

TRANSITION FROM SPORTS CAREER TO POST-SPORTS CAREER: A STUDY WITH HIGH-PERFORMANCE BRAZILIAN OLYMPIC EX-ATHLETES

TRANSIÇÃO DA CARREIRA ESPORTIVA PARA A PÓS-CARREIRA ESPORTIVA: UM ESTUDO COM EX-ATLETAS OLÍMPICOS BRASILEIROS DE ALTO RENDIMENTO 

TRANSICIÓN DE LA CARRERA DEPORTIVA A LA POST-CARRERA DEPORTIVA: UN ESTUDIO CON EX-ATLETAS OLÍMPICOS BRASILEÑOS DE ALTO RENDIMIENTO 

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Abstract: The transition from an active professional life to retirement is an important and decisive moment in one's life, especially when there is planning for financial stability and other guarantees. However, in sports, this transition is fraught with uncertainty. This study aimed to investigate the transition from career to post-career among former Brazilian Olympic track and field athletes. Eight Brazilian track and field athletes who participated in a summer edition of the Olympic Games were interviewed. As a result, athletes choose to retire for various reasons, and academic background remains a concern both during their time as athletes and in the post-career period. We concluded that the transition to the post-career lacks an organized plan that encompasses various aspects of the sports career, including support from public and private entities in Brazil.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The term career transition refers to changes in stages that have occurred over the course of an athlete's career (Alfermann; Stambulova; Zemaityte, 2004; Rubio, 2008; Hollings; Mallett; Hume, 2014). There are studies on the discontinuity of the sports career, such as, for example, the transition from the juvenile stage to the adult stage or from the athlete stage to the ex-athlete stage (Wylleman; Lavalée, 2004; Erpič; Wylleman; Zupanec, 2004; Green, 2005; Kuettel; Boyle; Schmid, 2017).

Each sport modality has particularity in relation to training time (Fisher; Wrisberg, 2007; Henriksen; Stambulova; Roessler, 2010). For Côté, Baker and Abernethy (2007), in sports such as artistic gymnastics, practitioners specialize earlier than in resistance modalities, such as marathons, where specialization occurs only at older ages (D'Angelo, 2008; Lourenço, 2009). For several authors, each modality has specificity (Greco; Benda, 1998; Tsukamoto; Nunomura, 2005; Nunomura; Oliveira, 2012), which can result in retirement at different ages.

In a very general way, studies suggest that at approximately 28 years of age, the transition from a sports career to postathlete life begins. After the age of 30, the family and the coach are still the main influences on the athlete's sporting life and are fundamental to identifying the opportune moment to retire (Alfermann; Stambulova; Zemaityte, 2004; Henriksen; Stambulova; Roessler, 2010). It is necessary to consider the physical capabilities of athletes who, at these ages (28–30 years), are related to natural aging, which represents one of the main causes of the end of their sports career (Fisher; Wrisberg, 2007; Agresta; Brandão; Barros Neto, 2008). However, other factors interfere with the sports environment, including the training site (Zelezny, 2010), possible injuries (Netto Junior, 2000; Laurino, 2005; Pastre, 2005), the athlete's will, and the support of friends and social groups in which the athlete is inserted (Huxley; O'Connor; Bennie, 2018). Therefore, the environment in which the person lives can influence the construction of the career (Elias, 1994), in this case, of an athlete.

Studies on this topic indicate that retirement can be associated with former athletes with mental health problems, the use of drugs, alcohol (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2000), financial problems, and housing (Green; 2005; González; Borges; Sfalcin, 2015), among other problems arising from a poorly planned sports career. For Rubio (2008), the end of a career represents a change in identity, the need to change a social role that, many times, was built since childhood.

Therefore, the transition and life after the end of a sports career are unique moments in an athlete's life. The guiding focus of this study is to address such moments in the lives of former professional athletes. Thus, this study has the following objective: to investigate the career transition to the postcareer position of former Brazilian Olympic athletics athletes.

2 METHODS

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study consists of an empirical investigation, characterized as associative and descriptive (Ato; López-García; Benavente, 2013), developed through a mixed approach (Anguera *et al.*, 2021; Morales-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Anguera; Hernández-Mendo, 2016).

