but does not explain the roles and responsibilities of sport federations with regards to supporting declassified athletes. The research also confirms earlier theorizing that research conducted with able-bodied athletes cannot simply be generalized to understand the experiences of para-athletes (Legg & Wheeler, 1998).

The Professionalization of Para-Sport and Implications for Para-athlete Retirement

Athletes are not just pushed from sport and/or pulled to pursue other opportunities. As previously stated, Fernandez et al. (2006) has defined *anti-push* factors as an attachment to the current situation and *anti-pull* factors as related to perceived risks about future situations. Anti-push and anti-pull factors were most evident when comparing and contrasting the interview and survey responses by cohort. Para-athletes in Cohorts 1 and 2 described a Paralympic sport system that had limited funding, infrastructure, programming and support services. Subsequently, many of these participants reported that they had struggled to stay in sport and that they were often working or studying in addition to training. As one athlete described it:

You just fit in training when you could and hoped that you [did] more than the other countries. It was just part-time, fit it in when you can at university. Because it wasn't

really fully funded and whilst we were committed to it, it was a bit more than a hobby but not quite a career.

The participants' descriptions of a Paralympic Movement under resourced through the 1980s and into the 1990s, and then a gradual build towards increased support leading to the Sydney Games in 2000, is supported by accounts of when leading Paralympic nations such as Great Britain, Australia and Canada started investing in para-sport (Hammond & Jeanes, 2017; Howe, 2007).

In contrast, Cohort 3, the group of para-athletes that competed in London 2012, described a Paralympic sport system that was highly developed with significant funding. Although participants spoke of the advent of funding for para-sport in terms of 'progress' (i.e., a growing public awareness of and financial support for Paralympic sport), they also referenced intensified demands on the athletes. This change in the Paralympic sport system had implications on para-athletes retirement decisions. Some athletes in Cohort 3 described the changes as placing undue stress on them (and their families) ultimately contributing to their decision to leave sport. For example, in an interview, one athlete had this to say about the final year leading to London 2012:

The culture in [the sport organisation] is incredibly results oriented. Of course in competition that is expected but on one level it takes the human factor out of it completely. For me with the structure of the coaching set up, the rigidity of the coaching set up – this took the fun and excitement out of the sport completely. I felt like I was just a number on the spreadsheets. Suddenly it wasn't about myself. It was about getting results for other people, people I didn't like... if you're not really enjoying the training then the training is not going to be effective and you're not going to get results and everything kind of goes from there really.

This athlete did attempt to continue in sport past London 2012 but retired a few months later when he realized the sport culture was unlikely to change in the next Paralympic cycle.

Yet other para-athletes in Cohort 3 benefitted from the increased funding, support and structure. Freed from the need to earn income from other sources, they were able to focus on their athletic careers. When discussing their decisions to retire from sport, these para-athletes were more likely to report anti-push and anti-pull factors. Rather than struggling to stay in sport, these participants *struggled to leave*. Whereas Cohorts 1 and 2 left sport because they could not afford to keep competing, Cohort 3 was concerned they could not afford to retire. For example, one Paralympian who competed in London spoke of ‘taking a pay cut’ when he retired from sport and delaying his decision until he had confirmed employment:

I don't think I would have retired unless I had a job 'cause we had a baby so I wouldn't have been able to. I would've carried on doing [my sport] until I had a job or an income so that I could retire... When I was competing I was quite well paid... if you're in that position its quite difficult to retire...

While concerns about being able to financial support oneself after leaving sport has been reported in the literature on able-bodied athletes (Agnew & Drummond, 2015; Aquilina, 2013; Fernandez et al., 2006), it has not been a large part of the discussion when researching para-athletes' experiences as, until very recently, Paralympians ‘earning a living’ in sport have been few and far between.

Challenges and Discrimination When Leaving Sport and Entering the Workforce

Coupled with concerns about losing their income from sport was uncertainty about future employment options. One reason the more recently retired Paralympic athletes felt apprehension regarding life after sport was their relative lack of work experience. Ten of the 14 para-athletes in Cohort 1 reported that they worked full-time while competing compared to only 5 of the 22 para-athletes in Cohort 3. Furthermore, over a third of the athletes in Cohort 3 reported they had zero work experience when their sport careers ended. Although lacking formal work experience might be a concern for any elite athlete (Aquilina, 2013), there were two ways in which this impacted para-athletes differently compared to able-bodied peers. First, despite laws and policies in the UK such as the 'two tick guaranteed interview scheme' (or more recently the 'Disability Confident scheme') and the Equality Act 2010, people with disabilities still face greater rates of unemployment and underemployment (Connor, 2010). It is reported that, in the UK, 48 per cent of disabled adults age 16 to 64 are employed and compared to over 80 per cent of non-disabled adults (Mirza-Davis & Brown, 2016, December 14). Athletes were certainly aware of this and some (though certainly not all) understood that the very impairment that had enabled them to pursue a career as an international athlete would be a barrier when trying to enter the post-sport workforce. In the survey one para-athlete wrote:

There may be relative parity between Olympic and Paralympic teams within sport, but that does not relay to the non-disabled and disabled employees in the open market. There are extra hurdles that any person with a disability has to jump [through] to get to the same place as a person without a disability.

