

# Developmental experiences related to retirement from sport: insights from Japan

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## Abstract

Psychological support systems for retiring elite athletes can assist them in making career transitions out of sport. The purpose of this study is to further advance research in this area, with a specific focus the developmental experiences related to the sport career transition process in Japan. One retired Olympic medalist was analyzed with a life story analysis method. The findings highlight the psychological difficulties experienced by retiring athletes and the system requirements to help them make an optimal transition.

Keywords: career transition, athletic identity, elite athlete

51 Developmental experiences related to retirement from sport: Insights from Japan

52 Retirement is perhaps the only inevitability in elite sport. However, the primary focus  
53 for most sport organizations is to optimize performance, so the system tends to neglect what  
54 happens to athletes when they retire (Lavallee, Park, & Taylor, 2014). This lack of support  
55 has the potential to lead to a range of adjustment difficulties for retiring athletes, including  
56 psychological adjustment.

57 A recent systematic review by Park, Lavallee, & Tod (2012) investigated what  
58 percentage of athletes experience psychological adjustment difficulties following retirement  
59 from sport. The study found that across 126 published studies and 13,511 participants, 16%  
60 (1,768) athletes reported career transition difficulties. Park et al. also observed that most  
61 studies (i.e., 68%) have reported that their participants expressed negative emotions, feelings  
62 of loss, identity crises, and distress when they ended their career. The experience of loss, in  
63 particular, has been a focus for sport career transition practitioners and researchers (Lavallee  
64 et al., 2014).

65 Lavallee et al. (2012) have outlined a conceptual model of retirement from sport in an  
66 effort to gain a better understanding of the career termination process. In the model,  
67 psychological adjustment to athletic retirement is influenced by three interrelated factors. The  
68 first involves the causes of career termination, with a focus on voluntary and involuntary  
69 reasons for retirement. The second factor considers available coping resources for adaptation  
70 to career transition, including social support. The third factor in the model involves  
71 developmental experiences related to the adaptation process, focusing specifically on  
72 identity-related issues. As Lavallee et al. suggest, the conceptual model can assist  
73 organizations in developing effective support system as once specific retirement difficulties  
74 are demonstrated, appropriate psychological support can be recommended. At the present

75 time, however, there has been very little research conducted on the needs of retiring athletes  
76 and the system requirements to help them make an optimal transition.

77 In Japan, several studies have been conducted on the retirement experiences of elite  
78 athletes. Toyoda and Nakagomi (1996) found out that Japanese athletes faced some  
79 psychological difficulties following sport career termination. Nakagomi (2012) highlighted  
80 the risks associated with a strong and exclusive athletic identity for retiring Japanese athletes.  
81 A career assistance program, the Japan Career Academy (JCA), was started in 2008 to  
82 support Japanese Olympic athletes at retirement. Hong and Coffee (2018) recently  
83 investigated the features of the JCA and identified that, although it had strong occupational  
84 support provision, psychological supports for retiring athletes were not provided due to a lack  
85 of qualified practitioners.

86 Two recent studies in Japan by Oulevey and colleagues (Oulevey, Tsutsui, &  
87 Kohtake, 2018; Oulevey, Lavalley, & Kohtake, 2020) have advanced research in the area  
88 through the testing of two of the three factors outlined in Lavalley et al.'s (2012) conceptual  
89 model of retirement from sport. Oulevey et al. (2018) surveyed 472 retired Japanese athletes  
90 who competed in either the Summer or Winter Olympics and found that individuals who  
91 retired voluntarily and experienced greater control over their reason to retire required less  
92 psychological adjustment than those who didn't. Some gender differences were identified in  
93 the research, with female athletes who competed in the Summer Olympics tending to require  
94 greater psychological adjustment. Oulevey et al.'s (2020) study extended this finding by  
95 assessing the different types of coping strategies needed by 44 Japanese female athletes who  
96 made a career transition out of elite sport. This research found that psychological stress  
97 accounted for 69% of all retirement-related coping needs.

98 The purpose of the present study is to further advance research in the area of  
99 retirement from sport, with a specific focus the developmental experiences related to the sport

100 career transition process in Japan. A life story analysis method (Sakurai, 2002) was adopted  
101 in order to examine the third and final factor in Lavalley et al.'s (2012) conceptual model,  
102 including identity-related issues. The study aimed to advance knowledge in relation to  
103 psychological support systems for retiring elite athletes.

## 104 Method

### 105 The Participant

106 One Olympic medalist (hereinafter referred to as "P") in synchronized swimming  
107 (hereinafter referred to as "Synchro") was interviewed. She was initially approached by the  
108 first author to participate in this study because she was a retired Olympic athlete. After  
109 explaining the purpose of the study and her broadly outlining her developmental experiences  
110 related to her career transition process as an elite athlete, we felt P's retirement story would  
111 help us achieve the study aim.

### 112 Procedure

113 A life story interview was conducted in a room of P's home. All data obtained from  
114 the one-on-one interview were tape-transcribed. A semi-structured interview guide was  
115 developed to ensure the freedom to change the expression and order of the questions  
116 according to the situation. The question items were designed based on the *Athletic Retirement*  
117 *Survey* (Alfermann et al., 2004).

### 118 Informed Consent

119 The purpose of the research and audio recording of the interview was explained to the  
120 participant prior to data collection, and consent was obtained. During the interview, the  
121 highest priority was given to respect human rights and ensure safety, such as guaranteeing the  
122 right to choose to stop participating in the research at P's own will. The participant was asked  
123 to confirm the content of the transcribed interview prior to data analysis. All verbatim quotes

124 included in this paper were also confirmed by P. This research was approved by the research  
125 ethics screening of the university to which the first author belongs.

