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### **Understanding Student-Athlete Reintegration: Using Social Work Strengths**

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**Charlotte E. Dean**

*Port Human Services*

**Jerry F. Reynolds II**

*Louisiana State University*

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*The reintegration process that follows a student athlete's unplanned retirement from sport is common among student-athletes. Upon reintegration there are factors that influence an athlete's ability to remain on campus. These include positive social supports, personal skills, coping skills, and goal setting. There are also more negative reintegration factors such as isolation and role engulfment, limited social supports, lack of preparation, limited personal living skills and emotional regulation, and negative stereotypes from the general collegiate population. A case study helps illustrate the difficulties that a student-athlete may encounter during the reintegration process and how professionals can assist in a more positive transition. The purpose of this article is to provide valuable references to those who may encounter or seek to better assist former athletes who experience challenges with reintegration.*

*Keywords: student-athlete, reintegration, social work*

Understanding how a college athlete reintegrates into the academic population of a university upon completion of their college sport career has multiple dimensions. College athletes represent a special population with unique needs different from their non-athletic peers and supplemental to the normal demands of a college student. At the Division I level or highest level of competitive college sport, they too must navigate a complex social and political athletic system of the university (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009). Challenges also remain with athletes when their competitive career ends and they seek to remain in a college environment when their athletic career expectedly or unexpectedly ends. The end of a college athlete's career has been labeled as being the equivalent to experiencing a death (Partridge, 2015) or representing a rebirth (Coakley, 1983).

Within this paper, our goal is to provide insight concerning the influences upon a former athlete's reintegration experience. In particular, this information will be useful for both academics and practitioners seeking to better understand how social workers can serve student-athletes as they retire from competitive sport and matriculate as a non-athlete. Recent studies have shown that the majority of college athletes encounter difficulties when leaving sport (Reifsteck, Gill, & Labban, 2016). It has been argued by scholars that an athlete's college experience is largely shaped by an overemphasis upon the role of athletics (Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). In order to better understand these influences upon an athlete, it is important to consider what shapes an athlete's collegiate experience and how remaining on a college campus after leaving sport for these athletes is challenging.

Athletes on college campus are often highly recruited and sought out for their athletic abilities. Larger athletic programs, such as those at the Division I level, spend millions of dollars annually allocated for the recruitment of these elite athletes and a small percentage are suitable for Division I competition. In American culture, college sport is often viewed as a gateway to a life of future economic success, social status, and stardom (Lanter & Hawkins, 2013). The athlete's family, coaches, their collegiate campus, and broader communities of fans validate expectations of athletic success. These influences may either intentionally or unintentionally foster a seductive environment of entitlement, permissiveness, and dependence (Wooten, 1994). Demands of coaches and personal expectations to excel translate into a full time job in addition to their role as a full time student. When a college sport career ends, significant adjustment ensues and research has shown that difficulties are the norm, rather than exception (Reifsteck et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that the end of an athlete's career can be approached as a retirement (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) due to the amount of time and energy expounded to become an elite athlete. As such, departing from one's life work can be a significant transition, especially if the athlete seeks to remain in the university environment without sports.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Some existing conceptual frameworks can serve as valuable references to understanding components of the reintegration process. Within this manuscript, we will highlight some references to describe the emotional transition of athletes (Wooten, 1994) provide an overview of the retirement process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and describe other influences upon reintegration,

such as role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991). As an athlete leaves college sport, Wooten (1994) asserted that athletes encounter seven stages of emotional transition. Upon departure or in anticipation of departure, the athlete encounters a period of shock and immobilization. The circumstance through which an athlete enters their athletic transition greatly informs how long they will remain in this stage. In stage two, the athlete typically seeks to minimize their challenges and often does not fully grasp or imagine a life without sport. During this period anxiety, depression, and frustration are common (Wooten, 1994). In stage three, feelings of doubt exacerbate the emotions encountered in stage two and intensify with a fear of the future. During stage four, the athlete begins to accept the inevitability of their retirement and appear to be more optimistic about the future. In the fifth stage, the athlete begins to consider new possibilities outside of sports and seek to test their new ideas. In stage six, the athlete will experience a period of ups and downs as they attach new meaning to their experiences not in competitive college athletics. In the final stage of transition, the athlete actively moves toward new ways of functioning and is mindful of the lessons learned during their transition. They seek to apply the lessons learned to future circumstances where a life transition occurs (Wooten, 1994).

