

## Career transition experiences of Japanese university student-athletes: A qualitative study

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### Abstract

Student-athletes' career transitions have been discussed in recent years, and there has been a movement toward understanding athletic career as a part of life. Their career transitions have been studied from individual, support, and environmental perspectives; however, research on Japanese student-athletes is lacking. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve student-athletes, this study clarified Japanese university student-athletes' experiences of career transitions. The analysis was conducted using the grounded theory approach. The results were described in terms of three aspects: perspective (what the student-athletes think), barriers (what difficulties they face), and coping strategies and resources (how they cope). The university student-athletes mainly had three career perspectives: pursuing an athletic career only, having options for an athletic career and others, and pursuing a non-athletic career only. They experienced barriers in choosing an athletic and non-athlete career, and faced interpersonal and environmental barriers. We proposed a model that incorporates both athletic and non-athletic careers, and the findings had practical implications for supporting athletes. Assessing the perspectives revealed in this study (e.g., comprehensively examining how student-athletes currently think about their career paths, what barriers they face, how they cope, and what kind of environment they are in) will assist in providing the necessary support to university student-athletes.

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## I. Introduction

There has been a growing interest in how athletes develop their careers after completing their athletic careers. Early research on the career transitions of elite athletes considered retirement from competition as a “social death” and understood it as a negative and traumatic experience (Jodai and Nogawa, 2012). However, it has become clear that the experience is not so negative as “social death.” In fact, some players retire at a very young age and decide to retire with hope for their futures (Wylleman et al., 2016). In recent years, there has been a movement toward understanding athletic life as a part of life and examining it from a holistic perspective (Stambulova et al., 2021). In this context, athletes’ career transition experiences and the quality of transition from athletic to non-athletic careers have been evaluated through the following frameworks (a) individual characteristics, (b) interpersonal support or support resources, and (c) the environment surrounding the athlete (Li and Sum, 2017; Park et al., 2013). Based on these perspectives, career support for athletes is being developed, such as skill interventions, career seminars and courses, and support systems and environments that facilitate career transition (Wylleman et al., 2004). Extensive research has been conducted on elite athletes, and various support systems have been developed based on survey results.

The results of elite athletes’ career transitions suggest that athletes should consider their post-athletic life during their athletic life, especially during their student years (Jodai and Nogawa, 2012). Athletes tend to prioritize competition over the non-athletic aspects of their lives, often failing to consider their future until they retire (Torregrosa et al., 2004). Surprisingly, 40% of athletes reported not giving any thought to their post-athletic careers (Torregrosa et al., 2015), emphasizing the need to encourage them to

consider their careers after retirement from sport during their student years. Research on student-athletes’ career transitions has adopted individual, interpersonal, and environmental frameworks similar to those used in studies of elite athletes. A systematic review noted that the career transitions of student-athletes are influenced by (a) individual psychological factors such as motivation and beliefs, (b) support from parents, teammates, and mentors, and (c) support resources from their schools and organizations (Guidotti et al., 2015). In the realm of individual psychological factors, research has explored aspects such as student-athletes’ perceptions of career transitions, motivations for competitions and careers, competitive achievements, optimism, and reasons for dropping out. Support from others include expectations and pressures from parents, as well as advice from mentors. Lastly, support resources encompass the environment surrounding student-athletes, such as career support programs and educational programs at universities and other institutions that help them balance academics and athletics. Sum et al. (2017) also conducted an interview survey on career transitions among Taiwanese student-athletes and organized the results from individual, interpersonal, and environmental aspects. The individual aspects included career goals, identity, self-efficacy, motivation, and personality, while the interpersonal aspects included support from parents, teachers, teammates, and coaches. Further, Sum et al. (2017) highlighted the relevance of the environmental aspects surrounding the individual, such as academics, medical care, and finances. The importance of research on student-athletes has, thus, been highlighted, with researchers having applied the framework developed from studying elite athletes to the student-athlete population.