## 126 Credibility

127 The main analyst (first author) is an expert in sport psychology and has over 20-years  
128 experience of research and practice in athletic retirement. This background allowed the  
129 research to be distinguished from other media interviews. An independent researcher  
130 confirmed the analysis process to verify if the first author's analysis was conducted from a  
131 consistent point of view. When different interpretations occurred, discussions were held until  
132 the opinions of both parties agreed to ensure certainty (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sakurai,  
133 2002). The independent researcher is an expert in sport psychology and has experience in  
134 qualitative research. During the interview, the interviewer (first author) asked questions in a  
135 non-directive manner so as not to induce the participant to speak. To secure credibility, the  
136 participant's own words were used in the analysis by considering the influence of the  
137 interviewer. However, a study limitation is that interview responses were originally  
138 transcribed in Japanese, and quotes were then translated into English.

## 139 Results and Discussion

140 P started participating in the sport of Synchro at the age of 6 and was influenced by  
141 her two sisters, who were already participating in Synchro. P participated in the Olympics at  
142 the age of 20 and won two medals. At the age of 23, P retired and experienced various careers  
143 such as going on to complete a master's degree at university, getting married and childbirth,  
144 and becoming a TV commentator. The present life story study identified 9 themes, including:  
145 1) Starting synchro; 2) Deepening commitment; 3) Competitive characteristics; 4) Sporting  
146 values; 5) Retirement difficulties; 6) Current challenges; 7) New values; 8) Transferable  
147 skills; and 9) Advice for the next generation.

## 148 Starting Synchro

149 *“I started Synchron at the age of 6 in the 1st grade of elementary school, or 7 years*  
150 *old. Then it was actually our three sisters. I am the youngest of the three sisters and*  
151 *my two sisters happened to go to a Synchron course there, and two sisters got in there.*  
152 *Well, my mom is a strange person, she thinks it's better doing something not everyone*  
153 *does than doing something everyone does, like swimming. Yes, then two older sisters*  
154 *did Synchron, and I'm a 5 year apart from my second sister. I started naturally looking*  
155 *at them.”*

156 P's reason why she started Synchron was not a self-motivated intention to do it. As the  
157 quote above indicated, it was largely influenced by her sisters, who started Synchron first. It  
158 can be said that the beginning of the relationship with Synchron for P was due to an extrinsic  
159 motivation. This type of motivation can be explained with self-determination theory of  
160 motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Her initial motivation was an extrinsic motivation with her  
161 family involvement as a social support.

#### 162 Deepening Commitment

163 *“There was one time I really wanted to quit at the beginning. It was when I moved*  
164 *from 6th grade to junior high school....It was a bit tough in the days when I didn't*  
165 *swim for 2 weeks. The fact that “a person who doesn't swim”. So, I thought going*  
166 *back. All came to me, so I went back. At that time, I realized that I can't continue*  
167 *unless the coach believes me. I'm really a false accusation. I don't remember doing*  
168 *that, but the coach said I did. No matter how much I love Synchron, I can't continue*  
169 *unless she believes me. So, I quit. But I loved Synchron so I went back. When I couldn't*  
170 *swim for two weeks, I realized that I really needed Synchron. I was really worried. I*  
171 *was in the middle of my adolescence. You know it was a tough time. The environment*  
172 *changed. Started going to a junior high school. In many ways, I felt that it was painful*  
173 *that I could not do Synchron. Yes, no matter what I did, it wasn't fun. Even when*  
174 *running in the track and field club. It was when I started the first grade in the junior*  
175 *high school. Then, I went back, well it was really fun.”*

176 P felt that she was not trusted by the coach so that decided to quit Synchron. While P  
177 was away from Synchron, she got involved in the track and field club for two weeks. This  
178 showed how important the trusting relationship with the coach was to P for continuing  
179 Synchron. However, for the two weeks away from Synchron, P felt that it was difficult to see  
180 herself without Synchron. P realized that she really liked and needed Synchron. The  
181 commitment to immerse herself in Synchron was growing, and at the same time, it is  
182 considered that her motivation was changed. This motivation shift can be explained with the  
183 self-determination continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Her motivation was shifted to integrated



184 regulation (she needed Synchro), then to intrinsic regulation (enjoying Synchro). Her athletic  
185 identity as a synchro swimmer began to be built around this period.

### 186 Competitive Characteristics

187 *“When I think of it now, I think I was very childish. I wonder if I could have been a*  
188 *little calmer and I could have thought in an adult's way or an adult's response. But*  
189 *you know, there were only zero or 100 at that time, don't you think so?”*

190 P was able to look back at herself objectively saying that she was childish and  
191 couldn't talk properly when her opinions differed from the coach's opinion. However, P still  
192 felt even now that she couldn't help acting like this. It is assumed that the expression "There  
193 was only zero or 100 at that time, don't you think?" is the feeling of asking the interviewer to  
194 understand. This kind of narrative with the generalization, “don't you think so?”, can be  
195 considered that P recognized the interviewer understood the model story, which was observed  
196 as being referred to the "model story of an athlete who lives in the Synchro world."  
197 Moreover, the expression, “zero or 100”, can be regarded as a sense of distance from  
198 Synchro. It can be imagined that there was no-halfway for P due to the strength of the  
199 commitment. This way of thinking can be read as “all-or-nothing thinking” in cognitive  
200 therapy (Beck, 1995) and, as such, can cause stress in life events such as at retirement.