Another important idea to examine is role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991). Adler and Adler (1991) ethnographic research found that athletes come to universities and colleges with a positive outlook about completing coursework and earning a degree, but due to overinvestment in sport athletes quickly became disenchanted with the idea of academic achievement and become more engulfed into their athletic roles and responsibilities. Despite perceptions that college athletes are overinvested in athletics, research has suggested they are equally focused upon both academic and athletic success (Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). Due to both academic and sport demands, this is often not reality. Seeking the rewards from nurturing an elite athlete's physical skills, universities establish arrangements, which often shield the athlete from the responsibilities of their non-athletic peers. Day to day activities of athletes are highly regimented and structured around athletics. Selecting a major is often not based upon the athlete's educational interests, but what is most convenient and allows for maximized time devoted to athletic pursuits. On campus, athletes too are largely isolated from their non-athletic peers. They often eat meals in and live in athlete specific environments. They too have difficulty assuming a life without sport and often question whether they belong on a college campus where they are disconnected from their identity as an athlete.

### *Planned or Unplanned Retirement*

The circumstances of retirement from athletics influence the outcome. Regardless of whether the end of an athlete's career is planned or unplanned, research has shown that athletic retirement is associated with psychological difficulties among collegiate athletes in general (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish 1992; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). When a retirement is expected or planned, due to the end of an athlete's eligibility or a self-motivated exit from sport, the athlete can exert control over the circumstance, promoting appropriate psychological adjustment and preparation for the retirement (Milhovilovic, 1968; Hill & Lowe, 1974). Unplanned retirement occurs when an athlete is unexpectedly cut from a team, has a career-ending injury or does not get selected by or invited to a professional tryout. An appropriate retirement plan allows the athlete more time to adjust to

life without intense athletic competition (Hill & Lowe, 1974). Scholars too have suggested multiple sources of influence upon athletic retirement.

Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) conceptual framework provides an overview of the retirement from sport process. The quality of an athlete's retirement or transition out of sport is affected by the circumstances of retirement (as described planned or unplanned), the pre-retirement resources and social support of the athlete, their identity, and sense of control over the process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). When an athlete's resources to adjust to retirement are limited, they have increased potential to encounter psychosocial risks, such as career development challenges, relationship problems, and psychosocial adjustment issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, and mental illness. However, this is not always the case as an athlete can have a positive or negative reintegration experience.

### *Positive Reintegration Factors*

Many student-athletes have a successful reintegration process into their college community, work force, or other life experiences (Partridge, 2015). Two important areas include social supports, and personal skills (Leffler, 2012). While many student-athletes may experience sport related social isolation, those who have many meaningful and positive social supports inside and outside of sport will experience more ease of the re-socialization process. Adjusting to a new social environment, sometimes for the first time, may cause a myriad of distressing or unpleasant emotions. A diverse and abundant positive support network can make the transition easier (Leffler, 2012). Those supports can range from coaches, student athletes, retired athletes, family, friends, classmates, and many others (Fuller, 2014). A student-athlete reintegrating into the college social community can benefit from reaching out to their support group for assistance. Those having more difficulties with the re-socialization process may benefit from counseling to develop new or additional social skills and have a safe and positive outlet for their feelings (Leffler, 2012). Clinical social workers can be resources for student-athletes at this time to help teach positive skills for resocialization, provide support, and facilitate emotional expression. Having a positive and diverse sense of self may also aid the transitional process. By seeing himself or herself as a multi-dimensional being, not solely as an athlete, will aid a student-athlete in the process of identity change and have a more successful retirement (Fuller, 2014). Social supports and inclusion are an integral part of the reintegration process. A positive sense of self and positive support network will aid in a smooth transition into the general collegiate population.

Reintegration is eased when a student-athlete has knowledge of positive coping skills to help navigate associated stressors with the process (Leffler, 2012). Some successful reintegration skills may be inherent in some student-athletes, while others may require assistance acquiring them. Many athletes experience a sense of relief retiring from sport. Others may have a negative experience, which will require knowledge and utilization of positive coping skills. Student-athletes who are involved in clubs, volunteer work, hobbies, or other areas of interest will have a smoother transition process (Leffler, 2012). Social workers can help teach positive coping skills to student-athletes in either the group or individual setting to help with the transition process.