### **1. Career transition experiences of university athletes: Their thoughts on post-university career paths and the barriers they face**

Various factors related to student-athletes' career transitions have been identified, but how do these student-athletes experience career transitions? Specifically, how do student-athletes perceive their post-university career paths? What barriers do they face and how do they cope with them? Examining athletes' perceptions of their careers, Ryba et al. (2017) interviewed 18 elite junior athletes (first-year high school students) in Finland and noted three career construction styles. They were characterized by (a) considering sport and education themes, (b) considering only one theme (mainly considering a professional sport career), and (c) being unable to construct the career regardless of sport or education. Twelve students had both sport and education themes, while five were considering a career in only one theme. The results demonstrated that not all elite-level high school students are solely focused on their athletic careers. Ryba et al. (2017) noted that while the students were able to talk specifically about topics related to balancing education and competition and what they wanted to achieve in competitions, they were vague about their future goals outside of competition. Ramos et al. (2017) conducted a questionnaire survey of athletes' perceptions of their careers, dividing the sample into those who were focused only on sport, and those who were focused on both sport and academics. The authors reported differences in the age at which the athletes reached the elite level and the lengths of competitive athletes' careers. Vickers and Morris (2022) interviewed 11 British university student-athletes and held a focus group with eight stakeholders. They discovered that after university graduation, student-athletes can pursue one of four pathways (a) further education and elite sport, (b) full-time sport, (c) sport and work, or (d) quitting sport and

pursuing a different career. The UK provides a wide range of career options for student-athletes. Additionally, the authors noted that education can not only act as a safety net in the case of early athletic retirement due to injury, but also open doors to desirable employment opportunities, such as managerial roles.

As for career-related barriers, Sum et al. (2017) found that student-athletes in Hong Kong and Taiwan had concerns such as difficulty in getting a job as a professional athlete and not knowing their future career options outside of sports. The participants expressed a desire to concentrate on their studies, but remarked that they lacked time to do so. In interviews with elite-level athletes interested in dual careers, Cartigny et al. (2021) found a gap between their actual occupational skills and their desired occupational goals in post-sport careers. The authors pointed out that the concentration on competitive sport may cause problems in post-athletic careers by not allowing athletes time to cultivate the skills and competencies needed for a career outside of sport. Brown et al. (2015) also conducted interviews with British university student-athletes and other stakeholders (six current student-athletes, three recently graduated student-athletes, nine coaches, three support staff, and five administrators), aiming to understand the demands that student-athletes experience during their university life and how they cope with them. The results revealed that these demands could be categorized into the (a) athletic, (b) academic/vocational, (c) psychological, and (d) psychosocial levels. Selecting a post-university career was considered as one of the demands at the academic/vocational level. The study also presented coping strategies (e.g., planning, changing priorities, communicating with staff, and displaying openness to learning) and resources (e.g., interpersonal skills, opportunistic/optimistic/positive personality, decision-making ability,

supportive personality, support from staff, role models, and college lectures).

The studies reviewed above reflect the idea of a dual career (DC), which seeks to combine sport and academics or sport and work. DC in sport “encapsulates the requirement for athletes to successfully initiate, develop and finalize an elite sporting career as part of a lifelong career, in combination with the pursuit of education and/or work as well as other domains which are of importance at different stages of life, such as taking up a role in society, ensuring a satisfactory income (EU Expert Group, 2012, p.6).” Extant research has, therefore, examined how to combine sport and academics, particularly dealing with student-athletes’ perceptions of and barriers faced when engaging in academics. However, few studies have examined the barriers student-athletes face when considering their athletic careers in the context of DC or the career transitions they experience (issue 1).

## **2. Career transition research on Japanese student-athletes: DC and life skills**

In Japan, existing career research has mostly focused on elite athletes (e.g., Kitamura and Kikuchi, 2022; Iio et al., 2023; Oulevey et al., 2018) and the findings on career transition among student-athletes are limited to DC (especially the combination of academics and sport) or life skills. In a study related to DC, Arai et al. (2018) proposed athlete-life-balance, which focuses on aspects of an athlete’s life outside of sport. They described this idea as a balance between athletics and the rest of life. Through interviews with students who had experienced competing nationally, Arai et al. (2018) identified the factors that promote and prevent the fulfillment of athletic and non-athletic life. In addition, using a questionnaire survey, Tsukahara et al. (2019) showed that attitudes toward balancing academics and athletics were influenced by the university’s

academic and athletic performance, rather than those determined before admission, such as the route to university.

Previous studies have also investigated the relationship between life skills and careers, which can be acquired during athletic life and applied in other areas. Life skills are capacities for adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to effectively deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life (World Health Organization, 1994), for example, decision-making, problem-solving, and creative thinking. Such skills are useful not only in competitive situations but also in one’s social life. They can enable individuals to take control of their lives and cope with future life events (Danish et al., 1992). Shimizu and Shimamoto (2011) studied life skills as a factor related to the career transition of university student wrestlers and found that goal setting was important. Yamamoto and Shimamoto (2019) also researched life skills and identified that goal-setting and problem-solving skills were crucial for university judo players. Both studies were quantitative and used questionnaires. Life skills are undoubtedly necessary to cope with any future career, but research on the career transition experiences of Japanese university student-athletes is insufficient. In its Third Basic Plan for Sport, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2022) acknowledged the lack of widespread support and opportunities for athlete career development in sports organizations, companies, and teams. With only 30% of universities providing academic and career support for student-athletes (MEXT, 2018), there is a need to increase the resources made available to them.