201 *“Well, how do I say, you know, maybe it sounds bad, but I'm, as an athlete, I really*  
202 *felt like a machine. I am like a Swimming Machine. I was treated as a Swimming*  
203 *Machine. The machine is named “Athlete”. I was so sad that my opinion as a person*  
204 *was not respected or heard at all. To some extent, I thought I had been recognized as*  
205 *an athlete after overcoming both the Olympics and the World Championships. It is*  
206 *like a complete rejection.”*

207 The "swimming machine" is a metaphorical expression in that it does not move at her  
208 will. This can be one of the expressions that reflects the competitive characteristic of  
209 Synchro. Synchro is a closed-skill sport. It is important to complete the prescribed  
210 movements as practiced and to synchronize with others. It is very different from open-skill  
211 sport, such as soccer and basketball, where the situation changes on the spot and it is  
212 necessary to judge accordingly. Also, because of the characteristic of the sport being scored

213 by others, it can be summarized that the coach's evaluation becomes absolute, leading to the  
214 expression that the athlete is a swimming machine driven by the coach. For P, it seems that  
215 she started wanting to assert her opinions since she had achieved some results; however, the  
216 reality was different. Because she expected that her opinion could be listened by the coach, P  
217 was sad and ended up saying "I am like a Swimming Machine". At the same time, it can be  
218 said that a machine is highly accurate and will never betray control. The expression might be  
219 capturing herself as a synchronized swimmer who established a strong connection with the  
220 coach who was the pilot of the machine. The phrase "swimming machine" can be said to be a  
221 characteristic expression of athletic identity in terms of how she perceived herself. It is also  
222 assumed that thinking herself as a machine can be explained as a foreclosed athletic identity  
223 which often occurs among elite athletes and can lead to psychological adjustment difficulties  
224 (Brewer, et al, 1993, Lavalley & Anderson, 2000).

225 *"Even though I thought I did very well, the coach got mad at me. The score does not*  
226 *match. What is it? Sometimes when I didn't do well, the score was high. The coach*  
227 *praised me. That is, the thing I do and the result don't match. It is such a disgusting*  
228 *sport. At that time, I was really wondering what this was about."*

229 For example, in soccer, players can visually confirm the track of the ball kicked by  
230 the players. Even in gymnastics, a similar sport to Synchro as it is a scoring sport, it is  
231 possible to feel and visually check the quality of work by touching the ground. However, it  
232 can be assumed that it was a very difficult sport to check the performance by the Synchro  
233 swimmer, herself, as one's sense of performance and the evaluation of others may be  
234 different. Generally, in sport, the feeling of "I did it" is one of the great feelings; however, the  
235 feeling did not match the result nor coach's evaluation for P. That fact influenced her view of  
236 it being "a disgusting sport". Based on the phrase "at that time", it is believed that P now  
237 accepts and understands the characteristics of Synchro.

238 *"I know in my head that it's important to think I just do my best and it's OK if I think*  
239 *I did well. But you know, we are the people who are graded, so it's really important*  
240 *and sensitive about other's evaluation. I was just worried about what people thought*  
241 *about me."*

242 P knew that "the feeling of I did well" is important. But at the same time, P was very  
243 concerned about the evaluation of others because Synchro was a judging sport. Through  
244 Synchro, a sport in which one's feelings and others' evaluations often differ, the meaning of  
245 being oneself who cares about others' evaluations was captured. Nakagomi (2012) pointed  
246 out that elite athletes who had a strong athletic identity in adolescence would have  
247 psychological challenges at their retirement if they were not able to follow career choices  
248 which their surroundings offered. If P's thought of "sensitive about other's evaluation" was  
249 cultivated through Synchro, then it can be considered that this thought may negatively  
250 influence here psychological adjustment to retirement.

251 *"Perhaps until now, there were many people who taught me without me asking to*  
252 *teach. I was doing it even though I didn't like doing it. So, I think I didn't really ask*  
253 *for anything."*

254 The days P devoted herself to Synchro were with the strict coach's guidance, which  
255 meant that P was always with someone who taught her. There is also a competitive  
256 characteristic in Synchro, where the evaluation by others was important. And since P's  
257 training was usually for meeting the demands of coaches, P analyzed herself as having few  
258 experiences in seeking teaching from herself. Through Synchro, P captured her own  
259 tendencies of how she interacted with others.

#### 260 Sporting Values

261 *"Well, I am very weak. My mind, kind of my mental, my mind is weak. I'm influenced*  
262 *easily and becomes lazy. Well, basically I just don't want to lose against myself."*

263 Based on the self-awareness, it was shown that P valued "I wouldn't lose to myself".  
264 It can be said that P was always living a life that was not easy. Perhaps P was able to move  
265 toward autonomy because she could recognize herself as a person who wanted to enjoy  
266 herself without being overconfident.

267 *"I skipped some training. When I was young. But, when I was young, I didn't go to*  
268 *the training several times. But the feeling is uncomfortable. When you skip the*  
269 *training, I can't help thinking. Ah, they are now training, maybe this is the time*  
270 *started the warm up, now they are doing a swimming menu... Now they are doing*

271 *routine training. Maybe you know right? You can't help thinking each minute. Not fun*  
272 *at all. So, I realized at the age of being in an elementary school, it is refreshing to go*  
273 *and do a hard practice."*

274 P had the experience of "skipping the training" when she was young. And, at that  
275 time, P felt that skipping training was neither uncomfortable nor enjoyable, so that by the  
276 time when P was in elementary school, she ended up having the notion that "it is refreshing to  
277 go and do a hard practice". It is assumed that the kind of notion led her commit to Synchro  
278 and developed her athletic identity. Unlike the fact that adults simply say, "Don't skip  
279 training", P realized it by herself based on her own emotional experiences. So that P was  
280 grown up to become a voluntarily training athlete. Moreover, the expression of "Maybe you  
281 know right?", can be explained that the reference to the "model story of a player who lives in  
282 "the Synchro world" was also observed here, and the interviewer was asked to understand.

