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MOVING INTO AN ACTIVE FUTURE

Supporting Lifetime Physical Activity for Student-Athletes

by Melinda Smith, M.S., CSCS; Erin Reifsteck, Ph.D.; and Diane Gill, Ph.D., FACSM

Apply It!

- Recognize that student-athletes face unique challenges in transitioning to lifetime physical activity beyond college athletics.
- Collaborate with university athletics departments to facilitate transition programs for student athletes in their final year to provide an opportunity for open discussion and goal setting for the future.
- Connect student-athletes with community resources during their transition out of college.
- Provide former student-athletes with opportunities to experience new forms of physical activity within supportive group settings.

Key words: Student-Athletes,
Transitions, Motivation, Physical
Activity, Basic Psychological Needs

INTRODUCTION

Focused training, exciting competition, tailored coaching, and supportive teammates define the physical activity experiences of many college student athletes (SAs). These factors provide essential motivation for SAs within their athletic pursuits. However, when the final game, match, or meet is inevitably completed, SAs may feel like they have abruptly stumbled onto an unfamiliar path. Many years of prior sport-specific training may leave them feeling unprepared to transition to health-promoting lifetime activity. Former SAs demonstrate striking reductions in their physical activity volume when compared with current SAs, and some evidence suggests that former SAs may not be significantly more active or fitter than non-SA college alumni (1,2). Required practices, competitions, and off-season training programs ensure that SAs maintain high levels of physical activity during college, but SAs may need assistance

with transitioning to exercising independently after college in a less structured environment. With more than 480,000 SAs competing in NCAA sports each year (3)—more than 95% of whom will not continue their competitive athletic career at the next level—health and fitness professionals are positioned to play an important role in helping SAs transition to meaningful physical activity beyond competitive athletics. To do this effectively, health and fitness professionals must understand and address the unique challenges faced by former SAs. This includes recognition that SAs' past competitive sport experiences may not automatically prepare them for meaningful self-determined physical activity in the future.

TRANSITIONAL CHALLENGES FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

During their athletic careers, many SAs focus on physical training for performance and may not fully appreciate the value of activity for physical and psychological health (4). Focused year-round training for a specific sport can make transitioning to meaningful physical activity beyond graduation difficult (2). Although such a singular focus may promote success in college athletics, the intense demands of participation often prevent exploration of other activities (5).

Former SAs also may encounter challenges in moving beyond the controlled structure of college athletics, which includes prominent extrinsic motivators, such as recognition, scholarships, and playing time. If SAs also do not possess intrinsic motivation, transitional challenges are compounded because intrinsic motivation has been shown to foster continued engagement in physical activity and enhanced well-being (6). At the conclusion of the final competitive season, the natural disbanding of teams also can lead SAs to fear that the camaraderie and social support they experienced with teammates will not be replicated in the future (7). The prospect of having to engage in physical activity outside of a supportive team

environment can lead to feelings of isolation. Greater transition difficulty is especially likely when SAs' social network in college exclusively consists of teammates (5).

Recognizing challenges faced by SAs as they transition out of competitive sport can inform the development of practical and supportive strategies. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a particularly helpful framework for addressing these challenges by promoting meaningful physical activity for former SAs. SDT emphasizes cultivating personally determined reasons for physical activity, which promote enjoyment, positive emotions, and adherence (8). With the development of intrinsic motivation, which is the most autonomous form of motivation, physical activity is pursued because it is inherently pleasurable and challenging (9). Applying this framework, former SAs can be encouraged to discover new and engaging forms of physical activity as they transition from competitive college athletics.

SDT posits that satisfying three basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness is key to fostering self-determined motivation for physical activity (6). Although these needs may have been fulfilled to a varying extent during college athletics, new strategies are needed with other forms of physical activity after graduation. For example, SAs are highly skilled in their sport, but their feelings of competence may fade when opportunities to train for and compete in their chosen sport disappear. Furthermore, SAs who have experienced limited control over their physical activity choices while participating in college sports may find it difficult to adjust to their newfound autonomy. Final-year SAs we have worked with noted¹:

“I am not sure that I am going to enjoy not having anything to work toward. Or if I am going to feel like... what am I even doing?” “You can set goals for yourself, but [after college sports] you have to actually sit and think about them instead of just working to get faster, jump higher, move quicker.”

Sidebar 1: Case Study: Psychosocial impact of transition

As a former basketball player, Casey's memories of college revolve around focused training sessions with her coaches, bus rides with her teammates, and the thrill of competition in a packed gym. Basketball defined who she was and permeated the conversations that she had with friends and professors. In the weeks leading up to and then following graduation, Casey felt unsettled. Although she would be starting a new job that interested her, she sensed a void that had previously been filled with basketball. For the past 12 years, basketball had been a constant in her life. Her basketball career was successful and intense, but that was over, and she did not see how physical activity fit into her life without basketball.