Planning for athletic retirement and setting goals for post-collegiate athletics helps an athlete transition by enabling them to have more influence over their outcomes and futures (Leffler, 2012; Fuller, 2014). Goal setting is another skill that gives student-athletes' more direction, which shifts focus to accomplishments and goals to work towards, rather than

reintegration difficulties (Fuller, 2014). Also noted within the literature are physiological challenges (Reifsteck et al., 2016). Learning skills of alternative fitness routines for health rather than sport, and being aware of physical body changes and body image alterations that may occur during the reintegration process is essential for student-athletes during the transition. This aids in learning life skills that may have not been previously learned while participating in sport (Fuller, 2014; Leffler, 2012). An athlete's training throughout their career is sport specific and directed by a coach or trainer. During reintegration phases an athlete must learn skills to exercise independently and for health rather than sport. Coping skills, goal setting skills and healthy living skills help student-athletes have a positive reintegration process by strengthening various aspects of their lives. Social workers can assist in helping student-athletes in translation of their athletic strengths to a non-athletic setting.

### *Negative Reintegration Factors*

While there are many skills and support networks that predict a student-athlete to have a positive reintegration experience there are potentially more factors that can contribute to a difficult reintegration experience. Support networks are beneficial for a positive reintegration process but many student-athletes lack diverse social supports. Student athletes overall don't see non-athletes as being as supportive of them compared to their teammates (NCAA, 2016a). While they may have some social supports outside of their team, many of their closest friends are teammates. This means during the reintegration process student-athletes will have overall less diverse supports, and potentially less social assistance from the general collegiate community due to this social isolation.

During the reintegration process a student-athlete may also be subsequently isolated from their athletic supports such as active teammates, coaches, trainers and others (Leffler, 2012). The student-athlete may have difficulty reaching out to them due to their professional and ongoing commitment to their sport, as well as not being able to relate to the reintegration process. This unintentional exclusion process means a student-athlete has to create a new social role without many of their former supports (Leffler, 2012). Having fewer social supports may require the student-athlete to navigate the reintegration process alone (Fuller, 2014). Family can be an excellent support throughout the reintegration process if a student-athlete does not have access to other supports listed. However, athletes may feel unwilling to reach out to family due to shame of not meeting familial expectations (NCAA, 2016a). Limited support during the reintegration process can cause a student-athlete great distress and feelings of loneliness. Social workers are able to help student-athletes by providing a professional support, and help them identify and strengthen natural supports.

Lack of preparation for the reintegration process can also create difficulties for student-athletes. Many athletes do not believe they will need to reintegrate into the college community, and do not plan for the reintegration process. Very few athletes will continue on to the next level of sport (NCAA, 2016b). Student-athletes may have greater difficulties adjusting during the reintegration process if they do not begin planning for reintegration (Partridge, 2015). They will also have more distress if they leave sport for unexpected reasons for reintegration such as having a career ending injury, chronic pain, or removal from sport (Partridge, 2015). Some colleges and universities have programs to prepare athletes for the reintegration process; however, many student-athletes are not being adequately prepared for this process (Leffler, 2012; Webb et al., 1998). Social workers can be an integral source to help collegiate institutions as they

have the education and background to plan, prepare, and implement programs to help student-athletes begin preparing for their reintegration (Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

A recent survey of former college athletes by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2016a) reported a high level of dissatisfaction with their level of career preparation. This can make reintegration difficult as they may be learning these skills later in their collegiate career, or miss out completely. In a college athletic environment, much adult responsibility is deferred to maximize time spent upon athletics. When their athletic career ends, many will be without athletic department resources during the reintegration process. Without these resources and continuity of these relationships, there is potential for life skill deficits (Leffler, 2012). Also important to consider is potential to turn to substance use as a negative coping skill during the reintegration process (Leffler, 2012). Student-athletes are known to have substance use throughout their athletic careers, sometimes more than the general student population (Dean & Rowan, 2013). This puts student-athletes more at risk for use of this coping skill during the reintegration process when they may be under more stressful conditions. Various mental health professionals, including clinical social workers, can help student-athletes learn necessary life skills and positive coping skills in order to better navigate the reintegration process.