The study uses a literature review, documentary research and interviews. As a guiding instrument for data collection, the interview technique with a semistructured script was used. Documentary sources were collected through official websites of government agencies (Ministry of Sports), sports entities (CBAt), Brazilian legislation and other free access internet sources—sports news portals—suitable for the purpose of this study.

2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The sample of this study was selected in an intentional, nonprobabilistic way and consisted of eight former high-performance Brazilian athletics athletes, who, at the time of this research (2016 and 2017), were engaged in a new career—whether or not related to the sport. These were selected intentionally to represent a certain population (Rudio, 1978) and in a way that they wished to contribute to the study.

The inclusion/exclusion criteria were set on the basis of the time of practice of the former athletes, taking as a reference at least ten years of dedication to the sport, as well as having been a high-performance professional athlete with participation by the Brazilian team in some edition of the summer Olympic games. In this sense, the interviewees obtained impressive results within the national and international athletics in their respective tests.

2.3 PROCEDURE

The interviews followed a script prepared on the basis of the literature and were basically composed of two parts: 1) career transition (accompany, support to the athlete during the career and postcareer transition) and 2) a new phase: postcareer (recognition, financial support, difficulties, current function, and remarkable experiences). On average, five questions were built for each category.

Data were collected personally by the researcher after they signed the informed consent form (Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Paraná, CAAE nº. 88770618.4.0000.0102, opinion No. 2.748.001). The collected data were transcribed, grouped and analyzed via the content analysis method (Bardin, 2011). Throughout the text, the reports referring to former athletes are presented by acronyms: EA1 (meaning that he is the first former athlete interviewed) up to EA8.

Considering the criteria of reliability, consistency and transferability, the transcribed interviews were inserted into the QSR Nvivo 11.4.3 software to perform

quantitative data analysis, owing to the software's ability to operate and group a series of data that may have similarities. As a complement, the speeches were transcribed to systematically organize the data into categories and analyzed descriptively. Therefore, as predicted by the technique, this study presents the frequency of appearance (f) of category and subcategory codes, presented as a percentage.

Through the systematization of data in the software, two main dimensions were identified and, on the basis of them, some categories of analysis: support or partnership programs for sports postcareer as an athlete (access to transition programs, $f=38.2\%$; academic education, $f=22.9\%$; transition from athlete to former athlete, $f=27.2\%$; role of entities, $f=11.7\%$) and postathlete phase (new phase, $f=39.4\%$; new profession, possibility of acting, $f=34.1\%$; social recognition, $f=26.5\%$).

3 RESULTS

3.1 INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Eight athletes, six men and two women, three of whom were Olympic medalists, were interviewed. All respondents had higher education: four in Physical Education; two in Physical Education and Administration; one in Advertising and Marketing; and one in Administration. Six of the eight participants graduated in Physical Education for reasons of affinity with sports. Four still have specialization courses, and one has a master's degree, all in the area of Physical Education.

Three, out of the eight investigated, managed to finish their academic background while still athletes, and this was essential for them to achieve their current professions. Five of the eight investigated athletes finished their undergraduate studies, which they had started as professional athletes—only after the end of their sports career. In addition, two of these have entered and completed new programs (administrations) in the postcareer phase. Therefore, the construction and completion of one's current career can occur after an athlete's career.

Two subjects, up to the time of the research, acted as sports managers (state athletics federation and sports manager of an athletics club), four as physical educators (coaches, physical education teachers, physical trainers), one as an advertiser and one as a company manager.

The average retirement age was 33.1 ± 2.08 years (min. 30/max. 37), and the average career time in athletics was 19.4 ± 2.23 years (min. 14/max. 20). For EA4: "[...] I started in adolescence [...] when I realized it, I already trained up to 6 hours a day [...] I did it until I was 32". The average retirement time of the athletes (end of their career until the beginning of the study) was 12.7 ± 4.9 years (min. 6/max. 19). Thus, it was possible to identify, in this study, reports of subjects of different generations—with recent retirements (EA5 and EA8: 6 years)—and former athletes who for almost twenty years no longer work professionally (EA3, EA4: 19 years).