While research on the career transitions of Japanese student-athletes has examined DC and life skills, studies focusing on their attitudes toward the future and how they experience career transitions remain scarce (issue 2). In addition to

DC and life skills, research on the career transitions of Japanese student-athletes is also necessary.

### 3. Study purpose

This study investigated the career transition experiences of Japanese university student-athletes using semi-structured interviews. Specifically, we examined what careers they pursue, what difficulties they face, and how they cope with these difficulties. The study aimed to (1) identify the barriers student-athletes face during their athletic careers, and (2) examine their perceptions of their future and how they experience career transitions. We intended to identify what Japanese university student-athletes should consider during their school years and provided an assessment perspective that can support their career transitions. In this paper, the term “career” is used only in the context of occupations or jobs.

## II. Methods

### 1. Participants

Twelve student-athletes (six men, six women; mean age  $20.25 \pm 0.92$  years) belonging to the

athletic clubs of a four-year university in Kanto, Japan, were included in the study. Eight of them had participated in national-level competitions and four had competed in international competitions. The specialized sports they engaged in were soccer, softball, and weightlifting (see Table 1). At the time of the interviews, one student had already chosen a post-graduation career path while the rest had not yet decided. The interviews were conducted from November 2021 to February 2022.

To recruit participants, the first researcher explained the details of the research project to the club coaches and provided them with a leaflet containing a summary of this study. The coaches then conveyed the information to the student-athletes. Those who expressed interest in participating were asked to contact the first researcher via email to schedule an interview. Some participants were then referred by other interviewees. Since an athletic career is unlikely if a student has not reached a certain level of competitiveness, the inclusion criteria were (a) belonging to a university athletics club and (b) having competed at the national level.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

ID	Age	School year	Sex	Sport	Level
A	21	senior	male	Soccer	National
B	22	senior	male	Soccer	National
C	21	junior	male	Soccer	International
D	21	junior	female	Soccer	International
E	19	sophomore	female	Soccer	National
F	20	sophomore	female	Weightlifting	International
G	20	sophomore	female	Softball	National
H	20	sophomore	male	Softball	National
I	21	sophomore	female	Softball	National
J	19	freshman	male	Softball	National
K	20	sophomore	female	Softball	International
L	19	sophomore	male	Soccer	National

## 2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 50 minutes. Semi-structured interviews are a major qualitative research method in sports psychology (McGannon et al., 2021). It is possible to obtain in-depth narratives and ask defined questions in the interview, which allows for a detailed examination of the participants' experiences and the process of events. Before the interviews, an interview protocol was developed based on a previous study (Sum et al., 2017). The main questions in the interview were: "What do you think about your career and career path after graduation?", "Did you have any support or assistance in thinking about or choosing your career?", and "Did you have any difficulties or problems in thinking about or choosing a career?" The interviews were conducted in Japanese by the first author who has a Master's degree in clinical psychology, is qualified as a clinical psychologist and has over four years of clinical experience because the participants' native language was Japanese. After oral and written consent were obtained, the data were recorded using an IC recorder.

## 3. Data analysis

The obtained qualitative data were transcribed verbatim. Analysis was conducted by referring to the grounded theory approach (GTA; Cobin and

Strauss, 2008; Saiki-Craighill, 2017). Specifically, the analysis included open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The storyline technique was then used to enhance the explanation of codes (Chun et al, 2019). First, the verbatim transcripts were separated into one to two sentences and labeled. The labels were based on the properties and dimensions (see Table 2). The properties were extracted from the characteristics of a sentence, and the dimensions were concrete expressions corresponding to the properties. The labels were carefully analyzed so that the analyst's interpretation would not be mixed with the labels. Second, referring to the properties and dimensions, relevant labels were collected to create categories (open coding). Third, diagrams were generated to express the relationships between the categories (axial coding). Finally, a theory was generated to represent the career experiences of university student athletes (selective coding). The verbatim transcripts and properties/dimensions were referred to at various stages of the analysis to avoid any discrepancy between the labels and categories and participants' responses. All analyses were conducted in Japanese, and the results were then translated into English. To verify the validity of the results, discussions were conducted with five graduate students majoring in sports science and one university professor specializing in sports psychology.

