

Engagement in sport career transition planning enhances performance

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2 **Abstract**

3 Retirement from sport has the potential to be a major loss for professional athletes. Yet,
4 many athletes resist engaging in career transition planning programs prior to their
5 retirement. This research note reports the findings from an investigation on whether
6 planning for an inevitable resource loss event (i.e., retirement from professional sport)
7 can accrue gains (i.e., sporting performance). Data for this study was sourced from the
8 National Rugby League, a top-level men's professional sports league in Australasia, and
9 included 28,516 performance selection observations for 632 players over three seasons.
10 The findings demonstrated that higher levels of engagement in pre-retirement planning
11 were positively associated with team selection, team tenure, and career tenure. Pre-
12 retirement planning was also found to exert its effect on performance through the
13 experience of career transition practitioners and the number of intervention support
14 sessions the athletes participated in. Results are discussed in relation to conservation of
15 resources and cognitive dissonance theories.

16 **Introduction**

17 Retirement from sport has the potential to be a major loss for professional
18 athletes. Past research on this topic has focused on the consequences of sport retirement
19 and how making the transition out of sport can lead to reductions in personal (e.g., loss
20 of sporting performance skills), material (e.g., loss of occupation), and symbolic (e.g.,
21 loss of identity) resources to which the athlete was emotionally attached (cf. Harvey,
22 1996). Nearly one in five elite athletes experience distressful reactions following
23 retirement from sport, and many experience feelings of loss (Grove, Lavalley, Gordon,
24 & Harvey, 1998; Park, Tod, & Lavalley, 2013). More recent studies have also started to

1 examine what resources can help athletes cope with the career transition process,
2 including pre-retirement planning (Park et al., 2013).

3 Pre-retirement intervention programs offer career and education support to
4 professional athletes during their playing careers to help them plan for their inevitable
5 transition out of sport. Although pre-retirement planning is one of the best predictors of
6 successful career transitions out of sport, many athletes elect not to engage in
7 intervention programs even when they have access to such services (North & Lavalley,
8 2004). This resistance has been attributed to the perception that engagement in career
9 transition intervention programs while still competing could be a distraction from their
10 sport performance (Park et al., 2013; Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992).
11 Cognitive dissonance, therefore, may play an important role in pre-retirement planning.

12 Cognitive dissonance theory postulates that individuals strive toward cognitive
13 consistency when a situation involves conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. If there
14 are inconsistencies, people will make alterations in their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors
15 to reduce psychological discomfort and restore balance in their lives (Festinger, 1957).
16 The magnitude of dissonance depends on importance or value of the attitude, belief, or
17 behavior that is dissonant, and thus influences the pressure to reduce or eliminate the
18 dissonance. As the magnitude increases, pressures to reduce dissonance and avoidance
19 from situations that generate dissonance also increase. Furthermore, when individuals
20 take actions that appear to be in conflict with their starting preferences, they experience
21 feelings of discomfort. To minimize or avoid this discomfort, people change their
22 preferences to more closely align with their actions.

23 Recent theoretical and empirical perspectives influenced by Hobfoll's (2002)
24 conservation of resources (COR) theory may also help advance knowledge in the area

1 of retirement from sport. COR theory has been adopted previously across several
2 different sporting contexts and populations (e.g., Ford & Gordon, 2008; Wendling,
3 Kellison, & Sagas, 2017) but the focus has generally been on psychological stress and
4 strain. A recent trend in the literature concerning COR theory has been its extension to
5 better understand how individuals allocate and conserve resources in the context of
6 resource gains and losses. Central to COR theory is the principle that resources need to
7 be invested by people in order to protect or limit potential losses. COR theory also
8 postulates a gain paradox principle: resource loss is disproportionately more salient and
9 important than resource gain (Hobfoll, 2012). From these principles, a number of
10 relevant corollaries of the resource investment process have been proposed to help
11 understand the downstream impact of changes in resources. For example, investment
12 becomes more difficult when individuals lose resources and they become more prone to
13 further investment loss (i.e., loss spirals) under stressful conditions. On the other hand,
14 when individuals gain resources they have greater opportunities to invest and accrue
15 additional resources (i.e., resource gain spirals). These patterns have been supported
16 through studies showing how individuals who possess resources are more capable of
17 offsetting losses, and how this serves to facilitate the acquisition of other resources
18 (Ennis, Hobfoll, & Schroder, 2000).

