

Transitioning Out of Sport: Personal Reflections From a Paralympic Judoka

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Background

It is widely recognised that a transition out of elite sport can be an extremely difficult period for any athlete for a variety of reasons. Yet very little is known about retired Paralympians and the specific challenges they face during this period.

As a retired Paralympian now working within the EIS Performance Lifestyle team and the Para Lead for Performance Lifestyle, I have attempted to highlight in this poster the practical challenges that I faced, as well as the emotional and social challenge of redefining my identity, I hope that sharing my personal experiences of transitioning out of sport can be used to shape PL support to Para athletes.

Acquiring a Disability

I feel that many of the lessons that I learnt when adapting and overcoming the adversity of deteriorating vision added to my mental toughness and resilience which are important traits for any athlete. In fact, I believe that having a visual Impairment has played a big part in the development of my personality teaching me many lessons and presenting opportunities that I would not have had experienced without a disability.

My Identity

Although I obtained a BSc and an MSc whilst being in the high performance bubble for over a decade I was still not prepared for my transition out of sport.

The realisation of no longer being one of the best in the World at something that I loved was what I struggled with the most. Judo gave me purpose, a sense of direction, structure and goals.

It took me two years to redefine my identity, what was important to me now, to realise what I wanted to do, what I needed to do to get it and accept that now not only was I a retired Paralympian but I was a disabled person.

Being visually impaired never once hindered me to achieve excellence in sport, yet, this was the one thing that enabled me to compete as a Paralympic athlete, but is now a huge inconvenience. My options of available/accessible jobs were limited and the reality was also dawning on me that equality in employment is a myth.



Injury

Pre 2012 I was a hot favourite for Paralympic gold, but one mistimed attack during a training fight somewhat changed the landscape for me. With 6 weeks to go I had ruptured both my ACL and MCL.

It was this event that on reflection gave me perspective and made me appreciate how fragile and unpredictable life as an athlete was. All of the years of commitment, dedication, my goals, difficult life and performance choices all delicately balanced on one mistimed attack from an opponent.



Summary

On reflection the main thing that I overlooked whilst pursuing my sporting career was my personal development. Thinking about the future holistically and what I wanted from it with timelines and details.

Having experienced a relatively straight forward transition out of sport, yet still struggling at times to adapt and accept the situation I found myself in, I would say that athletes need a thorough understanding of the added difficulties that their disability may pose post sport both practically and emotionally.

Finding employment and thoroughly planning all aspects of life after sport is vital for a successful transition. It may be that that day comes sooner than envisaged as a result of an injury, declassification or a multitude of unforeseen circumstances. If not, then the confidence that comes with early planning and comprehensive personal development may even lead to an extended and more stable athletic career.