Table 2. Example of label creation

sentence	property	dimension	label
I play football, so of course I have a dream of becoming a professional athlete, but I'm not really obsessed with the idea. I also think about working as an employee and am currently researching about companies.	sport dream degree of the dream action thought time frame	football becoming a professional athlete weak researching about companies working as an employee currently	Considering becoming both an athlete and getting a job

#### 4. Ethical considerations

Before conducting the interviews, we explained the following considerations to the participants in writing and orally (a) participation in this study was voluntary and cooperation was not directed or forced by the club activities, coaches, or the university, (b) participants did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to answer, (c) participants could withdraw from the study at any time, and (d) details about the use of the study data would be provided and personal information would be protected. Interviews were conducted only with those who provided consent. This study was approved by the Waseda University Ethics Review Committee on Research with Human Subjects (approval number: 2021-086).

### III. Results and Discussion

This study investigated the career transition experiences of Japanese university student-athletes using semi-structured interviews. The GTA was adopted to identify the components of the participants' experiences. The findings are presented in Figure 1, which depicts the three major career perspectives held by the participants and the barriers they faced based on each perspective. One student-athlete was considering an athletic career only (Student D), while the other student-athletes had more than one option or were considering only non-athletic careers. The participants used various coping strategies and support resources and tried to overcome these barriers. A unique feature of this study's model is its incorporation of athletic careers. Previous research on athletes' career transitions and DC has examined how non-athletic careers can be pursued alongside sports, considering the time constraints of sports activities and the inflexibility of university schedules as barriers (Cartigny et al., 2021). In the present study, the barriers in choosing an athletic career,

specifically the difficulties in pursuing a career as a professional athlete and anxiety about life as a professional athlete and life after retirement as a professional athlete, were identified. Determining these two barriers led to two benefits.

First, this model proposes a framework for supporting athletic careers. When a student-athlete aspires to be a professional athlete after graduation, it is inevitable that they think about their life as an athlete and their retirement thereafter (Wylleman et al., 2004). Nevertheless, there is a lack of established support methods for this career path. It may be difficult to establish such support methods since there are no specific factors that are required to become an athlete. However, the results of this study can inform the development of appropriate support for students that wish to pursue athletic career paths that seeks to address the difficulties involved in becoming a professional athlete and their anxiety about the lives after their athletic careers. Student H commented "Only a limited number of people can become professional athletes, and I can't become one." Student B also stated that "I can't imagine life after retirement as an athlete, I feel insecure and fearful." It is important to address the difficulties involved with pursuing athletic careers represented by these student-athlete statements.

Second, the results revealed student-athletes' ambivalence when considering which career path to follow. For example, student-athletes who considered both athletic and non-athletic careers were concerned that considering non-athletic careers would negatively impact their athletic careers. Student B explained "I doubt I can become a professional athlete if I'm thinking about something other than my sport." Student E, who did not expect to become an athlete before entering university, felt hesitant to consider non-athletic careers because she played her sport well and felt there was a possibility to become an

athlete. “I think I could be a professional athlete, considering my situation. So, I am hesitant to think about a non-athletic career.” It was apparent that the participants struggled with finding a balance between considering athletic and non-athletic careers. The results indicated that the student-athletes were concerned about the impact of considering non-athletic careers on their athletic careers and they did not disregard non-athletic careers due to their immersion in sports (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019).

In this study, incorporating athletic careers into the model revealed a new perspective. The

findings have practical implications for supporting student-athletes in their career choices. Those individuals who support student-athletes’ careers need to consider their perspectives on athletic careers and the fluctuations and dualities of considering careers outside of athletics. The following section provides a more detailed overview of what careers student-athletes pursue (Perspective), what barriers they face (Barriers) and how they cope with these barriers (Coping strategy/Resources) to understand their career transitions.