19 Wang, Henkens, and van Solinge's (2011) resource-based dynamic model has
20 proposed resources as the central mechanism that shapes how people cope with
21 retirement from the workforce. According to this model, losses, gains, or no change in
22 resources will lead to decreasing, increasing, or stable trajectories in the retirement
23 process, respectively. Recent work by Topa and Valero (2017) has applied this model in
24 a study exploring retirees' satisfaction, depression, and actual loss of resources. Results

1 revealed that the threat of resource loss had a positive relationship on retirement
2 satisfaction and depression levels after retirement.

3 While recent studies in sport have helped inform the development of pre-
4 retirement intervention programs for elite athletes around the world, little research has
5 examined the impact of the investment of resources during the career transition process.
6 Given the extant research (e.g., Topa & Valero, 2017), an interesting line of enquiry
7 would involve studying whether planning for an inevitable resource loss event (i.e.,
8 retirement from sport) can accrue gains. Such an extension of COR theory may
9 contribute to new ways of testing the resource investment process (Hobfoll,
10 Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman 2018). Therefore, the aim of this research was to
11 examine whether engaging in a pre-retirement planning program can enhance sporting
12 performance.

13 **Method**

14 Anonymized data for this study was sourced from the National Rugby League
15 (NRL), a top-level men's professional sports league in Australasia. A total of 16 teams
16 play in the NRL, fifteen of which are based in Australia and one in New Zealand. The
17 NRL operates on a single group system, with no divisions or conferences and no
18 relegation and promotion from other leagues. Each team plays 26 games per season
19 between March and October annually, with additional games scheduled in the finals
20 (i.e., playoffs) rounds. A total 17 players are selected to play per team for each game
21 based on performance levels at the time of selection.

22 Performance data was sourced across three seasons (2014, 2015, and 2016) from
23 official NRL databases, with all performance data entered manually and double-checked
24 for quality assurance purposes. Performance data included team selection, team tenure,

1 and career tenure for each player for each game across all three years (final round
2 games were excluded because every team was not represented). The players selected for
3 each team for every potential game, taking into account availability for selection and
4 excluding injured, suspended, and players being rested, were initially coded. The
5 number of years each player had been contracted at their current club (team tenure) and
6 playing in the NRL overall (career tenure) as at the start of the season in question were
7 also recorded.

8 Pre-retirement planning data was sourced for each player and included an
9 engagement in pre-retirement planning measure at every team selection point.
10 Engagement in pre-retirement planning was determined through a measurement of
11 Career Decidedness (Gordon, 1998) and Career Planning (Prochaska & DiClemente,
12 1992). Career Decidedness was applied with three categories as follows: *Undecided*: “I
13 don’t know what I want to do after footy”; *Exploring Options*: “I have an idea of what I
14 want to do/a few interests but I’m not sure yet which I really want to do after footy”;
15 and *Decided*: “I’m confident I’ve made a well-informed choice about what I want to do
16 after footy”. Career Planning was applied with five stages adapted from the
17 transtheoretical model of behavior change as follows: *Pre-contemplation*: no thought of
18 or intention to do career planning; *Contemplation*: weighing up the pros and cons of
19 career planning, but still doing no planning; *Preparation*: engaging in career planning;
20 *Action*: taking action towards their future career (e.g., studying, working); and
21 *Maintenance*: future career has been underway for at least three months (e.g. own
22 business, a trade, property development). For someone to be *engaged* they were
23 categorised as: Exploring Options or Decided in the area of Career Decidedness; and
24 Action or Maintenance in the area of Career Planning. Career transition practitioners

1 (i.e., career coaches) assessed Career Decidedness and Career Planning measures for
2 every player at every team selection point, and entered the data into a software system
3 built for tracking, reporting, and case management.

4 Data was also sourced on the experience of the career coaches (20 in total,
5 including at least one for each team; categorized as experienced, novice, or no
6 experience) and the number of pre-retirement intervention support sessions for each
7 player (Mean = 1.63, SD = .84).