283 *"I would think that there is no point unless you win. But not only winning. Winning is*  
284 *not enough. Winning with the coach's OK sign is important. So even when I win, if the*  
285 *coach doesn't look happy, of course I try to win though, but then I have no clue. In*  
286 *myself, sometimes I have the feeling that I swam very well. So, when my feeling and*  
287 *evaluation match, I have great feeling of achievement. But, somehow there are quite a*  
288 *few things that I do not feel clear in myself."*

289 P believed that it would be meaningless if she didn't win. At the same time, it was  
290 important for P to win with the coach's "OK sign". This is considered to indicate again that it  
291 is unique sport in which athletes cannot check their performances. Therefore, P can achieve a  
292 sense of accomplishment only when three points were established; winning, the "OK sign"  
293 from her coach, and her own feelings. It is assumed that P was not only committing to  
294 Synchro but also to her coach. It can be assumed that it would be psychologically difficult for  
295 P if her decision of career termination and career choice after retirement were not accepted by  
296 her coach. The similar case was seen in the previous research. Relationship with surroundings  
297 after retirement is one of the stressors among female elite athletes, and "People around me  
298 dictate my future" was one of the stressors. (Oulevey et al., 2020).

299 *"It's just like a difference between professional baseball players and Olympic*  
300 *athletes, Cirque is 365days. They have a day off two times a week though. But within*

301 *that, if you hit 30%, it's good. But, for the Olympics, you see, it's different. It's only*  
302 *once in 4 years and it's only 5minutes or 3minutes that you really need to focus.*  
303 *Extremely. You know? That's different."*

304 After retired from Synchro, P worked at Cirque du Soleil for few years and performed  
305 in their Las Vegas show as a professional (a salary paid) Synchro swimmer. Comparing to  
306 her experience as a show performer, P explained the difference between an Olympic Synchro  
307 athlete and a show performer. The Olympics is held only once every four years, but the Las  
308 Vegas show was held every day. P thought that she needed to focus extremely when she was  
309 an Olympic athlete.

310 *"It's not being perfect. Rather, I always want to aim higher. I want to go higher. The*  
311 *desire to be strong is extremely high. The desire is really big."*

312 The expression "I always want to aim higher " showed a strong desire to set endless  
313 goals and continue to pursue better things. This is thought to lead to the expression " The  
314 desire is really big".

315 *"I have the personality to drive myself hard. I feel I have to. Otherwise I can't do*  
316 *anything. So, I need to put myself in a tough situation. Otherwise I can't start doing*  
317 *things. That's me."*

318 P analyzed herself that she could not move forward unless she put herself in a tough  
319 situation. In other words, it can be said that P was able to drive herself even in a tough  
320 situation. Moreover, P was also able to see the tough situation as if she had created it. This  
321 kind of a coping strategy, reappraisal (changing the way a situation is viewed), is used  
322 frequently by elite athletes. (Uphill & Jones, 2012). Because of this self-awareness, it seems  
323 that P knew what to do when she was in a tough situation during her athletic career.

#### 324 Retirement Difficulties

325 *"I had huge pride at the beginning after retired. You see, in the Synchro world, I was*  
326 *a top. I had strange pride of myself used to be a top in the Synchro world, so that I*  
327 *couldn't say I don't understand honestly when I don't understand. I entered the TV*  
328 *world at first. I could have asked to get taught if I don't understand. But I tried to fix*  
329 *it by myself. It was tough. It was really tough. Then, I can't show my weaknesses or*  
330 *can't show my weak points. I felt I was so alone. Long time. But, you see I have pride.*  
331 *So, the ideal in me is really high. In everything. Even as a TV reporter, TV*  
332 *commentator, in myself, my ideal image was so high. This is good though, but then*  
333 *after all, my ability is not good at all. The gap was tough at the first year. I was a TV*

334 *commentator once a week. Every time on the way back home in the taxi, I got very*  
335 *depressed. Cried going home. Really. It was really tough."*

336 P was very depressed every time after finishing her job, and it was really tough.

337 However, P was not able to cope with the feeling by asking for help. P had a self-image  
338 associated with being on the top in the world of Synchro. And the pride with her self-image  
339 prevented her from asking for help. P is thought to be categorized an athlete who has "the  
340 Olympic self-image" (Petitpas et al., 1992). Petitpas et al. (2000) pointed out that the athletes  
341 with the Olympic self-image may have developed a sense of entitlement, and this expression  
342 of entitlement may be covering up feelings of fear or insecurities about lacking the skills  
343 necessary to become an elite performer in another career. It is assumed that P's case is  
344 similar. It is also considered that P had an irrational belief, "Absolute must's and should's" in  
345 Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT; Ellis & MacLaren, 1998) such as "I should do  
346 well in other world than sports", "I should solve problems by myself", "I shouldn't get taught  
347 by others", and "I shouldn't show my weaknesses". Because of these irrational beliefs, P  
348 ended up deciding to act alone.