3.2 SUPPORT OR PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FOR SPORTS POST-CAREER AS AN ATHLETE

Although the subjects, as athletes, claim to know the existence of a postcareer support service, six of the eight interviewees claimed that they did not participate during a sporting career in a postcareer support program (access to transition programs, $f=38.2\%$).

Therefore, two ex-athletes, one of them, an Olympic medalist, were able to count on some sports career termination programs. For example, the Athlete's Career Program (PCA) - carried out since 2012 - by COB, was for ex-athlete EA5, "[...] an incredible opportunity in a final moment of an athlete's career [...] needed guidance to enter in the job market and in this program, I listened to former athletes who had already passed what I was going through". The same interviewee added that, after the end of his/her sports career, he/she joined "[...] in an administrative function of the Brazilian Athletics Confederation (CBAt) and the program (PCA) contributed to this function and to the new career challenges".

Previous athletes reported that they never received specific services from municipalities or states to prepare them for postsports careers or a postcareer support programme to help them. Former athlete EA4 reported that most of his/her career "[...] was in the state of São Paulo, the main state of athletics [...] I have already received help from the state, from the municipality, on the financial side, but never, nothing, related to career transition [...]".

The paid benefit for former athletes in this study can be seen from the Olympic Heroes program, according to the following narratives. Subject EA1 stressed that it is "[...] part of the Olympic Heroes program, specifically for athletes who received medals in Olympic games [...] so I receive a monthly help from CBAt and for that reason I have to participate in several events of the confederation". EA2, another participant in this program, commented that "[...] the monthly help is basic, of course you can't make a living from it [...] I like to participate in the CAIXA marathons [...] there are many children, so I like to talk to them and tell my trajectory to them". With respect to the Olympic Heroes program, CBAt, in partnership with CAIXA Econômica Federal, developed such a program to support former Olympic athletes, with the goal of demonstrating the importance of Brazilian athletics in the Olympic Games to bring Olympic values to athletics and ally the victorious past with the athletes of the present (CBAT, 2016). The eight former athletes are part of the Caixa Olympic Heroes Program of the Brazilian Athletics Confederation.

It was possible to verify, mainly from the testimony of former athletes who did not obtain medals at the Olympic Games, that the sports result—in this competition—can influence how the athlete's career will be. According to EA8: "[...] the disappointment with a sporting result below expectations can prevail over the fact of being at the Olympic games among the best in your race, of being, for example, in an Olympic final, but staying in seventh", for EA6: "[...] If I had obtained an Olympic medal, I could achieve other indirect benefits, until I had momentarily improved the part of financial support [...] but I would continue in the same club, with the same structure [...]". For

EA4 “[...] I see that today the help is better, I have already been among the best in the world in my modality, if it were today I could have several sources of funds, in my time the club was basically the financial aid and today, these athletes only complain [...]”. Finally, former athlete EA7 noted that “[...] of course there is a big difference between being an Olympic athlete and an Olympic medalist [...] certainly being an Olympic medalist, let’s say that the athlete manages to sell him/herself better and who knows, other opportunities would appear [...]”.

For the group of respondents, in parallel with the sports career, academic and professional activities were developed, both on the initiative of the athletes themselves and on the part of coaches or organizational entities in the sport (academic education, $f=22.9\%$). The relationship between sport and study was essential for those investigated in career development and in the postcareer, as seen in the following speech: “[...] I had an incentive to study administration in sports, not from the family [...]” (EA4). For EA5, it was the club that “[...] started paying for my college, it was a way to remain on the team, because other teams also already did this procedure [...]”; therefore, “[...] college was a good opportunity to have another function [...] as an athlete, it was obviously more difficult, but after an athlete’s life, we knew that we could take advantage of the training that the sport provided [...]” (EA2). Finally, EA7 added, “[...] I came from a humble family [...] I think I wouldn’t be able to get this college (physical education) if I didn’t have a sport and at the end of my career, I was already helping the club in training athletes, in little school [...], it was paid”.

