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The Career Continues: The Perception of Former Athletes Regarding Life After Competitions

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to understand how the career transition process of high-performance athletes occurs. A career in sport is seen as the occupation in sports activities carried out in a practical and constant way, reaching high levels of performance. The retirement of athletes is understood as a time of change and transition. The research *corpus* was based on the transcription of interviews with former team sports athletes, explored using the content analysis technique. The post-transition moment is seen as new possibilities to continue working professionally and dedicating themselves to sport in different ways.

Keywords: Careers; Athletes; Transition; Professional sport

La carrera continúa: la percepción de los exdeportistas con respecto a la vida después de las competiciones

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo fue comprender cómo ocurre el proceso de transición de carrera de los atletas de alto rendimiento. La

carrera deportiva es vista como la ocupación en actividades deportivas realizadas de manera práctica y constante, alcanzando altos niveles de rendimiento. El retiro de los deportistas se entiende como un momento de cambio y transición. El *corpus* de investigación se basó en la transcripción de entrevistas con exatletas de deportes colectivos, exploradas mediante la técnica de análisis de contenido. El momento post-transición se ve como nuevas posibilidades para seguir trabajando profesionalmente y dedicándose al deporte de diferentes formas.

Palabras clave: Carreras; Athetes; Transición; Deporte profesional.

1. INTRODUCTION

Career studies have focused on traditional concepts within the field, which are usually associated with organizational structures. In other terms, the concept of a career has been restricted to those who expect to make steady advancements within a respectable profession, with a preestablished structure and a sequence of jobs reinforcing the link between positions and careers in organizations (BARLEY, 1989).

The greatest problem with this theoretical approach to careers is that it excludes other professions that do not fit within this traditional framework, and therefore, authors such as CARVALHO (2015) argue that individuals can embrace the existence of a career for themselves, without necessarily being linked to organizations. Consequently, “the career may encompass the individual’s experiences in the specific context of the work environment but is not confined to it.” (CARVALHO, 2015:33).

As an example, we can examine a career in sports. This career can be understood as an occupation involving sports activities performed in a practical and continuous manner within a sport or sports activity throughout an athlete’s life, with the objective of achieving high performance levels in one or several sporting events. It is constructed from the moment the individual begins to practice sports and continues until their retirement as an athlete (DOS SANTOS et al, 2015; TENENBAUM et al, 2007).

However, the term “retirement” for athletes with a sports career has been the focus of academic discussions. According to COSTA et al (2009), retiring means stepping away from work and the career, which is

not always the case with former high-performance athletes, who often choose to continue in sports, pursuing other related activities.

For authors such as MACIEL (2015), DOS SANTOS et al (2015) and Ferreira Junior and Rubio (2017), although this moment is treated as the end of high-performance sports activities, it also represents the possibility of beginning a new activity, i.e., it is a moment of transition. Thus, considering retirement as a defining moment in the life of high-performance athletes, symbolizing the transition from one phase of sports to another, this study was carried out to answer the following research question: **what transition occurs in an athlete's sports career following the end of high-performance activities?** Based on the assumption that athletes understand the moment of their “retirement” from competitions as a milestone and transition, rather than the end of their career in sports, and seeking answers to that question, the central objective of this article was to understand the career transition process for high-performance athletes.

Studies such as the one proposed herein are important and justified, as they help other researchers seek new knowledge on the subject of careers in sports and contribute to a greater understanding of that phenomenon.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 CAREERS AS A TRAJECTORY

Traditionally, career studies have focused on formal and/or traditional careers by interweaving the concept of a career and organizational structures, which is not necessary or obligatory (BENDASSOLI, 2009; CAMPOS et al, 2017). The earliest concepts related to careers were focused on positioning individuals within professions and structures. For example, TOLFO (2002) states that traditionally, a career is related to an occupation and a profession and has been associated with success and social advancement.

