

M Volleyball

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BREAKING

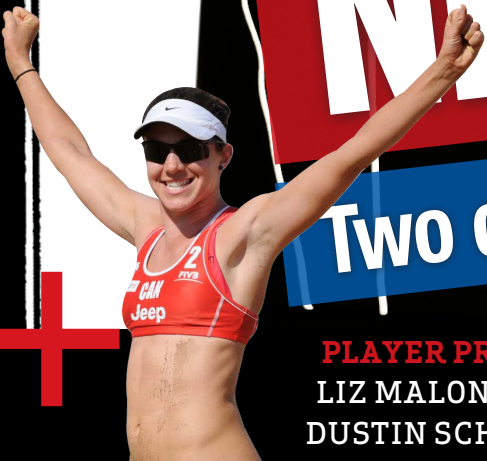
NEW GROUND

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FEATURE
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Is there life after sports ?

By **Dr. NATASCHA WESCH**

Throughout the careers of competitive athletes, the focus is on maximizing competitive performance: how to make improvements in their technical, tactical, physical and mental games. This focus becomes all-consuming for both the athlete and his or her coach.



Yet, when the athlete decides to leave the sport, the coach's focus shifts to the next generation of athletes and the retiring athlete often is left alone to make the transition to another career or lifestyle. This transition is often a difficult step, and many athletes experience depression, feelings of loss or social isolation, and even suicide.

Why does this happen and how can we make it better?

Athletes retire for a variety of reasons: age, injury, de-selection, free choice, etc. As a result, athletes may face a wide range of psychological, social and financial changes. How the athlete deals with these changes will affect the quality of the adaptation to retirement.

Competitive athletes tend to identify themselves as athletes first. When this identity is threatened or removed due to retirement, then they have a difficult time determining who they are. If they are no longer athletes, then who exactly are they?

Too often, individuals confuse who they are as a person with what they do. The key step here is to recognize that

being an athlete is only one part of who you are. It may be a big part, but it is still only a part. Taking time to identify the other roles you hold (e.g., parenthood) is increasingly important as you begin to put in more energy and time into those roles.

An athlete's world is often made up of people within his or her sport: coaches, teammates, media, competitors, etc. When athletes leave their sport, they feel like they have lost their social identity and social support.

Social support and relationships are integral to being human, so it is important for retired athletes to look to make new connections. Often this takes time, but a good place to start is through other retired athletes or finding another focus of interest (e.g., academics, even another sport).

A sense of control is important to competitive athletes. In fact, for the majority of their careers, athletes have tried to control as many aspects of their preparation and performance as possible. Often, when retirement occurs due to

unforeseen circumstances, the sense of control is shaken.

Therefore, it is critical to retain some control by focusing on the areas that can be managed, and on the things that make you happy (e.g., physical fitness and training, working towards goals). Also, it is important to remember that in order to cope with major life changes, such as retirement, time and support are required.

A few simple, yet effective ways to handle retirement are:

- ✓ Find another interest to replace your sport participation - School, travel, work, a different activity
- ✓ Keep busy - Stay connected to your sport through coaching or mentoring
- ✓ Maintain your exercise/training regimen and routine - Continue to stay active and fit
- ✓ Speak with someone who listens - This could be a close friend or a professional who deals with career transition
- ✓ Stay in touch with your sport and friends - Maintain friendships and close relationships
- ✓ Recognize that transition is a process, that it won't happen overnight - It's normal to feel a little loss, so it's vital to keep connections with others (do not isolate yourself or feel as though you are not normal for feeling down or lost)

Yes, there is life after sports...!

(Dr. Natascha Wesch, PhD is a Mental Performance Consultant who works with athletes and teams of all sports backgrounds and ages; for more information, or to contact her directly, please visit www.elitemindperformance.com)