Suggesting the significance of disablism and ableism for para-sport athletes, the concern that participants had about being discriminated against in the employment hiring process led to the

second point. Within disability communities there is considerable debate about if and when to disclose to a potential employer that one has a disability (Charmaz, 2010; Lindsay, Cagliostro, & Carafa, 2017). However, while some individuals may be able to decide when and if to disclose their disability, the para-athletes interviewed felt they did not have this option. As one participant explained:

I had more success with kind of major corporate [companies] than I did with small business. Probably because major corporate have a diversity department and are used to dealing with this and have HR teams that are trained and a smaller organisation is just put off instantly about the thought of disability and they maybe never met anybody with a disability... I pretty much had to disclose because if I removed [my sport] from my CV there would have been very little on it and they would have just thought I was incredibly lazy.

Accordingly, some para-athletes felt they were in a bind in that they were relying on their experience in sport and their athletic curriculum vitae to secure them employment after sport but by highlighting their para-sport experience so they were de facto disclosing their disability status and opening themselves up to discrimination in the employment sector. Although it would be clearly egregious to suggest that people with disabilities do not encounter discrimination while in sport (see Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015), many participants did contrast their experiences within the 'sport bubble' (Smith et al., 2016) to their experiences in other contexts. While many of the participants had been recruited to sport because they had an impairment that qualified them for a particular para-sport or filled a niche on the squad, outside of sport their impairments were more likely to be impediments to finding a job. When asked what they had learned from their own

experiences of looking for employment, several interviewees referenced the importance of finding mentors who were also disabled and in the workforce, and/or accessing schemes that assist disabled people to find employment.

Suggestions to Better Prepare Para-Athletes for Sport Retirement

As previously stated, the reasons that athletes ended their sport careers were complex, with some leaving sport voluntarily and at a time of their own choosing and others being forced from sport for reasons such as injury, deselection or declassification. Yet even if participants could not have foretold the time or circumstances of their retirement, they all knew that sport “was not a lifetime career.” The extent to which this understanding influenced how they prepared for life after sport was varied. Some participants felt that it was important to pursue education and employment opportunities even whilst pursuing their sport goals. One athlete spoke of continuing her education and then part-time employment even as she trained towards the Paralympics:

When I was going for the Paralympic team I was doing a part time job on the side. Then that [sport career] finished and I could go straight into the other thing and make that a career for the rest of my life.

However, most participants stated that it was only when they saw signs that their sport careers were coming to an end that they gave serious consideration to what else they might do. Consistent with the current research with able-bodied athletes, for many athletes these signs included realizing that their best performances were behind them, that upcoming athletes were challenging their records or that they had achieved many of their sport goals and the opportunities for new achievements were limited (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). The issue of what actions para-athletes took when faced with a growing awareness that the end of their sport careers

was imminent, was an interesting one. A few explained that even though they knew the transition was coming they greatly underestimated how difficult it would be. A para-athlete had this to say:

Interviewer: You said you were thinking of retirement before London. Was there any sort of long term planning happening?

Athlete: Not really. I kind of assumed that because I had a degree and a master's degree that I was quite employable. No, I think it was probably quite naïve... I just assumed that I was going to be in a relatively good position in terms of employment but I hadn't really thought much about it... I probably should have.

Other participants described feeling panicked and applying for many jobs despite not wanting to work in that field or not having the qualifications.

Four of the para-athletes interviewed were more proactive in their planning. These athletes made strategic decisions to turn their casual public speaking engagements and volunteer activities into post-sport careers. One para-athlete described how he managed to balance the two careers until the speaking career was able to support him full-time:

When I was swimming it was absolutely a priority and I would take some speaking engagements when they came as long as it fitted in with my programme and my coach was okay with it. So I took a small number of jobs really throughout the year. So then when I retired – well in fact even before I retired- I was able to take bookings in a different way... I remember being in the Olympic [Paralympic] village in Athens and going and checking my email and taking bookings for when I retired. So it wasn't overly complicated and I was still able to be focused on what I was doing as an athlete but still a step quite

comfortably into that work situation. But that wasn't a luck thing – that was from being organised.