It would thus be a path to be followed professionally, making it possible to advance—over time—in the positions held, with a career being an important indication of the professional development opportunities that an organization offers to its professionals. It is important to discuss the extent to which this corresponds to reality, in order for freelancers, the self-employed, service providers or others with

a discontinuous career trajectory to be included in the discussion on professional careers (RIBEIRO, 2009).

Broadening the understanding of what a career is involves discussing non-careers. Individuals who are not linked to a specific organizational structure usually fall into the non-career category. According to RIBEIRO (2009), a career predicts a predefined structure in which people construct a trajectory, one that depends on their ties to organizations and institutions, which are the environments in which a career is created and social legitimacy is achieved. The non-career category is associated with the world of work in general, referring to a work trajectory in which professional development cannot be predicted. CARVALHO (2015) therefore argues the following:

Individuals can embrace the existence of a career for themselves, without necessarily being linked to organizations. The career may encompass the individual's experiences in the specific context of the work environment but is not confined to it (CARVALHO, 2015:33).

RIBEIRO (2009) discusses how these implications become a challenge in contemporary career studies, adding that it requires a position toward the world that considers both change (movement) and permanence (essence) because careers reflect the transformations that have occurred in society, the economy and politics and the way in which organizations and workers relate to one another, redefining the relations between capital and labor (BENDASSOLLI, 2009; SILVA et al, 2014).

The understanding that the field of careers is interdisciplinary corroborates the possibility of studying careers with a broad perspective, recognizing the contributions and influence of different areas of knowledge—such as psychology, sociology, social psychology, learning theories and institutional approaches—in the origin and development of career studies (MOORE et al, 2007; KHAPOVA et al, 2011). Understanding the concept of a career as broad and contextualized in order to demonstrate the sequences of individual experiences over time can aid in a preliminary understanding of their interdisciplinarity, if we couple this with the idea that a career is related to individuals and organizations and is broad, dynamic and incomplete over time and space.

Based on this, it is possible to talk about the dimensions that comprise a career. BENDASSOLI (2009), RIBEIRO (2009) and

CARVALHO *et al.* (2015) present an analytical division that enables a more complete analysis of the trajectories of individuals in all their complexity, considering micro and macro levels, personal and organizational/institutional aspects and objective and subjective dimensions. It is important to note that this division is only analytical and problematizing, adopting a perspective that integrates these dimensions by transcending the duality of the concept; as CARVALHO *et al.* (2015) indicate, this vision allows careers to be addressed through multiple aspects of analysis and experience.

MOREOVER *et al.* (2007) emphasize that career studies can offer a conceptual bridge between the micro—individual—and macro—institutional—levels of analysis as well as an intellectual anchor for phenomena of interest to organizational scholars. Careers are thus a means for understanding complex and significant social phenomena, through the idea of the career as a process, embedded in contexts. The sociohistorical context can signal changes that affect the planning and configuration of careers for and by individuals (CARVALHO, 2015). These discussions make it possible to perceive the development and relevance of contextual factors for career studies and their growing influences on individual career behavior. This demonstrates a synchrony between contexts and the individual sphere within the logic of careers, which influence how they should be studied.

Accordingly, MAYRHOFER *et al.* (2007) assert that careers are always careers in a given context. The authors argue that studies should be focused on individuals, organizations and society, with careers situated at the intersection of societal history and individual biography. As such, they are not confined to the corporate vision of promotions and structured hierarchies through which the individual moves throughout their professional life. As indicated by BENDASSOLLI (2009), the concept of a career is capable of mediating the different dimensions of human experience involving labor, in a problem that embraces the individual and the contextual as central.

The understanding of careers as a broad phenomenon with no exclusionary predefinitions, the exploration of how societal structures shape people's behaviors and lives, and the way people who challenge

the social order live and experience the social world are important factors to consider. Based on a vision of a career that understands it as a person's trajectory in time and space, the stabilities and instabilities that compose it, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of individuals, their lives and perspectives, and the (de)organization of society.