349 *"After all, when I retired, I wonder why all people in the world aren't working so*  
350 *hard. Why these people, they are saying they can't they can't when they are not*  
351 *working hard enough. I really don't get it. So? Well, then you just do it. Why you*  
352 *don't? I was really wondering why."*

353 The criteria and the definition of "working hard" would be different depending on  
354 each person and each situation. However, it is considered that her firm definition of "work  
355 hard" had been completed from the experience of spending time with her teammates who  
356 aimed to participate in the Olympics and won medals during her career as an athlete.  
357 Therefore, it seems that P applied her own definition to all people immediately after  
358 retirement, and P evaluated people as "they are not doing their best" from the gap with her  
359 own definition. It suggests that P was confused and irritated by the gap. It can be said that  
360 people who interacted with P changed through the retirement, and P felt the difference in the

361 common sense between in her community during her athletic career and in others. It would be  
362 difficult for P to get a social support from others with her feeling above.

363 *“How do I say, really, I have to control my energy low. I shouldn’t show my feeling*  
364 *out. Have to live without letting out of my feelings. I have to be gray. Gray color. I*  
365 *have to act like this. You know even if I tell them, no one understands. That’s it. Okay*  
366 *okay, maybe that’s the way it is. That is to become an adult. Wow, what is it?*  
367 *Somehow, it seems that people have to walk with the same pace in the society. You*  
368 *have to adjust.”*

369 P uses the phrase “act”. It seems that P felt the need to live in a “grey” (not black or  
370 white, but rather in the middle) self, which is different from her true self. However, P thought  
371 that her feelings were not understood by others, and convinced herself that it meant becoming  
372 an adult and she tried to keep pace with the people in the society. As P said, “even if I tell  
373 them, no one understands”, it is thought that P felt meaningless to talk to someone about her  
374 feelings. This can be seen in elite athletes at their retirement. Petitpas and Champagne (2000)  
375 pointed out that many transitioning athletes believe that few people understand what they are  
376 going through. In that case, it would be difficult to get a social support even if it is there.

377 P was uncomfortable with the difference in her life as an athlete and the life after  
378 retirement. However, P can also felt that it was unavoidable. From this, it can be seen that P  
379 thought that the world in which she lives changed due to the turning point of retirement. The  
380 ways of thinking such as “acting like a grey color”, “controlling my energy low”, and  
381 “walking with the same pace” are thought to be her coping strategies to go through her  
382 transition.

383 *“I want to be targeting higher. I have my ideal image higher. I was able to reach in*  
384 *the high level in Synchro, but as a TV commentator, well, suddenly, a person like a*  
385 *baby takes on an ideal image for a greater level. There is a dilemma. I was also*  
386 *irritated about the laziness of the people around me.”*

387 P was willing to aim higher in the new working environment after retirement.  
388 However, it was difficult for A to put out her ability in the commentator job which has no  
389 experience at all, unlike Synchro which had a long experience until then. As a result, P  
390 suffered the difficulty not being able to do well in the work. When P was not satisfied with

391 her own ability, she was also judging people around her as lazy. It is thought that P was not  
392 able to share her feelings of difficulties with people around her if she judged them as lazy. At  
393 the same time, it is questioned what kind of feelings P had inside of her in evaluation of  
394 others being "lazy".

### 395 Current Challenges

396 *“As a wife, mom, TV commentator, all are not the same. In the past, I thought I just*  
397 *do whatever I want to do, but now, well, there are so many things you can't do even if*  
398 *you want to. Sometimes I feel what? But kids come first. Family first. Balance around*  
399 *that, the balance for living. How to balance yourself around that so that nothing*  
400 *breaks.”*

401 P used to have the idea of always doing what she wanted to do. However, now, she  
402 has to fulfill multiple roles as a wife, mother, and commentator. So that she seems to have  
403 come to the idea that there were things that she could not do even if she wanted to do. It is  
404 probable that P was able to concentrate on the role of an athlete in her athletic life. However,  
405 in the current situation where multiple roles needed to be performed at the same time, it can  
406 be seen that she was facing the new challenge of worrying about balance in life. It is  
407 questioned though if P didn't have to balance her life roles in her athletic life. Petitpas et al.,  
408 (1997) emphasized the importance of recognizing multiple life roles. During P's athletic life,  
409 she would have had many different life roles such as daughter, student, athlete, friend, etc.,  
410 and she would have balanced the roles. However, P seems to have difficulties to balance  
411 multiple roles as a new challenge. Recognizing multiple roles as an athlete and foreseeing  
412 future life roles are the part of self-exploration interventions in career assistance programs for  
413 decades. If P knew about the notion of life roles in advance, the way of looking at her current  
414 situation might be differed.

415 *“That's why, there is no challenge at all anymore. This is, well, I think it can't be*  
416 *helped. Yes. But, if you give up something, it will not continue, so I will continue.”*

417 P felt that the current situation is not challenging using her own definition of  
418 "challenge" based on her experience as an athlete. In addition, A regards the post-retirement  
419 world as a world in which it is not necessary to live a challenging life by looking around at



420 others. Besides, P regards the current world as a world where she had to care about the  
421 balance in living. From this, it seems that P accepted the current situation as being  
422 unavoidable. Although P is dissatisfied with the fact that it is not challenging, she thinks that  
423 if she gave up and quit, it would be the real end. So, she made the choice to continue.