There are several mental and emotional factors that may indicate a harsher reintegration experience. Many athletes spend the vast majority of their lives training for a career in college athletics and the majority of their time in college is spent devoted to their sport. As a result, student-athletes may separate from sport feeling tired and jaded due to physical and mental exhaustion (Fuller, 2014). Therefore, it can be assumed that some student-athletes will have less desire and energy to put into having a positive reintegration experience due to the emotional factors. Student-athletes may also focus on their inadequacies, and goals not being met during their athletic careers during the reintegration process which can lead to feelings of regret and shame (Fuller, 2014). If the student-athlete has a strong athletic identity they are also more likely to have difficulties due to this strong attachment to self, and the changing of their identity, which can result in psychological difficulties (Partridge, 2015). If they are having a difficult reintegration process they are also susceptible to various psychological disorders or difficulties such as adjustment disorders, substance use disorders, depression, anxiety, fear, loss of self-esteem and self-image or many others (Leffler, 2012). Reintegration is inherently a stressful event and mental and emotional factors create additional stressors for a student-athlete. Mental health professionals such as clinical social workers, counselors, sports psychologists, and others can assist student-athletes in treating and managing various psychological disorders that may arise during the student-athlete's reintegration into the general collegiate population.

The presence of negative stereotypes of student-athletes by the general college population creates unique stressors during the reintegration process. The general student body may have negative preconceived notions towards student-athletes, which would make integrating into the social and academic community difficult, due to stereotype threat. Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone (2009) found in their research study that the general college student population has many stereotypes of student-athletes such as being dumb, lazy, and partying in excess. There is also the possibility that faculty may treat them differently due to student-athlete status, either positively or negatively throughout the transition process (Comeaux, 2010). The research is inconclusive on if faculty members as a whole treat student-athletes differently, but research does state that some faculty have a negative attitude and believe that student-athletes will perform worse academically. This is greater for male athletes (Comeaux, 2010). Negative stereotypes or stigma,

can have a detrimental impact for an athlete reintegrating into the college population and influence how well they are accepted into their college population based on the preconceived notions.

The final factor that current literature reflects as an indicator of a more difficult reintegration process is isolation and role engulfment. Various demands placed on student-athletes during their athletic careers take away from their ability to fully engage and partake in the college experience (Singer, 2008). A student-athlete chooses their college based on different factors than that of the general population. They focus on aspects such as the sports offered, the team, and coach, success of the athletic programs, and scholarship availability. While engaged in the reintegration process they may find that they do not prefer certain aspects of their collegiate institution, such as location, academics, campus diversity, and campus activities, and become unhappy (Le Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009). The academic and social isolation that occurs within sport will be revealed during the reintegration process and has the potential to cause difficulties for a student-athlete (Comeaux, 2010). The isolation that occurs for student-athletes throughout their careers causes them to have many insufficiencies and vulnerabilities for difficulties. However, there are ways to assist athletes in having a successful reintegration process. Social workers can be a valuable aid to help student-athletes have a successful reintegration because of their wide array of skills and knowledge of how person in environment affects an individual and their outcomes (Dean & Rowan, 2013; Gill, 2008).

### *Reintegration Success Factors*

While there are many factors influencing a student-athlete's reintegration success during the process, there are also many ways that their collegiate institution and supports can assist to ensure a smooth process. One way they can aid is by having programs and career fairs specifically tailored to student-athlete needs and future career planning. They can also prepare athletes by educating them on exercise for health rather than their sport, as well as a detraining regimen. It would also be beneficial to provide educational and counseling services for student-athletes on body composition and psychological changes that may accompany body image changes which are likely to occur during the reintegration process. Student-athletes should also be given opportunities and guidance to participate in other college and university clubs and organizations that are non-sport related. This helps them build relationships and experiences outside of their athletic careers, which benefits them in the transition process (Fuller, 2014). Social workers can assist student-athletes who have interest in various university clubs or organizations by helping advocate for them to athletic staff to have some time away from their sport in order to engage in these activities. Another institutional responsibility is ensuring that student-athletes have positive relationships with coaches and other athletic staff, and introducing them to other professional supports to begin building relationships with them during the reintegration process (Fuller, 2014). When collegiate institutions assist in these ways and many others it will greatly increase student-athlete success during the reintegration process.

There are a few examples of established programs that assist student-athletes in their reintegration process. The NCAA has articles on their website with information regarding a successful reintegration process. A notable article by Moshak (2013) describes the University of Tennessee that has a program helping reintegrating football players on how to maintain a healthy body weight. It helps educate them on healthy eating, stress management and self-actualization;

it has been found that this program helps them lengthen their lifespan (Moshak, 2013). This program is a positive step for football players to learn this essential life skill.