This perspective will be used to analyze the career of high-performance athletes, particularly in terms of the transition to retirement. To proceed with this contextualization, the sports career will be presented in the following section.

2.2 SPORTS CAREER

Based on the perspective of careers presented, the sports career of the high-performance athlete is discussed below. There have been discussions about considering sports as a profession, job and, consequently, career because it does not have characteristics based on classic models but does have specificities in terms of the beginning, development and end of the sports career (DOS SANTOS et al, 2015; CAMPOS et al, 2017). This paper intends to transcend those discussions by considering the trajectory of the individual, thus addressing all the stages and dimensions.

A sports career can be considered an occupation involving sports activities performed in a practical and continuous manner within a sport or sports activity throughout an athlete's life, with the objective of achieving high performance levels in one or several sporting events. This career is constructed from the moment the individual begins to practice sports and continues until his or her retirement as an athlete (DOS SANTOS et al, 2015; TENENBAUM et al, 2007). Its duration is defined according to the specific characteristics of each sport. Typically, the sports career begins in childhood and ends in adulthood, before the age of 40 (Comitê Olímpico Brasileiro - COB, 2014).

DOS SANTOS et al (2015) indicate that practicing sports involves a number of different factors, such as motivation, life history and certain facilitators and constraints that may occur during a life trajectory. It is also important to consider that athletes experience different situations throughout this process, involving phases and transitions at the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational levels, from when

they start to when they achieve high-performance and then to when they end a competitive career (DOS SANTOS et al, 2015).

MARQUES et al (2009) present transitions in the sports career as a focus of their study, namely, entry into sports and building a foundation; investment in training for competitions; participation in more significant competitions, such as regional and state events; high-level competitions, i.e., national and international events, as well as playing for large clubs, becoming a sports professional; and finally, retirement from practicing sports. For the authors, it is important to consider the social support at the end of this career and the range of influences throughout career development.

The participation of the coach and family at the beginning of a sports career is particularly significant (MACIEL et al, 2008). VERARDI et al (2008) indicate that families who understand the importance and value of sports or a love of practicing sports usually support their children's sports careers, i.e., influence their sports career. CAMPOS et al (2017) emphasize the social context as a major influence because it includes aspects that impact an athlete's decision, maintenance and continuity in sports.

This context is also affected by sports. The sociocultural nature of sports as an integral element of social and economic values is particularly noteworthy because sports activity can also be seen as a source of income by athletes, coaches, managers and others and by organizations linked to the image of sports, i.e., sports brands, products related to sports and others that use athletes' image to generate economic profit. When these issues are analyzed from the athletes' perspective, high-performance sports can be considered as work because they demand consistent effort to build a foundation, there is a financial return, beyond what the athletes' individual achievements and renown represent, and athletes are examples in the sports they practice. Moreover, relating individual interests to the expectations and needs of their environment, practicing sports must be contextualized with the reality of sports (PIRES, 2007; MACIEL et al, 2008; CAMPOS et al, 2017).

This study was carried out with athletes who played team sports and participated in high-performance competitions. The focus was defined at a specific moment of the sports career, namely, the end of their participation in competitions, which will be addressed in the following session.

2.3 RETIREMENT FROM THE SPORTS CAREER: A TRANSITION MOMENT

The sports career begins in childhood, with high-performance activities as a youth or young adult, and it is common to stop participating in competitions around the age of 35 (IBGE, 2013); it is thus a career with specific characteristics: an early beginning and early retirement, here called a transition. It is therefore important to recognize and understand the factors involved in the transition to a new professional and personal stage.

Retirement in the context of sports careers involves a cognitive restructuring process following the end of a stage, representing the end of the pursuit of personal goals and achievements in the high-performance sports environment (DOS SANTOS, ALEXANDRINO, 2015). MACIEL (2015) indicates that the transition period following the sports competition phase is pervaded by peculiarities, such as (re)orient after dealing with the physical and psychological demands of high-performance activities and psychological and social baggage from practicing sports. This period is accompanied by stress, fear and anxiety and requires the individual to adjust emotionally to a new group and lifestyle (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000).