The construction and completion of a post-athletic career can often take place after the athlete’s retirement, as illustrated by former athlete EA1: “[...] I put my college studies on hold several times. Six months before the Olympic Games, I wasn’t studying at all—I had no time, and the university didn’t have an educational program specifically for athletes [...] I only completed my degree after I retired.” Similarly, EA8 stated: “[...] after I stopped competing, I went back to school and was able to finish my degree [...] While I was an athlete, it was difficult—my university didn’t care that I was an athlete. In Brazil, most institutions don’t offer support to help balance training and academics”. The former athletes highlighted that the experiences acquired throughout the sports career were fundamental in career transition (transition from athlete to former athlete, $f=27.2\%$), development and adaptation to the new profession. According to EA5, the competitiveness required to be a high-performance athlete, “[...] helped to quickly fit into the advertising profession [...] because it is also a competitive market with some characteristics similar to that of competitive sport [...]”, also, according to EA7 “[...] whoever did competitive sport, takes it to their work, whatever it is and if they know how to use it they can do well professionally”.

It was a common aspect, for the interviewees, that the high-performance sport helped them overcome the challenges that they faced in the postcareer. This approach takes into account the daily demands for high-performance sports, such as concentration, focus, discipline, physical and psychological preparation, stress control, and motivation, among other skills that the athlete acquires and that can be used in professional work. Complementing this question, EA8 reported that “[...] for me, everything as an athlete is still very recent, everything is very fresh, but what I

went through in the sport is helping me now, in my new coaching profession". In the same way, EA1 stressed that he/she has contributed a lot to the current sport, as follows: [...] As a sports manager, I try to pass on to the coaches and athletes that I have contact through the state federation that their difficulties were much greater in my time, to show how we did to overcome them, that athletes need discipline [...].

Former athletes even received, in an informal way, some career guidance: "[...] some people from my club talked to us about what we intended to do after stopping, but it was nothing formal, a simple chat [...]" (EA6), "[...] some colleagues who stopped almost with me [...] were invited and recruited by the club to help with the club's training process, but they didn't even have a formal contract" (EA2).

From the testimonies, the role of sports entities in the development of athletes' careers became evident (role of entities, $f=11.7\%$). According to EA3, "[...] the athlete depended on athletics organizations [...] to go to the Brazilian team he/she needed to be in a club [...]", and for EA1, the club "[...] should fulfill the contract, fulfill the combined benefits with athletes [...]", in addition, "[...] to pay for travel, training, national and international competitions [...]". About the confederation, EA4 reported that "[...] at the time (late 80 s) began to assume this role of taking responsibility for high performance with more professionalism, as it was already able to sponsor and pass on monthly help to some athletes of the selection [...]". Importantly, in some situations, it appears that the responsibilities of the confederation and the clubs were understood by the former athletes as a benefit that these entities provided for them and, in fact, it should be an obligation, since the athletes represented the country and their clubs.

3.3 POST-ATHLETE PHASE

With respect to the expectation for the new phase ($f=39.4\%$), the moment at which the athlete's career was abandoned can be seen as a complex moment in the life of the participants of this study. In the view of EA1: "[...] it was not a simple decision, but I needed to stay more with the family, so I decided to stop little by little, redo my life goals [...] after a while I started to dedicate myself to studies and think in a job that allowed me to stay close to the family".

The end of his career for EA5 was dedicated to "[...] finishing his training, I got my degree in advertising, at the time I started working in that area [...] I supported myself financially". EA6 also mentioned that "[...] I was with physical problems, I had a very serious injury, I was unable to train as I should, I had to anticipate the end of my career and started to dedicate myself to being a coach [...]" and EA3: "[...] the athlete knows when the end is near [...] I started to reject training, my head didn't want to train anymore, I made the same effort, but the result was much lower [...]".