Another difference observed was in the para-athletes use of PL support services. While 'athlete advisors' have been active within the UK sport system for many years, it was after the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics that PL was formalized as a unit within the EIS and PL support provided as a core service to elite GB athletes (J. Harrison, Performance Lifestyle Lead at the EIS, personal communication, October 12th, 2017). Thus it was most commonly Cohort 3 that spoke of having interactions with PL advisors and the role these practitioners had in supporting them in their transition out of sport. Those who had had ongoing contact with PL advisors throughout their sport careers were most likely to comment on the positive impact that this had had on their transition out of sport and into employment. In contrast, those who had had less interactions with PL practitioners during their careers, reported that they did not access PL services during the retirement process or, if they did access, they felt PL practitioners had little to offer them. As one participant explained:

I meet with Performance Lifestyle a couple of times and they sent me examples of CVs and sent a few emails round... I wish on the support side it had started years ago and years ago we had sat down and gone 'right – you might chose when you want to leave sport... or you could get an injury and you don't know what's around the corner, so while it's really really important to keep training it's really really important to think about what you want to do afterwards.' I really wish we had that conversation and then I really wish I'd have got mechanisms in place - because in the moment I had no clue what I was doing, I had no clue what to do.

In addition to learning about the experience of already retired para-athletes, a key focus of this research was to understand how to improve the future retirements of current para-athletes. With this in mind, participants were asked what advice they would give to para-athletes still in sport and what could be done to better support athletes during this time. The overwhelming majority of participants stated that they had started thinking about and planning for sport retirement too late. This theme was named ‘starting with the end in mind’ to signal that although leaving sport might be the final transition in the sport career as an elite athlete, planning for it needs to start when the athlete first transitions *into* the high performance system. It is also interesting to note that while much of the advice included recommendations that athletes should be studying, working or volunteering during the sport careers, several participants believed this would not have been endorsed by their own sport organizations and that their own coaches, managers and other sport staff had discouraged them from engaging in other pursuits. This finding can contribute to the growing body of literature exploring the experiences of athletes who pursue ‘dual careers’ (ie. work or study whilst in sport) and the challenges encountered by athletes who go this route (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tshube & Feltz, 2015).

Conclusions

Speaking in public for the first time since her recent appointment as chairperson of UK Sport, Katherine Grainger declared that “transition is the biggest challenge of the moment” and that those involved in the high performance sport sector needed to take immediate action to better support athletes to cope with life after sport (Rumsby, 2017, May 9). However, in order for these actions to equitably benefit *all elite athletes* leaving sport, there is a need to ensure that para-

athletes are considered in the design and delivery of initiatives and support services. As stated in the introduction, to date the existing research on athletic retirement has almost exclusively focused on able-bodied athletes with assumptions made that the findings are transferable to para-sport. With the aim of examining the experiences of Paralympic athletes and the subsequent implications of their experiences, we set out for the first time since important changes have been made to para-sport to survey and interview retired para-athletes .

Adding to the existing literature on the common reasons athletes leave sport (Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Taylor & Olgivie, 1994) and the implications of voluntary or involuntary retirements (Alfermann et al., 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lavalley et al., 1997; Taylor & Olgivie, 2001), we identified reasons for retirement that are unique to para-sport and related to the classification process. We also revealed support for the ‘quintuplet jeopardy’ proposed by Wheeler and colleagues (1996, 1999). Specifically, we identified how issues associated with the progression of certain types of impairment can force some para-athletes to leave sport sooner than they otherwise would (dealing and coping with original disability and aging with a disability), while concerns about employment opportunities and discrimination in the workforce can lead athletes to overstay in sport (financial and employment related issues). Moreover, we confirmed what others have previously theorized (Wheeler et al., 1996, 1999; Legg & Wheeler, 1998; Martin, 1996, 1999, 2017), that the context of the Paralympic Movement has changed considerably since its inception in the early 1960s and this has implications on the transitions out of sport of para-athletes. Whereas earlier generations of Paralympians struggled to find time to train while working or studying and to pay for the costs of their sport participation, the most recent cohort of para-athletes has access to funding but struggles to find time to get work experience or complete their education. While few are questioning that the recent

‘professionalisation’ of disability sport is a positive step in terms of greater equality in the treatment of Olympic and Paralympic athletes, this research reminds us that high performance environments can have a negative effect on the wellbeing of individual athletes in terms of their future life prospects and progression into a new life phase.