Although this moment is treated as the end of the sports career and the possibility of beginning a new activity (MACIEL, 2015; DOS SANTOS, ALEXANDRINO, 2015; Ferreira Junior, Rubio, 2017), it is argued that this moment is one of change and transition, rather than an ending.

In this paper, retirement is considered to be an important moment in everyone's life, regardless of their occupation or professional background. At the end of a professional trajectory, subjects anticipate retirement and its impacts. Due to its potential consequences in terms of the subjects' identities, retirement is understood as a phenomenon that symbolizes the transition between phases in people's lives. The subjects' adjustment to retirement is also correlated with their personal attributes, factors of their job and the organization where they worked, as well as their family and socioeconomic aspects (MARRA, 2011).

Another important consideration is to regard career and trajectory as synonymous because both describe the trajectory beginning with the individual's entry into the labor market and the continuation of their journey throughout their professional life, considering the time elapsed

during professional trajectories. Trajectories are divided into objective trajectory, defined as the individual's occupations over time, and subjective trajectory, defined as an individual's experiences along their trajectory that create meaning for the positions held and choices made (MARRA, 2011).

Retirement should thus not be spoken of as an end but, rather, as a crucial moment in which an individual can take the next step in his or her trajectory. In addition to being understood as a milestone in people's lives, it is necessary to consider the complexity of this transition and its impact on identity, subjectivity and personal and professional relationships. Constant cultural and market shifts make it possible to envision this crucial moment not as the end of the line but as the beginning of a new stage in the trajectory. Individuals who retire do not leave their careers behind; the career remains and is transformed in this new context, either through new activities or through the identity of the individual who remains devoted to it.

Returning to the context of sports, there are a number of factors that can influence decisions regarding the transition moment. DOS SANTOS and ALEXANDRINO (2015) treat transitions as events that cause imbalances in an athlete's trajectory and that can be normative when they are planned and non-normative when they are related to unexpected changes, such as injuries. BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000) state that the transition is the result of individual factors and social influences, such as age, new interests, physical and psychological fatigue, difficulties with the coaching staff and declining results, among others.

Regardless of the reason for the transition, there is an important change and restructuring in the individual's lifestyle, which varies according to the personality and temperament of the person and may have more or less positive or negative effects (MACIEL, 2015). Moreover, in the sports career, the transition represents "changes in personal assumptions, changes that require a set of skills that enable the athlete to adapt to the new dimensions and demands of post-athlete life" (Ferreira Junior, Rubio, 2017:189) and these changes have an influence on cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000).

Ferreira Junior and Rubio (2017) indicate that the way an athlete experiences the transition is related to triggering events, depending on the existence or lack of support, individual coping characteristics and meanings attributed to the change. Other aspects to be considered are the

athletes' perception of their own identity, perception of control and social identity, which are related to their status and how they respond to the end of their career (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000).

As for the quality of this transition, BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000) cite adaptation factors, such as “development experiences, self-identity, perceptions of control, social identification and contributions of others, and the resources available for adapting to the career transition, such as strategies to deal with the transition situation, social support and previous planning for retirement” (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000:50). The authors also emphasize the importance of planning for this moment, which they argue is neglected by some athletes, who believe that their fame will be sufficient for this moment.

To deal with this change, it is important to address the individual's preparation for this moment, which will influence his or her life after the transition. MACIEL (2015) indicates the importance of leveraging highly desirable skills developed and acquired throughout the sports career, such as emotional self-control, discipline and motivation. Another relevant factor is social support at the end of the career, particularly considering that the individual is still productive (CAMPOS, Capelle, MACIEL, 2017).

MACIEL (2015) states that little emphasis is placed on the future professional career but that, in most cases, the new career has a connection with the sport played, demonstrating the lack of preparation or the lack of foresight or concern of high-performance athletes for their professional career after sports, justified by the heavy demands of being involved in sports, which may shift the athlete's focus away from later needs.