Some of the former athletes demonstrated that they took a long time to adapt to the new phase, as stated by EA7. In fact, this seems to be in line with what EA2, EA8 and EA1 said, respectively: "[...] it was a moment of anguish that I lived in, because I had time for everything when I was an athlete and suddenly I had to change my day to day, it was the most difficult moment of my life [...]"; "[...] I think that every athlete,

soon after stopping training, they miss the sport, without a doubt, this part of quitting the profession of athlete was the most complicated, I certainly had a psychological issue, after all, it's several years doing the same thing [...]"; "[...] when I finished my career, I went back to my parents' house [...] I remember I didn't know what to do for a long time, how to occupy the day [...] I needed some time to decide what to do".

On the basis of the testimonies of former athletes, from the moment they stopped their sports careers, they began to think about new goals and objectives for their personal lives and understood that they should prepare to find new goals. It can be said that it was a common aspect for all the subjects to have difficulties in relation to the path they would follow after the end of their careers. The following narratives reinforce this issue: "[...] as much as you think you are prepared, you are not" (EA3); "[...] I had doubts about what to do, the path I would follow [...] today I advise that the important thing is that the former athlete is happy [...] I did several experiences, there were several jobs until I decided what was best for me" (EA5), and to facilitate this process, the former athlete must "[...] take from inside what he/she has capacity and gradually put into practice [...] this can facilitate what he/she truly intends to act after finishing the career [...]" (EA4).

Notably, former athlete EA5 is now a speaker. However, for this to be a smoother process to materialize, he/she should - as an athlete - have prepared better, for example: "[...] Learn to express myself better in public [...] but look, no one ever told me that the lecture could be a possibility to get money after retirement, or about how to act in a lecture [...] so I learned in practice and today I am making better use of this issue of lectures, mainly financially.

The former athlete EA2 reported that, at first, he/she thought "[...] I would be a coach after finishing my career [...] even when an athlete already worked with the club's youth [...], but I didn't adapt to that role [...]", also, according to EA5: "[...] if you ask most athletes who are quitting competing: what are they going to do after they quit? they will say that they will be coaches, but often they do not have the profile to be a coach [...]", in the same way, EA3 stated that "[...] it is one thing to be an athlete, another thing, to be a coach [...]".

As already mentioned, most of the participants went through the physical education program, as they intended to be sports coaches, and some of them had already worked as coaches before the end of their career: "[...] there was a period that was coach and athlete, I do not guide this for my athletes, or do one thing or another [...]" (EA6). For EA3 to be coach, "[...] it was a goal that started as an athlete and today I can say that it is my new career [...], I work as an athletics coach, physical preparation of athletes from different sports".

In general, it was possible to perceive the need for a new profession after an athlete's life (new profession, possibility of acting, $f=34.1\%$). In addition, it is worth emphasizing that all the investigations argued that the sports career was also harmed because most athletes, in addition to finishing their careers at ages that it is not allowed to retire in Brazil, did not have, for some years during the career of athletes, a formal contract with the club they represented. That is, the athlete's career does not

guarantee formal retirement, which is associated with the contribution time and age to apply for the retirement benefit (Instituto Brasileiro de Seguridade Social 2025).

Importantly, two of the eight participants mentioned that they decided to end their career, but after a certain time, they returned with training. The former athlete, EA4, stated that, for the first time, he/she decided to stop his/her career as an athlete “[...] because of the age and because I was tired of the athlete routine”. However, after six months away from the tracks, he/she decided to return to his/her daily training to compete in university games. In the case of former athlete EA2, the return to the tracks was by invitation “[...] the coach, he got another sponsorship, asked me to complete the team, in fact, he wanted to help me financially and then I came back [...] I finished with more a medal in the relay of the Brazil Trophy”. The two athletes added that this return was good for them to consolidate the end of their career; in addition, they praised the fact that they ended their careers on the podium with medals. Nevertheless, EA2 emphasized coach gratitude on that occasion because such an athlete had already decided to end his/her career “[...] because it was more financially advantageous to think about another profession [...]”. After almost a year, this former athlete was called by his former coach to return to training, as he achieved better training conditions.

The participants in this study (EA3, EA7, EA8) decided to give up athletics, mainly because they understood that they had already fulfilled their goals in high-performance sports, such as participating in major competitions, obtaining good results, and understanding that if they continued training and competing, they would hardly be able to obtain better yields or more success in their careers. Thus, they decided that the best decision would be to end their career and seek new challenges.