8 Results

9 The data set included a total of 28,516 performance selection observations for
10 632 players (Mean age in 2016 = 23.84, SD = 4.26; Mean years team tenure in 2016 =
11 2.52, SD = 3.02; Mean years career tenure in 2016 = 4.02, SD = 4.01). Engagement in
12 pre-retirement planning was found to be significantly correlated with each of the
13 performance measures: team selection ($X^2 = 112.18, p < .01$); team tenure ($r_b = .48, p <$
14 $.01$); and career tenure ($r_b = .52, p < .01$). Engagement in pre-retirement planning was
15 also found to be significantly correlated with the number of pre-retirement intervention
16 support sessions ($r_b = .81, p < .001$) and career coach experience ($X^2 = 456.12, p <$
17 $.001$).

18 Linear and logistic regression analyses were also tested following relevant
19 variable transformations. These results demonstrated that engagement in pre-retirement
20 planning was positively associated to team selection ($F = 6.94, p = .008, R^2 = .19$), team
21 tenure ($F = 16.58, p < .01, R^2 = .23$), and career tenure ($F = 28.57, p < .01, R^2 = .27$).
22 Sobel tests were employed to explore whether the experience of the career coach and
23 the number of intervention support sessions could explain the impact of pre-retirement
24 planning on performance. Significant ($p < .05$) results were found for the experience of

1 the career coach (team selection: $z = 2.21$; and team tenure: $z = 2.07$) and the number of
2 intervention support sessions (team selection: $z = 1.98$; and career tenure: $z = 3.22$).

3 **Discussion**

4 The aim of this research was to examine whether planning for retirement from
5 sport can enhance sporting performance. When relationships across the study variables
6 were examined, higher levels of engagement in career transition planning were found to
7 be related to team selection when available (i.e., not injured, suspended, or being
8 rested), the number of years contracted by the team, the number of years playing
9 overall, the experience of the experience of the career coach, and the number of
10 intervention support sessions. The results support the findings by Topa and Valero
11 (2017) as the threat of a resource loss event can have a positive impact on pre-
12 retirement planning.

13 Further analyses showed how greater engagement in career transition planning
14 predicted team selection, team tenure, and career tenure. These findings can be partially
15 explained through cognitive dissonance theory as engaging in pre-retirement planning
16 may have led to less cognitive dissonance, allowing for more time to focus on sporting
17 performance. Previous research (e.g., North & Lavalley, 2004) has shown how many
18 athletes resist engaging in pre-retirement programs they have access to, possibly due to
19 the perception that such engagement could be a distraction from their sporting
20 performance (Petitpas et al., 1992). In this study, evidence was found to suggest that
21 inconsistencies that might normally influence professional athletes to not engage in pre-
22 retirement planning were altered. The value players placed on pre-retirement planning
23 appears to be greater than the pressures to focus exclusively on sport performance (cf.
24 Festinger, 1957), perhaps due to the experience of the career coach and number of

1 intervention support sessions. The experience of the career coach was found to explain
2 the significant relationship between engagement in career transition planning and team
3 selection and team tenure, and the number of intervention support sessions was found to
4 explain the significant relationship between engagement in career transition planning
5 and team selection and career tenure.

6 By applying the process of resource loss and gain cycles among professional
7 athletes, this study extends Hobfoll's (2002) COR theory into the retirement from sport
8 context. The findings also support COR theory, as the professional athletes who took
9 action through engagement in pre-retirement planning invested resources in order to
10 limit potential losses. In line with Hobfoll's (2012) gain paradox principle, resource
11 gains would have increased in salience as loss circumstances became higher. In this
12 study, individuals were deemed to be engaged in pre-retirement planning if their levels
13 of career decidedness (i.e., exploring options or decided) and career planning (i.e.,
14 action or maintenance) were in the advanced stages. The downstream impact of changes
15 in resource investment is seen in the performance data for the individual, team, and
16 career overall. When individuals accrued resources in planning for their retirement,
17 they would have had greater opportunity to accrue additional resources through gain
18 spirals. In a similar way to Ennis et al. (2000), this would have allowed the athletes to
19 be more capable of offsetting losses and thereby jumpstarting further resource gains.
20 Future researchers should consider the role that time plays in in the dynamics of
21 resource investment. This temporal aspect can take many forms, ranging from the
22 amount of time over which resources are lost or gained, to the length of recovery
23 periods necessary to regain resources, to the specific timing that a resource becomes
24 available relative to the timing of resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 114).

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