In a literature review, BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000) indicate six factors that may hinder the transition process of athletes:

- 1) an identity strongly or exclusively based on sports performance;
- 2) a marked difference between the level of aspiration and the level of skill;
- 3) little experience with similar transitions;
- 4) emotional or behavioral shortcomings limiting adaptation to change;
- 5) few supportive relationships; and
- 6) the need to deal with change in a context lacking the necessary material and emotional resources (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000, p. 57).

With regard to the transition from the sports career to post-athlete life, i.e., what the former athlete's new career will be, BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000) state that planning can involve different activities, including continuing education, employment, investments and social work. Marques and Samulski (2009) indicate that athletes generally plan their sports career well, although not necessarily their education. The pursuit of professional development for activities following their life as athletes contributes to providing continuity to their activities after the transition. In particular, if there is interest in working in sports, the Brazilian Federal Council of Physical Education requires that an individual must be qualified through education acquired in undergraduate programs in physical education or related fields, as the profession has been regulated since 1998 (Conselho Federal De Educação Física - CONFEF, 2000); this is not mandatory for athletes, who do not need to have completed any level of basic education or higher education (MACIEL, 2015).

Finally, this moment is best assimilated by athletes if it is related to a personal choice, if their goals and objectives have been met, if they are able to remain involved with the sports environment, if they have supplemented their studies and if they have reached the top (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000).

Understanding this transition process can be valuable for discerning the trajectory of the individual, the impact of personal and professional events and how their subjectivation and identity construction take place.

3. METHODOLOGY

In ontological terms, this study followed the constructivist paradigm, epistemologically guided by the interpretivist approach, and thus used a qualitative methodology.

The study has an exploratory character, with the objective of understanding the career transition of high-performance athletes, in order to grasp a reality that has rarely been studied before now. The study actors were selected based on the following criteria: athletes who no longer participate in high-performance sports competitions and played team sports. The selection of the former athletes was random: as the interviews were conducted, a respondent would indicate other athletes for the study. After initial contact, those who demonstrated interest and

willingness and were also accessible to the researchers were selected to participate in the study.

Following the principles of CAMPOS, Capelle and MACIEL (2017), the universe of people who were once high-performance athletes but no longer compete will be called former athletes.

Ten in-person individual interviews, using a semistructured script, were conducted with athletes from different sports, as shown in Table 1. The interviews were conducted from October 2018 to June 2019.

Table 1: Identification of the respondents

Code of identification	Gender	Acting sport	Age when retired as an athlete	Current activity
Former Athlete 1	Male	Volleyball	39	Club manager
Former Athlete 2	Female	Volleyball	36	Committees and master competitions
Former Athlete 3	Male	Soccer	29	Instructor
Former Athlete 4	Male	Soccer	30	Instructor
Former Athlete 5	Male	Soccer	38	Instructor
Former Athlete 6	Male	Soccer	36	Sports commentator and panelist
Former Athlete 7	Female	Handball	40	Team project
Former Athlete 8	Male	Handball	36	Team manager and coordinator
Former Athlete 9	Female	Soccer	35	Coach, manager and athletic agent
Former Athlete 10	Male	Basketball	33	Coach

Source: The authors (2021)

The study *corpus* was constructed based on complete transcriptions of the interviews, which were recorded after informed consent forms had been signed by each participant. The material collected was explored using the content analysis technique, following BARDIN's (2011) guidelines for thematic analysis, which seeks to find the nuclei of meaning. In these terms, the pre analysis (transcription and organization of the corpus), exploration of material (categorization and selection) and

treatment of results (inferences and hermeneutics of the researchers) were performed. Three previous categories were chosen for the analysis based on the specific objectives proposed: “Planning the transition”; “Transition context: motivations and influences” and “Post-transition moment,” while a fourth category emerged from the study material: “Gender inequities.”

4. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

4.1 PLANNING THE TRANSITION

The objective of this category was to discuss whether or not there was concern about the transition moment, in the perception of the former athletes. Most of the respondents began practicing sports during childhood and adolescence. What was once an opportunity for physical activity became a profession, as they excelled in the sports they played.

“I had no idea what it was, what being an athlete was all about. I was there to practice, to learn, but I had no clear objective.” (Former athlete 1)

“Well no, at the time that I was playing, I couldn’t imagine what might happen. I thought I would be a physical education teacher, teaching at a school. That’s what I thought I would do, just that, and as a physical education teacher, that’s exactly what happened to me (...).” (Former athlete 2)

It is possible to argue, however, that the sports career was already being defined at that moment, for according to DOS SANTOS and ALEXANDRINO (2015), a career is constructed from the moment an individual begins to practice sports and continues until his or her retirement as an athlete, encompassing the sports activities practiced throughout the individual’s life.

Thus, according to the accounts, sports was not thought about as a career until the moment when it was effectively linked to a sports institution or club. From the moment this connection occurs, former athletes primarily begin to be concerned with financial gain, in order to help their families and improve their living conditions.

“I come from a very humble family, and I knew that if I wasn’t an athlete, I would have to work, I would have to

study; so, there was always a concern about that.” (Former athlete 1)

They then begin to make a living from sports, which becomes the primary source of financial support. This corroborates the statement that high-performance sports can be considered a job, due to the financial return and rewards for the effort made (Pires, 2007; MACIEL, Moraes, 2008; CAMPOS, Capelle, MACIEL, 2017).

Even if they did not have a plan for when they stopped competing, the participants demonstrated that they were aware that their career would end early, as is common in sports.

“My preparation was that all the money I earned playing soccer, I invested in rental properties. So, that was my intention. (...) Because athletes, they don’t have, their career is short, right, maybe 20 years or so. We all know that, right, so they have to think about the future, right, so that was my concern. I said, ‘Look, there will come a time when I will have to stop, and I will stop when I am 40 years old. And 40 is still young (...)’ (Former athlete 4)

“No, it never happened, that never happened. It was a particular, individual thing. We were never prepared for ‘and then later, when...’ (...) because there are excellent people who have stopped, who could be tapped at the level of the confederation, the federation, even the Olympic committee, and they give opportunities to very few people; they don’t use them.” (Former athlete 7)

Considering the context presented by the respondents, the lack of planning may be related to the fact that many stopped participating in competitions unexpectedly, primarily due to irreversible injuries. In cases where former athletes’ age was no longer appropriate for high-performance activities, they seem to have spent more time thinking about the transition moment; however, as we will see in the next section, it was no less traumatic.

BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000) have asserted that planning for the transition is neglected by athletes. The authors also emphasize the importance of planning for this moment, which according to them is neglected by some athletes, who believe that their fame will be sufficient for this moment.

When speaking about preparation, it is possible to mention the interest of individuals in remaining involved with sports, causing many of them to pursue a degree in Physical Education as an alternative, in order to remain in the area. MACIEL (2015) also agrees with this observation, stating that little emphasis is placed on a future professional career but that, in most cases, there is a connection with the sport practiced

“My idea was to work as a physical education teacher (..), but unfortunately, I wasn't able to do that because my knee injury compromised my ability to work in sports (...). (Former athlete 6)”

“Yes, the idea has always been to continue in soccer; so, I prepared myself, like I said, in all aspects related to soccer, right. I wanted to work in soccer because it was my biggest interest and because it was actually what I knew how to do.” (Former athlete 9)

This reveals a lack of preparation or a lack of foresight or concern among former high-performance athletes regarding their professional career after sports.

Another aspect that can be considered is preparation through professional education, as mentioned by BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000), Marques and Samulski (2009) and MACIEL (2015). In the case of the former athletes interviewed, the most cited degree was Physical Education. The participants demonstrated interest in the area, and some said that they were attending or had attended college, while others justified the fact that they had not pursued that education.