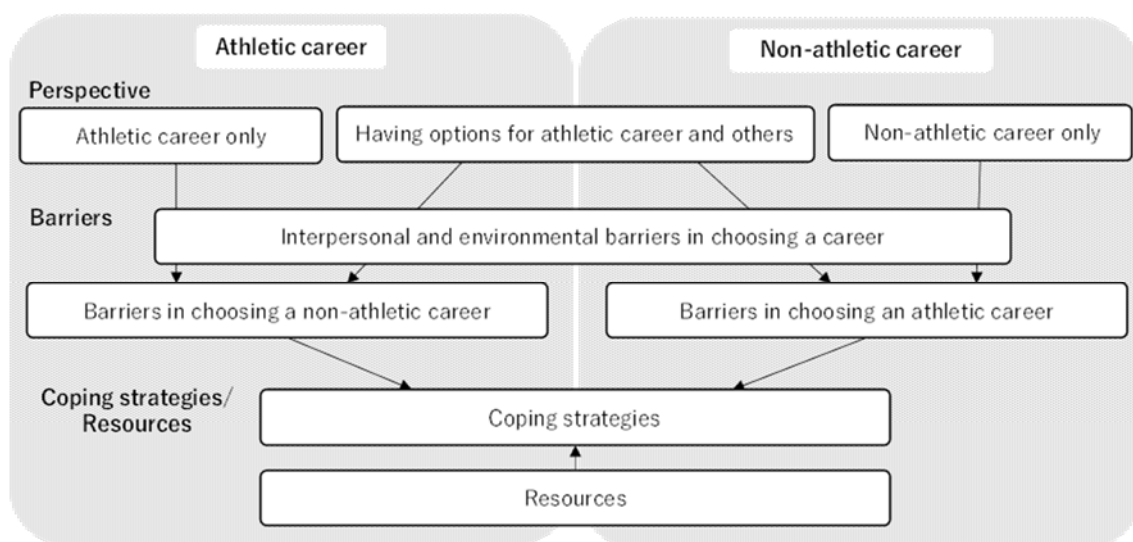


Figure 1. Career transition experiences of Japanese university student-athletes

## 1. Perspective

The perspectives of university student-athletes regarding their careers included: pursuing an athletic career only; having options for an athletic career and others; and pursuing a non-athletic career only (as seen in Table 3). Student D commented that she only ever wanted to pursue an athletic career and that she desired to challenge herself as a professional athlete after graduation. She stated, “I started playing sports when I was in primary school and wanted to become a professional athlete in junior high school. I have never thought about anything other than becoming a professional athlete.” Those student-

athletes who considered only non-athletic careers contemplated pursuing specific occupations. Some mentioned specific jobs, such as “I want to become a teacher after graduation” (Student I), while others more broadly described what they wanted to do, for example “I want to go to a developing country and do what I can to help them” (Student K). The Japanese university student-athletes primarily exhibited three career perspectives. This finding is consistent with a previous study, which observed student-athletes’ career construction styles that involved considering sport and education themes or considering only one theme (mainly a



professional sport career) (Ryba et al., 2017). It appears that both Japanese and Western student-athletes hold similar career perspectives, signifying a growing trend in Japan toward considering both an athletic careers and non-athletic careers (Japanese Society of Sport Psychology, 2008). Student L said, “I first heard the term ‘second career’ when I was in high school. Since then, I have become more interested in non-athletic careers”. Following increased attention on the significance of career support for athletes in Japan, terms like “second career” and “dual career” have gradually gained popularity and likely influence the career perspectives of student-athletes (MEXT, 2019).

Some distinctive perspectives were also observed among the Japanese student-athletes. They perceived professional athletic and non-athletic careers as completely different options. “Being a professional athlete and getting a job are completely different paths, so I’m looking at both of them” (Student C). Additionally, they did not imagine much of a future career if they did not pursue a career as a professional athlete. “If I get a job, I hope to have a stable life and earn a good salary” (Student B). “It’s important not to have a bad future” (Student L). These student-athletes vaguely prepared for the future and considered taking different paths if they could not become professional athletes. Thus, Japanese student-athletes are likely to pursue either athletic or nonathletic careers. DC, which is pursuing both athletic and non-athletic careers (athletics and academics or athletics and work), is the most common approach in Europe and North America (Guidotti et al., 2015). Though the Japanese student-athletes had similar thoughts on DC (i.e., options for a professional athlete’s career and others), they might be slightly different from those of their Western counterparts. For example, Harrison et al. (2022) reported that university-level soccer players placed equal emphasis on

athletic and non-athletic careers. However, the Japanese differed in that they placed more weight on one, although they still retained both as options. In Japan, there is not only a lack of role models for post-athletic careers (especially if they are not successful athletes), but also limited research carried out on dual careers (Arai et al., 2018). For these reasons Japanese student-athletes may feel pressured to choose between athletic or non-athletic careers. In addition, none of the participants in our study stated that they would pursue academics and sporting competitions after university graduation, which differed from the findings of previous studies (Vickers and Morris, 2022). As a result, we submit that establishing such career paths and support systems would be essential in Japan.