424 *"In the past, you would have to put out 120% of the power. Otherwise you didn't feel*  
425 *you were working hard enough. It's not like that now. The environment I have now,*  
426 *the environment given to me now, I just do what you can in the given environment.*  
427 *This, doing what you can do, is like only 30 or 40% of my effort comparing to the*  
428 *past. So, that kind of myself, is it OK like this? I just think, I want to do more, burning*  
429 *heart. You know we have the kind of DNA, don't you? I am trying to make it good,*  
430 *adjust it myself. Balancing is needed for me now.*

431 For P, the definition of "work hard" based on her athletic experience was to exert  
432 120% of her power. However, now it is important not to use it as her standard, but to do  
433 things as much as possible in the current environment. At the same time, since this standard  
434 which cultivated in the athletic life was deeply rooted in P, she feels that this was as much as  
435 30% comparing to the old days. Therefore, P sometimes desires to do more in this present  
436 situation, and she is using the word DNA to describe herself. This is considered to be the  
437 recognition that P thought that she had a characteristic of athletes. Also, from the expression  
438 "don't you?", the reference to "the model story of an athlete who lives in the Synchro world"  
439 was observed here, and it can be said that the interviewer recognized the person as having the  
440 same DNA. And from the statement "balance is necessary for me now", it can be seen that  
441 she recognized that putting 120% of the power according to the athlete's DNA would be  
442 overkill in her current life.

443 *"I think being an athlete was definitely more stressed than now if I think about it now.*  
444 *But, at that time, we did to the end, right? We did 100%. But now, I have stress that I*  
445 *can't do with 100%. I have the stress that I couldn't do until the limit. It means that I*  
446 *can't push myself hard. In my mind, I don't have time. You know I want to do up to*  
447 *this much, but I have to pick up kids. I have this kind of stress. I'd better really not to*  
448 *think this is stress, but I can't help feeling stressed about those things. I guess I feel*  
449 *stressed to be in the half-way."*

450 P felt that it is more stressful now than the time of being an athlete even though the  
451 athletic time must have been really hard. She felt stressed about not being able to do what she

452 wanted, such as not working hard and lacking time, comparing the days of working hard to  
453 the limit every day as an athlete. And P self-analyzed that being halfway was stressful, and  
454 also seemed to understand the value learned from the appearance of others who met after  
455 retirement. There is a conflict between herself as an athlete and herself at present.

#### 456 New Values

457 *“It’s completely different way of thinking from the way as an athlete. So, it is not*  
458 *winning for myself only. I just realized so many things. When I was an athlete, I was*  
459 *just doing my best. But not that. I am on the top of the people supported me. I am just*  
460 *sitting in the most shining place. I realized in the TV studio that there are so many*  
461 *people supporting me. Sitting on the stage of the studio, you see, there are many kinds*  
462 *of people in the studio. There are sub directors, sceneshifters, and others. I can see*  
463 *them right in front of me. Wow, there are so many people supporting the TV show.*  
464 *Then, I noticed that maybe Synchro was the same. I noticed now. It’s been so long*  
465 *since I retired. How silly I was when I was an athlete. I was not thinking about*  
466 *anything.”*

467 P strongly recognized the difference in the way of thinking from the time of being an  
468 athlete. Through her work on television, she learned that she could shine in a good position  
469 only with the support of many people. Through this awareness, P realized that she was the  
470 same when she was doing Synchro. At that time, she was thinking about herself only that she  
471 did not notice the support of people.

472 *“But I was saying thank you very much in word. I said it, but what did I really*  
473 *appreciate? I just realized that. I felt that the only thing I could see in front of me was*  
474 *the coach.”*

475 P used to say thank you during her athletic career, but began to realize that it might  
476 have been superficial. P remorsefully reconsidered that she cared about her coach only so that  
477 she couldn’t see many people who supported her, and she could not be truly grateful.  
478 Looking back on herself as an athlete, P realized that the quality of gratitude was different  
479 than it is now.

480 *“For me, I tried a lot of challenging things, and even Cirque, I did what I wanted to*  
481 *do. I’ve lived long time thinking that I can't understand unless I try. But, I realized*  
482 *that there are people who can’t do like this. I realized that it was strange to impose*  
483 *my thoughts on people.”*

484 P was able to challenge what she wanted to. Also, when P was an athlete, she spent a  
485 lot of time with coaches and teammates who had the same goal of winning medals at the  
486 Olympics. So that she assumed that her thoughts were correct. However, after retired, P met  
487 many people and found that not all of them lived the same way as she did. Then, P seems to  
488 have begun to realize the meaninglessness of evaluating others based on her own criteria as  
489 an athlete and imposing her own thoughts.

490 *“If I make it simple, it’s just not about winning. Winning, I’ve always thought that I*  
491 *won’t be recognized unless I win, but, I think the world is like that. But it’s not all that*  
492 *you are recognized by people. We are not living for getting people to recognize you. I*  
493 *would be happy to get recognized, and I’m happy if I’m praised or told me that I’m*  
494 *amazing. But it’s not all that. Not only that sense of value, but what you are is*  
495 *actually the most important thing.”*

496 Since P lived in the world of judging sport where rankings were decided by judges, it  
497 seems that she had a strong feeling of being recognized otherwise she would not be able to  
498 win. However, after retired, she began to think not only about winning and losing, but also  
499 about her own way of life. At the same time, P thought that the desire for approval was also a  
500 natural desire for humans. It is considered that A has come to accept herself having the desire  
501 of being recognized.

502 *“After retired, I went to the media world. Of course, if I did something wrong on TV*  
503 *and people hate about, then I can’t stay there. But, I’m not working to be liked by all*  
504 *millions of people, so, like myself, who I am, I can live a little more naturally and it’s*  
505 *OK to be relaxed in life.”*

506 Being involved in the media business, P realized that she wasn't working to be liked  
507 by everyone. As a result, she encountered a new way of life in which she could live naturally  
508 and relaxed.