Building on the research of Martin (1996, 1999) and Legg and Wheeler (1998), we also asked how can sport practitioners better support para-athletes so that they thrive whilst in sport *and* after their sport careers end? To this question we propose three responses, all of which are pertinent for sport psychologists, PL advisors and researchers working in disability sport to better understand retirement, coping, wellbeing and identity. Firstly, while *most* para-athletes leave sport for similar reasons as able-bodied athletes, there needs to be better mechanisms in place to identify para-athletes at risk for being pushed from sport due to classification issues. Because these instances are relatively rare, individual NGBs may not see the need to have a plan to support an athlete in this situation. But these types of forced retirements are not outliers. As long as there is a classification system, there will be athletes found to be ineligible (either because of changes in their impairments or because of changes in what impairments are deemed ‘classifiable’). Every UK Paralympic sport has access to a Performance Lifestyle advisor that supports and mentors athletes throughout their careers (Ashfield, Harrison & Giles, 2017). Our research suggests that these advisors are ideally positioned to identify these athletes who, for a variety of reasons, may be heading towards particularly difficult or traumatic retirements. If, for example, PL advisors become aware of athletes at risk for declassification, they can mobilize the high performance sport sector (including sport psychologists) to support to athletes. Furthermore, practitioners can draw on the findings of this study when developing processes and resources to aid NGBs to navigate

events such as (de)classification and to understand the impacts of these events on the psychosocial wellbeing of para-athletes.

Secondly, our research highlights the need for more assistance in preparing athletes for post-sport employment. While many of the athlete employment and professional development initiatives currently in place and being developed are open to para-athletes, there are further steps that could be taken. For example, participants spoke of facing discrimination when trying to enter the workforce. Not only was this discrimination disturbing in and of itself but they were also ill-prepared for it because of the relative equity between Olympic and Paralympic athletes that they had experienced whilst in the high performance sport system. Sessions informing para-athletes of the various laws and legislations that protect equality in hiring and interview processes and when negotiating terms of employment and promotion would be very beneficial. Participants also stated that they felt there would be value in creating opportunities for para-athletes (at all stages of their athletic careers) to network with and be mentored by disabled people who are employed. Practical information on disability employment schemes, and understanding and managing disability benefits payments (termed 'Personal Independence Payments' in the UK) could be useful to para-athletes preparing to leave sport. Moreover, given that para-athletes can be largely unaware of the high levels of discrimination disabled people daily face (Smith et al., 2016), raising their awareness of possible oppression when retired along with sharing strategies about how to challenge discrimination could be useful. In light of calls for sport psychology practitioners to directly engage with such social justice concerns (Schinke et al., 2015), and the work that PL practitioners do, these groups have much to contribute to such awareness raising and strategy building.

Thirdly, practitioners working in the elite sport sector have an important function to play in ‘future proofing’ para-athletes. In our findings it was clear that para-athletes who started thinking about life after sport sooner rather than later had more positive experiences. Yet despite knowing that their sport careers would not last forever, many failed to take steps that would prepare them to cope with retirement and later regretted that they had not been more proactive. Sport psychologists, PL advisors and other members of the sport system have contact with athletes at different stages during their careers and can play a key role in starting these conversations sooner. Moreover, this research can be a resource to practitioners when they encounter athletes who are resistant to thinking about retirement or coaches and other sport staff who feel that working or studying will detract from an athlete’s ability to focus on their sport performance.

In addition to enhancing the support and services available to para-athletes, this research expands our understandings of the context in which disability sport is practiced and how this has changed over the years. When the Paralympic Movement moved from an era of participation to an era of high performance decisions were made to ‘integrate’ with the mainstream (ie. Olympic and able-bodied) sport sector (Hammond & Jeanes, 2017; Howe, 2007). This study contributes to a small but growing body of empirical work exploring how this integration is experienced by individual para-athletes and the implications it has on their athletic and disabled identities (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Smith & Bundon, 2018; Smith et al., 2016). Our findings make a novel contribution by highlighting how this move towards integration has provided para-athletes with more access to funding, coaching, sport science, sport medicine and other related services but has equally placed new constraints including expectations that they will train full-time, relocate to centralized training locations and forego other pursuits. It also illustrates that the unique needs of para-athletes are not always being met by a sport sector that was largely designed for able-bodied

athletes. For example, while there is currently *equality* in the support being provided to Olympic and Paralympic athletes preparing to leave sport and enter the workforce, there will only be *equity* when those supports include a consideration of the unique retirement forced by classification issues and the discrimination para-athletes are likely to encounter when pursuing employment. Addressing these issues and others is part of the sport sector's duty of care to para-athletes and PL advisors and sport psychologists play an essential role in creating a system that ensures athletes thrive in sport and after sport.

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