Arizona State University also has developed a model that helps athletes with the reintegration process (Partridge, 2015). Their program features supportive interventions that help athletes with the more difficult parts of the transition back into the college community such as coping skills, and identify supports. It also encourages counseling interventions for athletes having more extensive difficulties, life skills development for the different stages of retiring from sport, and obtaining additional aid for career such as professional skills, and networking (Partridge, 2015). These are only a few examples of established programs that help illustrate how collegiate institutions can help student-athletes with the reintegration process. Using aspects of established programs for aiding student-athletes in the reintegration process can help the NCAA with creating a widespread program for all of their participants.

### *Case Study*

Sarah (name changed to maintain confidentiality) a 19-year-old student-athlete member of a Division I swimming and diving team reintegrated into the general college population after being a member of the team for one year. She had premature and unexpected reintegration due to medical reasons. Sarah competed as a swimmer for 13 years. Swimmers spend many hours practicing, often twice a day both in the water and dryland practice. Sarah's experience reintegrating into the general college population was not immediately difficult, as she remained close with many of the friends she had made while a member of her collegiate team. Due to her circumstances she ultimately ended up transferring universities and found it very hard entering into a new school after losing contact with teammates to their time commitment to their sport.

Sarah described the reintegration process and separation from her team as "everything is different, the way you schedule classes is different, the people you meet are different, the things you do for fun are different." She reflected upon her life prior to reintegration and reported how she can see that she always lived inside, what Sarah calls, a swimming bubble. This bubble is described as all of her friends being swimmers, all they talked about was swimming, she only dated swimmers, and all of her friends did the same things together, as swimmers. She reported her sport consumed her life, and she never really ventured outside of her swimming community.

When Sarah stopped swimming and reintegrated into the college population, for the first time in her life, she had to venture outside of her swimming comfort zone. This was initially very hard for Sarah to figure out and navigate. She began isolating, and described many depressive symptoms. When she reintegrated into her new school, she went to class and straight home, where she lived with her parents. She didn't engage in campus activities, meet new people, or want to live on campus. Sarah described her reintegration process as disconnecting from her former life as a student-athlete and identity as a swimmer. Once she allowed herself to fully disengage from her former life and identity she was able to focus on the future she was able to make friends and live a happy and healthier life.

Sarah reported not feeling supported by the coaching staff when she made the decision to leave the team due to her medical condition. Her team had always had a close bond, but reports it did not feel that way once she was on the outside of the team. Sarah saw a therapist for about two years following her separation from the swim team to assist during the reintegration process into the general college population. Sarah went through a lot personally during that time and found it extremely helpful to talk to someone during this major transition on multiple levels. Sarah



supports student-athletes having access to a social worker or a counselor, stating the transition from a life-long passion and sport to the general student population can be extremely difficult to manage.

Sarah's description of her experiences as a student-athlete and her reintegration helps show how different variables affect the process. She ended her athletic career prematurely due to medical conditions and was unprepared. The lack of support from her team and school made the reintegration process even more difficult due to how close she previously thought they were. Descriptions of isolation and depression emphasize how the reintegration process can be mentally and emotionally difficult. Sarah sought support from a professional who helped her through the process and supports this resource for other student-athletes.

## Conclusion

There are many influences upon the reintegration process of student-athletes. Student-athletes have a unique collegiate experience, which can make reintegration a multifaceted psychosocial challenge. Due to their significant investment in sport, there is potential to experience role engulfment, which can lead to various deficiencies in areas such as life skills, coping skills, and isolated supports. Some can be voluntary such as athletic season ending, choosing to focus on academics or health. Others are involuntary, for instance, sudden injury, or being cut from the team. The reason for reintegration greatly influences the ease of the reintegration process.

There are positive and negative factors that influence how successful a student-athlete will be with reintegration. Helping student-athletes better prepare for this inevitable process may improve their quality of life and well-being. There are many professionals that are highly qualified and knowledgeable to assist student-athletes during this transition. It is important that these professionals have expertise of working with the athletic population, as their needs are unique. Ideally, the professional will have a broad knowledge and skill base in order to meet the multi-faceted needs that accompany the reintegration process and prepare them for success in an education-focused, rather than primarily athletic-focused environment of the retired athlete. Social work is a profession that can greatly benefit student-athletes during their reintegration process due to specialized skills and experiences. Through this article, we hope to provide a resource to address and understand the reintegration process of student-athletes into the general population.

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