Table 3. Perspective

Primary category	Secondary category	Tertiary category
Pursuing an athletic career only		
	Aspiring to be a professional athlete	Hope to work as a professional athlete after graduation Wanting to compete a professional athlete
Having options for an athletic career and others		
	Having options in case one don't become a professional athlete	Get a job if they do not become a professional athlete Wish to obtain stable income if not able to become a professional athlete
	Considering being a professional athlete as one possible career path	Lack of a strong desire to be a professional athlete Considering being a professional athlete and getting a job as two completely different careers
	Vague preparation for the future	Not wanting to have a bad future Hoping to earn well
Pursuing a non-athletic career only		
	Finding a job or pursuing a certain occupation	Getting a job Pursuing a certain occupation as per choice

## 2. Barriers

The barriers identified in the analysis included barriers in choosing an athletic career, barriers in choosing a non-athletic career, and interpersonal and environmental barriers (as seen in Table 4). As abovementioned, the barriers in choosing an athletic career included difficulties in pursuing a professional athlete, and anxiety about life as a professional athlete and life after retirement as a professional athlete. The participants expressed concern about whether they could become professional athletes after university. “I don’t know if I am good enough to become a professional athlete and I don’t know the criteria for becoming a professional athlete” (Student E). “I lost confidence in my efforts compared to those around me who aspire to become professional athletes” (Student I). They also felt anxiety about life as a professional athlete and life after retirement, even if they were able to become professional athletes. “I think the life of a professional athlete is physically and mentally tough” (Student K). Prior research has examined athletes’ career transitions and the barriers to top-team promotions (Morris et al., 2017), retirement

from sport (Harry and Weight, 2021), and balancing DC (Lupo et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2015). Morris et al. (2017) conducted interviews with soccer players promoted from youth teams to top teams and reported that, prior to promotion, they were concerned about whether they could adapt to the speed and intensity of playing in top teams as well as whether they were physically and psychologically prepared for this change. This result is synonymous with the tertiary category of uncertainty about own abilities as an athlete in the present study. The findings of the present study revealed a wider range of difficulties involved in pursuing a career as an athlete than previous studies have unveiled. Additionally, in the context of studies on retirement and DC, the transition to a career other than professional competing has been considered (Stambulova, 2012). Few studies have been conducted on the difficulties involved in choosing an athletic career in this context, and thus, the results of our study add to the body of literature on the subject. According to our findings, the solution to overcoming these difficulties lies in seeking advice from experienced coaches and senior

professional athletes. “I ask the coaches about athletic careers. They have experience of professional athletes and their advice is very helpful. I don’t often talk to my parents or friends” (Student F). The student-athletes were less likely to discuss their athletic career with parents or friends who do not have competitive sports experience. In competitive sport, information regarding competitions is prone to constraints (Reilly and Gilbourne, 2003) and likewise, the lifestyles and post-athletic careers of athletes would only be shared among those with first-hand experience. It is important that the student-athletes have support not only from career counselors (Van Raalte et al., 2017) but also from those who have had experience of athletic careers.

The student-athletes who wanted to pursue an athletic career felt barriers in choosing a non-athletic career. Some had difficulty in clarifying their future. “I don’t know what I want to do other than sports and I don’t know how to think about it” (Student D). Research has highlighted that career planning is inhibited when athletes lack interest in non-athletic careers because they desire only to earn a living as a professional athlete (Harrison et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2016). In the present study, even if there was a specific job in which the student-athlete wanted to engage, they felt hesitant as they were not certain that they would be socio-economically secure. “I would like to become a coach in the future, but I am not sure if I should choose this career because it is a part-time or low-paid job” (Student F). There is little other research indicating that this hesitation was found in other studies and that it has been identified as a barrier previously. As there are jobs in non-athletic careers that present the same difficulties as choosing an athletic career (e.g., jobs in which volunteering or moonlighting is the norm), we believe that this issue needs to be considered when encouraging student-athletes to pursue DC.