Finally, feelings of belonging and connection with others were likely strengthened through membership on a college athletics team but may be threatened as teams disband after graduation. Transitioning SAs gave voice to this concern:

"I think it's going to be challenging to not be part of a team or something like that... and to find where else to put [your] energy."

"You just go from being around everybody all the time to... well at least for me, I am going to be by myself wherever I am at and will have to make that extra effort."

The impact of this transition is deeply personal for SAs, as highlighted in the following case study. Faced with the conclusion of her college career, Casey struggles to envision her life without competitive basketball (Sidebar 1).

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR HEALTH AND FITNESS PROFESSIONALS

Effective strategies must prepare SAs to enjoy and adhere to physical activity beyond college sport competition. Health and fitness professionals can play a unique role in implementing specific strategies designed to enhance former SAs' development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their pursuit of lifetime physical activity. Strategies that encourage the establishment of personal and meaningful reasons for physical activity develop motivation that is less characterized by external or internal pressure (9). Former SAs likely placed high personal expectations on their physical skills and fitness levels during college and

may feel pressure to meet these expectations as well as frustration when they are no longer able to (10). Health and fitness professionals can help transitioning SAs determine healthy thresholds for physical activity and encourage them to explore and integrate forms of activity that are intrinsically valuable and enjoyable. Transition programming that fosters self-determined motivation, community connections, and exposure to group exercise opportunities can support SAs in engaging in healthy, meaningful activity beyond college sports.

Transitioning to Self-Determined Physical Activity

Health and fitness professionals can collaborate with athletics departments to develop transitional programming that fosters SAs' physical activity and well-being as they approach graduation. In these programs, transitioning SAs have opportunities to share their concerns and brainstorm strategies for managing a future lifestyle that includes sustainable activity.

Transitional programming can be offered during the SAs' final college semester. Helping SAs recognize that moderate activity can facilitate physical and psychological health may encourage transitioning SAs to redefine what counts as exercise and look forward to their new autonomy.

Educational programs can support SAs in making a healthy transition by providing opportunities for group discussion, effective goal setting with related action plans, and exposure to lifetime physical activities (11). For example, the Moving On! program, which was developed using an SDT framework, incorporates guided lifetime physical activity demonstrations to help final-year SAs build competence and autonomy as they redefine physical activity for enjoyment and health enhancement (11). The program also fosters relatedness by using a group-based format where SAs can share their challenges, fears, expectations, and goals with peers. SAs who participated in this program explained the benefits of this type of approach:

“I think what I found the most helpful was being able to talk to other people who are going through the same thing... to hear what other people are trying for physical activity that is different.”

“Just being able to talk through that before you graduate is helpful. I also really liked the variety of physical activity that we did. I would not have pulled up a kickboxing video on my own and done that.”

Health and fitness professionals can use similar strategies when they work with former SAs one-on-one. These approaches include engaging former SAs in conversation about how they feel regarding the transition and supporting the establishment of new self-determined goals for future physical activity. These goals could include planning and preparing for a half marathon, fitness competition, or even a backpacking trip that spans several days. Nontraditional sports, such as mountain biking, trail running, or rock climbing also may provide challenging options for former SAs to build competence in new skills. Health and fitness professionals can assist former SAs in exploring sustainable physical activity options that they may not have considered during college. SAs we have worked with highlighted a variety of physical activity options that they could envision themselves trying in the future:

“I want to do hiking and walking and something with strength, but I don't like lifting weights, so yoga or Pilates or something relaxing.”

“I would love to try a body pump class with a group of friends or start training with a group for a triathlon.”

Community Connections

Allowing SAs to explore the future by discussing the transition process with others also can aid in successful movement beyond college sports (7). Health and fitness professionals can

facilitate meaningful connections between former SAs and other clients. Emphasis on connecting former SAs with others who have been through the transition process could provide valuable support. Those who have successfully transitioned out of college athletics could share their own personal challenges and joys in beginning careers, starting families, and discovering new outlets for physical activity. They also can dialogue on the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and strategies for accessing local health and fitness resources. When working with former SAs, health and fitness professionals might encourage connections with current clients of similar interests to foster greater community, which may lead to continued engagement in their exercise programming. In addition, health and fitness professionals might host seminars and open-house events geared specifically to recent SA alumni. Building relationships with local college and university athletics departments could provide health and fitness professionals with opportunities to discuss strategies for transitioning to an active lifestyle with SAs in the months leading up to their graduation.