509 *“Gradually, I started to notice various things little by little. Well, well, I was at the*  
510 *top in Synchro, but the level of commentating is less than zero. For example, I was*  
511 *swimming all the time when all ordinary students were studying for 4 years. My*  
512 *starting line is really behind comparing to others. It is obvious that the level or my*  
513 *start line is behind. After all, I wonder what this is for various people. I was starting*  
514 *to wonder if it’s okay to expose myself a little more. It was the second or third year of*  
515 *starting the job.”*

516 P thought that even if she was the top in the world of Synchro, there were things that  
517 she could not do well because the challenges changed. Then, she began to accept herself that  
518 it was OK to be behind comparing to others because she was an athlete for a long time. By  
519 admitting not being able to do things well, she was able to correctly evaluate what she could  
520 do at the same time. It seems that this led to the courage to expose herself to others.

#### 521 Transferable Skills

522 *“To get results, enough preparation is needed mentally and physically, it’s easy to*  
523 *say, but I was able to really experience it. That fits to anything. In anything,*  
524 *preparation and process are important. There is no unfounded confidence. It’s similar*  
525 *to the one I talked about earlier, but I’m having a well-founded confidence only in me.*  
526 *You just need to prepare. At least the minimum preparation. At work as well. And*  
527 *preparing for kids are the same. All needs preparation. I need to prepare for the time*  
528 *comes. That was something very important as an athlete.”*

529 Transferable skills are defined as skills learned in one area of life that can be used in  
530 another area (Murphy, 1995). Athletic transferable skills can be defined as abstract skills  
531 learned in the athletic environment that are applicable to another career (Mayocchi &  
532 Hanrahan, 2000). P was experiencing how much mental and physical preparation was needed  
533 to produce results. P seems to have learned about the necessary approach to produce results  
534 no matter what the issues are. This kind of preparation are thought to be come from her will  
535 to succeed. The will to succeed is one of the transferrable skills among elite athletes  
536 (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). It is assumed that P didn’t know the notion of the  
537 transferrable skills but she knows she learned these through her athletic life and that they are  
538 still useful in her present life.

539 *“I had to be sharp otherwise I can’t reach the top. So that if you do loose thing, you*  
540 *can’t become a number one in the world. I used to be very, very sharp. I think that*  
541 *having such an experience when I was young was an extremely valuable asset. I can’t*  
542 *live like this for the rest of my life. But after all, being able to experience such a thing*  
543 *when I was young, once you become an adult, you can’t do easily, don’t you think?”*

544 P thought that it was important not to be loose and to be in a sharp state in order to  
545 aim for the top in the world in a certain field. And the experience was difficult to get even if

546 one tried to experience it after becoming an adult. That is why she regarded her experience of  
547 being able to do it when she was young as a valuable asset. Also, from the expression "don't  
548 you think?", "a model story of an athlete living in the Synchro world" was observed here as  
549 well, and P recognized the interviewer as the same experienced person who experienced a  
550 sharp state in her youth. P thought having the experience of being sharp was valuable even  
551 though P thinks that this sharp state is not needed in the world after retirement. If the sharp  
552 experience can be interpreted as achievement feeling, then it can be thought as a transferable  
553 skill (Petitpas et al., 1992).

554 *"I learned that it is important to make an effort. So, this, you see, some people don't*  
555 *know how to make an effort. Like someone saying what does effort mean? Maybe*  
556 *asking why do I make an effort? Well, it's not just good results, but it's kind of like*  
557 *repeating something that comes with results and something new comes out of it. It*  
558 *was very important that I learned how important it is to accumulate the career. Since*  
559 *I was kid, I learned that. That is very important."*

560 P thought that she learned how to make an effort to get results during her athletic life.

561 This can be interpreted in several transferable skills. If "knowing how to make an effort to get  
562 results" can be defined transferable skills such as the ability to attain goals, perseverance, and  
563 self-motivated (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). P was involved in the sport since she was a  
564 child and thought that this continuous experience was important. Also, she thought that doing  
565 competitive sports and taking on challenges would experience negative results that did not go  
566 as expected. However, P believed that if she continued to make efforts, something new would  
567 be born, and she believed that continuous experience would become her career.

568 *"There is a word, having a successful experience. But for us, we experience both*  
569 *success and failure through sports, right? Because I experienced all of these totally, I*  
570 *know if I do something, I would either succeed or fail. But I know someday success*  
571 *would come. After all, if you do not challenge first, nothing will start. I think that the*  
572 *experience value that I am experiencing in sports is being utilized to the fullest in my*  
573 *subsequent life."*

574 P knows empirically that the person who had a successful experience knew both  
575 success and failure. It can be said that she knew experientially that nothing would start unless  
576 she challenges in her sport. This can be explained as the transferable skill, ability to

577 challenge, based on her acceptance of a failure on the road to success (Mayocchi &  
578 Hanrahan, 2000). It can be seen that P felt that the experience gained through sports were  
579 still useful in life after retirement. The expression "for us" and "right?", is the feeling of  
580 asking the interviewer to understand. This kind of narrative can be considered that P  
581 recognized the interviewer understood the model story, which was observed as being referred  
582 to the "model story of an athlete who lives in the Synchro world." It can be seen that P felt  
583 that the experience gained through sports were still useful in life after retirement.