Finally, participants reported that most of the awards, after winning the Olympic medal, were not in the form of money: “[...] it is funny, because people say: how cool, you are going to receive a prize, some ask me how much I will win, but the prize is a plaque, a certificate [...]” (EA8), “[...] you receive many honors throughout your career and after that [...] from the municipality, state, federation, confederation, it gets tiring and repetitive [...]” (EA4).

All the respondents reported that the moments of social recognition that they had, as athletes, for their achievements in sport motivated them to believe in what they were doing and continue with their dedication in the sport (social recognition, $f=26.5\%$). The moments of recognition that occurred in the athlete postcareer were fundamental to make their career recognized as proper and, consequently, presented the requirements to help other athletes that were emerging, further strengthening this process of recognition of athletics athletes.

Other forms of awards were identified as a result of winning the Olympic medal. For former athlete EA2: “[...] whoever wins the Olympic medal receives a cash award from the CBA sponsor and depending on the club, it also awards the athlete, this can also be in cash [...]”, but according to EA1, the bonus “[...] in our time, was very weak, especially for the feat we did [...]”; in addition, EA3 stated that it is possible for the medalist athlete to have “[...] a bonus from the sponsor of that athlete, which

can be any company, a sports brand [...]” (EA3). Additionally, according to the same interviewee, “[...] right after the games, I even made commercials, I could make some money from it [...] so the companies wanted to associate our image, show an image of overcoming, strength [...]”.

Previous athletes reported that they received no bonus (in cash) from any state or municipality—specifically for having won an Olympic medal. Additionally, they complained about the postcareer financial return, according to EA2: “[...] the fact of being a former Olympic athlete, or having received an Olympic medal, does not guarantee the future, retirement [...]”.

4 DISCUSSION

Former athletes decide to end their sports careers for different reasons, such as the need to be close to the family, financial issues, and physical and psychological stress; they reach personal goals in the sport; and the need to seek new challenges, which are fundamental reasons for the decision to end the career. Some of these reasons are also present in other studies of other sports (Alfermann; Stambulova, 2007; Agresta; Brandão; Barros Neto, 2008; Rubio, 2008; Oppa, 2013; González; Borges; Sfalcin, 2015; Maciel, 2015).

Some of the investigated buildings planned their track farewells. One of them reported that he/she stopped at a high level, others were decreasing the pace of training and competitions; consequently, they had a decrease in intrinsic motivation or showed signs of tiredness. Others had to end in a more forced way, not very planned, for example, owing to injury, which caused a great loss of physical potential. Erpic, Wylleman and Zupancic (2004) find that the greater the perception of control of an athlete in relation to the decision to retire is, the less difficult this transition is.

Additionally, the moment of ending the career was seen by some of the participants as a feeling of challenge because, after the sports career ended, they missed the daily training routine (Agresta; Brandão; Barros Neto, 2008) and the thrill of competing. Some authors claim that the personal satisfaction found in sports is what makes a person not want to leave it, and this can also determine a person’s impulses and attitudes (Elias; Scotson, 2000).

An athlete’s career is short (Tsukamoto; Nunomura, 2005; Marques; Samulski 2009), and the investigated career ending age is not considered retirement age in Brazil (Instituto Brasileiro de Seguridade Social, 2025). In this sense, former athletes needed to develop the postcareer and find other functions to maintain themselves financially—something that can be considered peculiar to the careers of the athletics athletes surveyed—because, at times, there was no career formality in which the employment contract, the formal contract and the labor benefits (Costa; Soares, 2009) were a logical consequence in the careers of former athletes, different from what happened in other professions.

For some of the participants (mainly Olympic medalists), when they reached the peak, sporting peak, or personal records (Guttman, 1978; Ericsson, 2003), they

obtained basic conditions for integral development in the sport. According to former athletes, obtaining social recognition for their achievements was an important motivator for continuity in the sport since the work provides self-realization and satisfaction (Elias; Dunning, 1992), which was evidenced by the interviewees. Nevertheless, the symbolism of winning an Olympic medal, the image and the media that this can represent nationally can be transformed during and in the postcareer in different capitals (economic, sporting, political) for athletes (Bourdieu, 1997).