Interpersonal and environmental barriers were mentioned at least once or more by all the participants. These barriers influenced the barriers in choosing an athletic career and the barriers in choosing a non-athletic career. Interpersonal barriers included a lack of people whom the student-athletes could trust to talk to about this issue and who they could look up to as role models. Student F stated, “My ideas conflict with those of my parents,” while Student A expressed a sense of loneliness relating to his career path when he commented “I have no friends around me who have similar ideas.” The lack of an environment in which the participants could share their thoughts on their careers was cited as a reason. In terms of environmental and organizational barriers the participants stated that “there is no climate in the club to think about future careers, and no one takes the time to do so” (Student L), and “I have no time to think about my career because the club activities are too long” (Student A). These statements indicated that the student-athletes were affected by the environment of their athletic clubs. Sum et al. (2017) reported that student-athletes are influenced by multiple stakeholders, including coaches, teammates, parents, siblings, teachers, and classmates when they consider their careers. Ryan (2015) also noted that professional athlete’s time and lifestyle constraints become more pressurized as they advance in their athletic career. However, the climate of the organization the athlete belongs to, has not been mentioned thus far. Nakasuga et al. (2019) pointed out that in the club activities of university students, members are more likely to take the initiative in their activities, and that team cohesion is strengthened by members making rules and adhering to them. If the club has a climate in which student-athletes are made to feel that they should only focus on sport, this may be a factor that inhibits their career transition.

Table 4. Barriers

Primary category	Secondary category	Tertiary category
Barriers in choosing an athletic career		
	Difficulties in pursuing a career as a professional athlete	Narrowness of the door to become a professional athlete Uncertainty about own abilities as an athlete Uncertainty of criteria to become a professional athlete Decreased confidence and determination to become a professional athlete due to comparisons with others Anxiety about athletic career due to injury
	Anxiety about life as a professional athlete and life after retirement as a professional athlete	Mental burden of pursuing only an athletic career Concerns about life and career after professional athlete Lack of information Anxiety about early retirement due to injury or lack of ability Concerns about balancing work and competition (depending on the sport)
Barriers in choosing a non-athletic career		
	Difficulties in dealing with the desire to be a professional athlete	Hesitation to consider a non-athletic career Difficulty in dealing with the possibility of being a professional athlete Difficulty maintaining motivation for current competitive activities
	Difficulties in clarifying what they wanted to work on other than being a professional athlete	Uncertainty about what one want to do outside of the sport Unclear image of a job/occupation other than being a professional athlete Difficulty in organizing career ideas Lack of clarity in the relationship between professional athletes and other careers Uncertainty about what to do with a non-athletic career
	Hesitation to socio-economically unstable work which they wanted to do	Hesitation regarding instability in socio-economic instability in work
Interpersonal and environmental barriers in choosing a career		
	Interpersonal difficulties	Lack of a reliable advisor Absence of people who share the same views Conflicts of opinion with others Non-availability of role models
	Organizational and environmental difficulties	Climate of thinking only about the competition in their club Restrictions due to club activities

### 3. Coping strategies and resources

Coping strategies and support resources were mentioned by the participants as ways to deal with barriers they faced (as seen in Table 5). Coping strategies involved preparation for making career decisions, postponement of thinking about careers and attitude of trying to make career decisions. Student B commented, “I keep a wide range of options open instead of focusing on just one possibility” while Student F

stated, “I am interested in children, so I am gathering information about teaching children in the future by reading books and talking to people I know.” Both participants had explored other potential careers after graduation. Some participants expressed a decision-making attitude, with Student A explaining, “I have set a deadline for when I will decide my future.” Student J also said “I analyze my characteristics and personality and think about the future career that will suit me.”

In terms of the strategies the student-athletes used to cope with career transitions, our results are similar to those of previous studies conducted with general students (Jemini-Gashi et al., 2021; Lipshits-Brazilier et al., 2016; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2013), which suggests that student-athletes need to seek career advice (especially regarding non-athletic careers) in the same way as other students. Although considering both athletic and non-athletic careers is important (De Brandt et al., 2017), this is extremely challenging for student-athletes due to time and effort limitations (Turick et al., 2021). There were also certain responses that showed that several participants had postponed their career decisions. These included “I can’t imagine my future, so I try not to think about it now and concentrate on the competition (Student L).” We submit that the difficulties posed by a non-athletic career would create an excuse to focus on the competitions. Furthermore, only a few of the participants were aware of the transferable skills and abilities they had gained from their athletic experience. In the career transitions of athletes, it has been emphasized that it is crucial for them not only to receive support from others and engage in career planning, but also to develop transferable skills that are valuable in the workplace (Matsankos et al., 2019). The student-athletes’ lack of awareness may stem from a perception that athletic and non-athletic careers are completely separate. Student C said, “I don’t know how my sport experience and working can be connected.” In the future, student-athletes who face time constraints while attempting to build their careers will require support to assist them to recognize their athletic experience as part of their life journey (Wylleman et al., 2004) and reflect on their past experiences to identify the skills they have already acquired.