#### 584 Advice for the Next Generation

585 *"I just think you should learn. First you should learn. Because all athletes are not*  
586 *stupid. Don't you think? Athletes are aware of the problems in many ways. Even they*  
587 *are aware of the problem of retirement. Also, like problems such as about society,*  
588 *sports world, so on. Not only by feeling, you have to have the competency to explain*  
589 *things properly by theories. Otherwise, you are not useful in society, you can't survive*  
590 *in life. This learning, maybe all athletes should do. Perhaps it depends on what you*  
591 *want to do, but if you start working, you can never avoid it. Without learning, for the*  
592 *time being, I think there's still a trend that it's OK to just do sports. It should be*  
593 *changed, don't you think?"*

594 P thought that athletes have a strong sense of finding problems with society and  
595 themselves. From the expression "don't you think?", the reference to "the model story of an  
596 athlete who lives in the Synchro world" was also observed here, and the interviewer was to be  
597 recognized as the same awareness as herself. However, if the awareness of the problem  
598 through the athletic experience remains too sensuous, it would be difficult to convey it to  
599 others and it is not possible to discuss it. P pointed out that it was important to develop the  
600 ability to explain one's feelings in theory in order to live in society. It is important to study for  
601 that purpose, and P asked agreement to the interviewer "don't you think?" that P still feels  
602 that there was a trend of it is OK to do only sports without studying during the athletic career.

603 *"When I was an athlete, I was directed to do this and do that by the coach. But, I was*  
604 *directed without noticing that I was directed. I was on the decided rails. It was not the*  
605 *rails I chose. I was running on the rails and I was pushed from behind. So, instead of*  
606 *being pushed on the rail from behind, after all, you have to choose your own way to*  
607 *go, you have to hold your own rudder, you have to have your driving force, you have*  
608 *to go forward by yourself. Otherwise, if you don't do that, you'll regret it somewhere,*  
609 *and myself, I think there are various regrets about this. When I was an athlete. That's*

610 *why I was able to do that, you know that is why I was able to win a medal. I know that*  
611 *is why I am here. But well, you know. Even when you are as a second career, if you*  
612 *stumble again, well I am sure you stumble. Even if you take a detour, you should go*  
613 *on your own.”*

614 P thought she was running on her own rails but realized that she was actually running  
615 on a rail without her will. It is assumed that the rails were decided by her coach. And because  
616 of that, P believed that she was able to win the medal. At the same time, she admitted that she  
617 had regrets. Because P believed that her regrets led to a stumbling block in the second career,  
618 she appealed for the need to go on one’s own, even if one makes a detour. P emphasized that  
619 what is needed immediately after retirement is learning and autonomy. In other words,  
620 looking back now, it can be inferred that P herself wanted to learn and become autonomy at  
621 retirement.

622 From the P’s life story, several important results are observed. First, development of  
623 her athletic identity was found. She committed herself in her sport and developed her athletic  
624 identity around the age of junior high school, and her self-image was developed relating to  
625 her sport such as “swimming machine” and “zero or 100”. Second, the Olympic self-image  
626 caused difficulties at retirement. Third, starting new career needed some coping strategies  
627 with her transferable skills. And lastly, psychological difficulties relating to athletic identity  
628 still existed even after more than decades from her retirement.

629 At the end of the analysis of the P's life story, the followings also should be noted. P  
630 achieved her athletic goal by receiving two Olympic medals and three world championships  
631 medals. After the successful results, P was known as retired for psychological reasons. Since  
632 the sporting goal achievement was positively related to post-sport life satisfaction among  
633 retired athletes (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), P would be thought satisfied with her post-sport  
634 life. P didn’t mention about the degree of satisfaction in her life; however, P told the  
635 interviewer/author that she still didn’t want to confront about the real causes of her  
636 retirement. In other words, P revealed in the interview that she did have a different cause of

637 the retirement from what she used to say in public. Although P didn't have a clinical  
638 psychological issue during and after her retirement, it is assumed that P had some  
639 psychological adjustment difficulties even now. P has managed by herself using various  
640 coping strategies in her own way, but it is presumed that there is still a conflict between  
641 herself as an athlete and her present self even after nearly 30 years of her retirement. Athletic  
642 retirement research so far has clarified the needs for interventions at the time of retirement  
643 and the needs for proactive interventions before the retirement. From P's case, it is observed  
644 that a former elite athlete who retired for several decades still has psychological difficulties  
645 including an athletic identity issue. It is assured that a psychological intervention for athletic  
646 retirement is needed in Japan.

#### 647 **Conclusion**

648 The purpose of this study was to further advance research in the area of retirement  
649 from sport, with a specific focus the developmental experiences related to the sport career  
650 transition process in Japan. The findings add detail to Lavalley et al.'s (2012) conceptual  
651 model of retirement from sport. Specifically, the result of the study revealed that the  
652 developmental experiences during the athletic career affected the athlete's identity formation  
653 and loss of self-confidence (Lavalley et al., 2014). For the psychological adjustment  
654 difficulties related to athletic identity at retirement, helping athletes develop a sense of who  
655 they are beyond sport is a useful intervention that can occur anytime in an athlete's career  
656 (Lavalley & Anderson, 2000). It would be better to get consulted by a sport psychology  
657 professional prior to the retirement as a proactive coping strategy; however, once athletes  
658 retire, a psychological approach by professionals is needed to help athletes developing an  
659 understanding of what they are going through in the transition (Baillie, 1993; Petitpas et al.,  
660 1996).



661           There has been increasing research in the area of athletic retirement, but Stambulova  
662 and Ryba (2013) have highlighted how further research on cultural differences is required.  
663 Moreover, a recent paper by Taku and Arai (2020) highlighted the importance of research in  
664 Japan given the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games as a result  
665 of COVID-19. The results of this research, therefore, advance knowledge in this area in  
666 Japan. However, the present study cannot generalize Japanese athletes' psychological  
667 difficulties at their retirement. Based on the findings presented in the current study, combined  
668 with the previous research by Oulevey et al. (2018) and Oulevey et al. (2020), we recommend  
669 further research to help progress towards the development of a psychological support system  
670 to help retiring athletes make an optimal career transition.

671

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