The subjects of this study reported that there was no association between athletes and athletics coaches, and no government (federal, state, municipal) offered support during or after the sports career. Only two former athletes, at the end of their careers, were able to count on specific programs for this purpose through COB. Therefore, the fact that Brazilian athletics won a medal in an edition of the Olympic games does not mean that there was a political-sports project in the country for this modality, since the former athletes investigated here pointed out several demands of the sports career that were not met by sports entities.

Studies indicate that national sports entities should develop programs related to sports postcareers, with this theme almost nonexistent in several countries (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2009; Stambulova *et al.*, 2009). Thus, this concern, involving sports in general, can be seen internationally. Some organizations, such as the National Sports Confederations in the United States, Olympic Committees in Germany and Canada, and even the Government Sports Institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom, have started offering specialized programs to support athletes (Marques; Iora, 2009; Zelezny, 2010). The International Olympic Committee launched the athlete's career program, which has education, life skills and employability as its basic pillars. The program developed in partnership with the company Adecco was launched in 2005 and is currently being developed in 30 countries in cooperation with the National Olympic Organizations. By the end of 2012, the program had already served 11,000 athletes worldwide (International Olympic Committee, 2014, 2017).

In Brazil, only the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB), through the Brazilian Olympic Institute (IOB), offers support to athletes in the transition from a sports career to a postsports career. However, from the speeches, this transition occurs informally in clubs or sports organizations, in which the former athlete, sometimes having a relationship with the area of physical education and sport, is hired.

Retirement cannot be an isolated event in an athlete's life; it needs to be conceived in a much less problematic way, and it is recommended that at the end of one's career, the individual is relocated to another sport-related function (Alfermann; Stambulova; Zemaityte, 2004). In this study, most of the subjects are in the sports environment; however, two are in other contexts and are linked to the business branch. Notably, there were no reports of subjects being unmotivated or unhappy in the new profession. Authors (Pahl, 1997; Green, 2005; Henriksen; Stambulova; Roessler, 2010) argue that the new function needs to be related to some factors that facilitate this transition, such as personal satisfaction, affective readiness, behavioral readiness and good motivation for the new stage of life.

Importantly, concern with academic background was an important finding of this study; as already mentioned, it was not only a reason for starting in the sport but also a constant concern throughout the athlete's career. Sports linked to the formation of higher education were important achievements throughout the athletes' careers. For Torregrosa *et al.* (2015), encouraging a dual career of study and sport can help minimize the proportion of individuals who need psychological support. Nevertheless, it is not easy to reconcile sport and college studies (O'Neill; Allen; Calder, 2013; Maciel, 2015), which is due to the demands of training in general—so much so that, for some investigated, the completion of undergraduate studies was given only after the end of their careers and, consequently, at the beginning of new functions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

An investigation of the career transition to the postcareer of former Brazilian Olympic athletics athletes confirmed that former athletes did not have an organized plan—which encompassed several aspects of the sports career—coming from clubs, states, municipalities, or other sports organizations. Thus, it can be said that only some subjects had small initiatives, considering the different stages of an athlete's life. Therefore, a career plan for athletic athletes is a gap in the athlete development process in this sport.

Rather, only a few individuals engaged in sporadic personal initiatives that inadequately addressed the various phases of an athlete's career. Consequently, the absence of comprehensive career planning mechanisms constitutes a significant shortcoming in the athlete development framework within Brazilian athletics. These findings highlight a critical void in the country's sports policy landscape: the lack of institutionalized programs tailored to the specific needs of elite athletes approaching the end of their competitive trajectories.

Participants' narratives underscored that their transitions were largely self-directed, frequently improvised, and heavily dependent on individual agency, academic attainment, and informal support networks. While a minority accessed fragmented support services – such as the Athlete's Career Program (PCA) – the majority navigated retirement without consistent institutional assistance. This scenario corroborates international scholarship that emphasizes the necessity of integrated support structures capable of addressing the complex challenges athletes face in retirement, including identity renegotiation, financial instability, and the pursuit of new professional pathways.