Support resources consisted of interpersonal and organizational/environmental support. Interpersonal support involved the student-

athletes having someone to talk about alternative careers with or someone to give them opportunities to develop an interest in other occupations and to think about their future career plans. Several participants advised that they received support from their parents, siblings, relatives, coaches, teammates, teachers, alumnae, and others who were involved in their lives. Student A commented “I empathize with my parents’ way of working and their relationship with their colleagues, so I would like to choose a similar career.” In addition, the participants’ coaches provided them with the opportunity to achieve personal growth. “I learned important things as a human being such as greeting, punctuality and sincerity” (Student K). Their friends also motivated them. “I heard my friend was doing well, so I have to work harder too” (Student B).

Our results demonstrated that organizational and environmental support were found inside and outside the university. Participation in several different activities helped the participants think about their careers. “I considered my career for the first time through lectures at university” (Student F) and “I imagined my future through the extra club activity of organizing sports classes for children” (Student H) were some of the comments made. Through self-initiative, they were able to receive the support they required. Student A stated that “The staffing agency workers were busy and difficult to ask for advice, but I got information about the company information and how to write my CV.” The findings relating to support resources are consistent with previous studies in regard to support from stakeholders (Chambers and Lim, 2022; Tessitore et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that none of the participants mentioned the systemized support structures or support resources at university, regional or national level (such as Burns et al., 2013; Ryan, et al., 2017). This suggests that student-athletes,

who compete at a national level, but are not top in Japan, must chart their careers independently, relying on their own spontaneous and conscious effort. We therefore submit that support from those close to them plays a vital role in the construction of their careers (Tessitore et al., 2021). In this context, Japanese university student-athletes do possess certain support resources. For example, they are instructed by coaches as the participants have opportunities for personal growth. Student L described “The coach emphasizes the importance of both competition

and personal development. He encourages us to consider the social issues and to think about what we can do.” They also have connections with graduates, who provide useful information and advice, and opportunities to think about the future outside of their out-of-competition activities in their athletic clubs. This suggests that being a university student-athlete is not always a disadvantage for transitioning to a non-athletic career. However, it is important to understand what barriers they face and what support resources are available to construct the career.

Table 5. Coping Strategies/Resources

Primary category	Secondary category	Tertiary category
Coping strategies	Preparation for making career decisions	Gathering information
		Vaguely thinking about the future based on interests
		Consultation
		Obtaining qualifications
		Serious about what is in front of them
		Expand your range of options
Postponement of thinking about careers	Attitude of trying to make career decisions	Put the future on hold in accordance with surroundings
		Think seriously about career
Support resources	Interpersonal support	Clarify own characteristics and traits
		Consultation/reporting partner
		Provide opportunities to consider various careers
		Bringing interest in future and career
		Providing useful documents and information
	Organizational/environmental support	Maintaining motivation
		Promoting personal growth
		Courses and lectures
		Extracurricular involvement in club activities
		Support from private career support companies

## V. Conclusion

This study clarified the experiences of Japanese university student-athletes regarding career transitions through semi-structured interviews. University student-athletes’ career

transitions are impacted by perspectives, barriers, and coping strategies and resources. In future, assessment of the perspectives revealed in this study (e.g., a comprehensive examination of how they currently think about their career paths, the

barriers they face, how they cope, and what kind of environment they are in) will assist with developing the necessary support for university student-athletes.

Nevertheless, this study has three limitations. First, the sample was drawn from one university and the student-athletes were engaged in a small number of sports. In the future, the experiences of athletes from other sports and universities should be clarified and compared. The career perspectives, barriers, and coping strategies of university student-athletes could differ depending on the level of competition, individual or team sport, or minor or major sport (Wylleman et al., 2004). Clarifying differences based on these demographic features through interviews or questionnaires will further the understanding of student-athletes' career transitions. Second, it was not possible to identify the key factors within each aspect. For example, what barriers specifically need to be resolved for university student-athletes, and what coping strategies and resources are important for them? Using questionnaire surveys could determine these specific factors. Third, as this study was conducted only with students in Japan, we were unable to examine institutional and cultural influences of the Japanese context in detail. It would be beneficial to clarify the system surrounding university student-athletes in Japan through interviews with the university career staff and athletic organizations. It would also be valuable to compare the value and role of university sports in Japan with those of other countries.

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