Group Exercise Opportunities

Most fitness centers already offer group exercise classes, and this existing structure can provide an opportunity for former SAs to enjoy quality fitness instruction, discover new options for continued physical activity, and build a sense of team with others in their classes. Exposure to new forms of physical activity can promote autonomy and competence because former SAs feel more equipped to pursue personally meaningful options. Former SAs may have had little exposure to other forms of physical activity outside of their competitive sport. Health and fitness professionals can invite former SAs to experiment with different activities because without previous exposure, it is difficult to determine preferences or quality of personal experiences (9). By establishing relationships with local colleges and universities, health and fitness professionals

could offer on-campus exercise classes for final-year SAs. These connections can bridge the transition for SAs who also may then be more likely to become clients at local fitness centers after graduation.

While providing foundational fitness benefits, group exercise classes also can help former SAs develop new physical activity skills. With supportive instruction, there are opportunities for participants to make choices in how exercises are completed. Group classes also provide positive social support. SAs should be encouraged to choose classes that interest them and to build relationships with others in their classes. Possible group exercise class options include Pilates (Figure), yoga, tai-chi, taekwondo, high-intensity interval training, Zumba, indoor cycling, and aquatics. These forms of exercise are popular choices among adults, and participation opportunities are easy to locate. In addition, as new forms of physical activity for most former SAs, they do not carry expectations for high-level performance.

Instruction should emphasize mindfulness, enjoyment, and modifications tailored to accommodate skill level and potential chronic injuries of former SAs. When introducing these new physical activity opportunities, health and fitness professionals should be aware that lifetime physical activity among former SAs may be impacted by the recurrent physical and psychological consequences of sport-related injuries (12). It is important that activities are appropriately modified to avoid exacerbating injury risks. Health and fitness professionals who are willing to explore new activity options with former SAs could help reduce functional limitations and promote better quality of life (12).

Sidebar 2. Case Study: Experience physical activity competence, autonomy, and relatedness

For several months after graduation, Casey did not pursue any physical activity because she felt “burned out” from college sports. As time passed, she began to experience feelings of mild anxiety and physical fatigue. When a friend invited her to try a free kickboxing class at a local fitness center, she hesitantly agreed. During the class, Casey was surprised by how much she enjoyed learning new skills and the opportunity to exercise at an intensity that she controlled. The kickboxing instructor talked with Casey after the class and offered her a chance to try out various group exercise classes at the fitness center for a lower cost over the next month. As she attended different classes, Casey decided to continue with kickboxing as a

Sidebar 3: Case study; Moving into an active future

As she continues on her journey, Casey is learning to value physical activity for personal enjoyment and health, stress management, and social connection with others. Casey’s experiences as a competitive basketball player will always remain an important part of her identity. However, she has now broadened her interests and feels confident in her ability to continue participating in physical activity. Casey hopes to share her own journey to encourage others and is currently pursuing opportunities to mentor other recent student-athlete alumni in her community.

Instructors can facilitate a positive group climate and provide resources for continued involvement in lifetime activities, such as a schedule of upcoming classes, tours of local green spaces, and online video links. Health and fitness professionals might promote discounted group exercise packages to recent SA alumni, allowing them to sample different classes and make choices as they discover new options. As reflected in the case study, health and fitness professionals have a unique opportunity to positively influence the transition experience of former SAs. Casey’s interactions with a local fitness instructor support her physical activity competence, autonomy, and relatedness in new ways (Sidebar 2).

COMMITTING TO CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

By recognizing the unique experiences of SAs, health and fitness professionals are better equipped to help transitioning and former SAs find enjoyable and sustainable physical activity. When physical activity involvement aligns with personal values, goals, and needs, participants are more likely to derive meaning from it (8). Health and fitness professionals can support

former SAs' self-determination for future physical activity through a collaborative and holistic approach. Although appreciating the unique experiences and fitness benefits gained from competitive college athletics participation, transitioning SAs also should feel empowered to pursue meaningful physical activity for their future. In the conclusion of the case study, Casey feels motivated to move into an active future as an alumnus after receiving personalized support through her transition (Sidebar 3). She also now considers ways to share her own physical activity transition experiences with other SAs.

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Former student-athletes face unique challenges in transitioning to lifestyle physical activity, including loss of extrinsic motivators, disbanding of teams, and limited exposure to activities beyond their sport. With an emphasis on enhancing physical activity competence, autonomy, and relatedness, health and fitness professionals can support student-athletes in their transition to a physically active lifestyle beyond college. Suggested strategies include offering transitional programs for student athletes during their final year, fostering community connections, and exposing former student-athletes to varied lifetime activities within supportive group classes.