A pivotal insight emerging from this study is the central role attributed to academic education, which served not only as a means of professional redirection but also as a stabilizing force amid the uncertainties of post-athletic life. Nonetheless, the attainment of formal qualifications was often postponed due to the intensive demands of elite sport, reflecting the systemic difficulty of pursuing a dual-career model. These findings underscore the imperative for institutional strategies that promote academic continuity throughout athletes' sporting careers, thereby enhancing their long-term personal and professional outcomes.

Moreover, although participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability – translating skills acquired through sport into success in other domains – their testimonies illuminated the emotional, psychological, and logistical difficulties accompanying athletic retirement. Reports of disorientation, emotional distress, and inadequate preparation suggest that, when not properly supported, the career transition process can represent a profoundly destabilizing and vulnerable life juncture.

It is essential to recognize a key methodological limitation of this study: the homogeneity of the sample. All eight participants were drawn exclusively from a single sport (athletics), operated within the Olympic sphere, and held relatively high levels of education. This uniformity may have shaped the findings in ways that limit their applicability to the broader population of Brazilian athletes, particularly those from under-resourced backgrounds, lesser-known sports, or with limited educational opportunities. These characteristics likely influenced participants' perspectives on career transition and their access to post-retirement opportunities. Therefore, while the experiences presented here are detailed and valuable, they may not be representative of the diverse realities faced by former athletes in Brazil. Future research should strive for greater heterogeneity in sample composition to more fully capture the range of experiences and adaptive strategies employed across varied sporting, socioeconomic, and educational contexts.

The development of sports programs aimed at sports career transitions, with professionals who provide support so that the athlete can achieve high sports performance and prepare for the end of their sports career, providing continuity as naturally as possible to their postathlete life, is suggested. Such initiatives should encompass psychological services, career planning, academic partnerships, and pathways for professional reintegration, ensuring that retirement from sport becomes a supported process of transformation rather than an abrupt and disorienting rupture.

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Resumo: A transição de uma vida profissional ativa para a aposentadoria é um momento importante e decisivo na vida, especialmente quando há planejamento de estabilidade financeira e outras garantias. Mas, no esporte, essa transição é repleta de incertezas. Este estudo teve como objetivo investigar a transição de carreira para pós-carreira de ex-atletas olímpicos brasileiros de atletismo. Oito atletas brasileiros de atletismo que participaram de uma edição dos Jogos Olímpicos de verão foram entrevistados. Como resultado, apontamos diferentes razões que levam os atletas a escolherem se aposentar e a formação acadêmica é uma preocupação durante o período em que eram atletas e também na pós-carreira. Concluimos que a transição para a pós-carreira não possui um plano organizado que abranja vários aspectos da carreira esportiva, vindo do apoio de entidades públicas e privadas no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física. Esporte. Atletas.

Resumen: La transición de una vida profesional activa a la jubilación es un momento importante y decisivo en la vida, especialmente cuando hay planificación de estabilidad financiera y otras garantías. Pero en el deporte, esta transición está llena de incertidumbre. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar la transición de la carrera a la post-carrera de ex-atletas olímpicos brasileños de atletismo. Se entrevistaron a ocho atletas brasileños de atletismo que participaron en una edición de los Juegos Olímpicos de verano. Como resultado, señalamos diferentes razones que llevan a los atletas a elegir retirarse y la formación académica es una preocupación durante el período en que fueron atletas y también en la post-carrera. Concluimos que la transición a la post-carrera no tiene un plan organizado que abarque varios aspectos de la carrera deportiva, proveniente del apoyo de entidades públicas y privadas en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Educación Física. Deporte. Atletas.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that this work involves no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

André Felipe Caregnato: Research design, data collection and analysis, study writing, and review.

Isabelle Plociniak Costa: Data collection and analysis, study writing, and review.

Mayara Torres Ordonhes: Data collection and analysis, study writing, and review.

Fernando Renato Cavichioli: Data collection and analysis; Study writing; Review; Coordination.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Research data is not available.

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EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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