Sometimes athletes are very dedicated and abandon their studies. Then, you don't know what you're doing because if you don't have a profession, there are a lot of former athletes, you know, so when it comes to employment, it's a very lovely story: you won the title, but now, what's your background? 'Oh, no, I'm just an athlete.' 'Sorry, but I won't be able to hire you.'” (...) (Former athlete 8)

I had been thinking for a few years and getting ready to stop playing. I know that this part of the transition is very difficult. So, I had been studying; I knew I still wanted to work in soccer. I've been doing this all my life. It wouldn't be possible for me to do anything else because of the know-

how I have in the sport, the experience I gained when I was playing. (Former athlete 9)

Yes, my education, during my career I was worried about my background as a physical education teacher, and that's where I wanted to work, right, as a coach, and I made this transition; I was preparing for this transition. (Former athlete 10)

There is thus a consensus that actions in the transition moment are not planned, but there are similar concerns in terms of being financially stable and remaining involved in sports. Understanding the transition moment as a change in an individual's trajectory can contribute to broadening the idea that preparing for this moment is important and relevant, particularly in regard to career development.

Furthermore, this transition depends on personal, social, economic, organizational and contextual factors. Accordingly, the accounts presented in this subsection concern individual experiences, with a diversity of personal characteristics and external influences that affect the planning process or lack thereof, as will be presented below.

4.2 TRANSITION CONTEXT: MOTIVATIONS AND INFLUENCES

This category will address the main motivations and influences that determined the transition moment, understood as the decision to stop competing.

According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE*), the average retirement age of high-performance athletes is 35 years. Consequently, when an athlete finishes his or her career in sports, he or she is still considered to be at a productive age, defined by the IBGE (2014) as the age group from 15 to 64 years, data that can be seen in the empirical material gathered, as shown in Table 1.

The main reason reported by the respondents were injuries and inadequate physical conditions for competing. The transition moment is thus related to a non-normative imbalance, i.e., an unexpected change, according to DOS SANTOS and ALEXANDRINO (2015)

and Ferreira Junior and Rubio (2017), and is the result of individual factors and social influences such as age, new interests, physical and psychological fatigue, difficulties with the coaching staff and declining results, among others, according to BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000).

The accounts reveal that as expected, this decision occurred early and unexpectedly, making the transition moment different from what had been imagined.

I was suffering from a clavicle injury. I was almost 39 years old, and I decided to stop. (Former athlete 1)

So, I had planned to play until I was 40, right? But as I told you, in 2006, I learned that I had diabetes and also had injuries, the knee problem, right? The knee damage caused me not to be able to continue, because I wasn't going to have the same performance. I wasn't going to be able to play at a high level, right? So, if I was going to stay without being able to earn money, then it wasn't interesting for me (...) I was 35, 36 years old. (Former athlete 4)

Even understanding that they were unable to continue with the routine of training and competitions, the former athletes reported that they would have liked to have been able to continue, had it been possible.

I think it was because of the physical aspect; it was because of the physical aspect. If my body could have held on a little longer, I would have continued (...) (Former athlete 2)

Other motivations that appeared were the desire to be closer to family and difficulties in relationships with staff/managers. Additionally, when questioned about the repercussions among family members and colleagues in the sport, the accounts show that receiving support was important for taking the next steps in the transition decision. This aspect, considered as social support, can contribute to the quality of the transition, as stated by BRANDÃO *et al.* (2000).

Therefore, with regard to the motivations for the decision to stop a competitive career and transition, there were no new findings compared with what was indicated in the literature examined above. Without previous planning and forced to stop early as a result of physical exhaustion and injuries, former athletes must face the post-transition moment.

4.3 POST-TRANSITION MOMENT

Finally, this study sought to understand former athletes' experience of the post-transition moment. The accounts show that the post-transition moment is one of reflection and great internal conflict.

Not so long ago, I was saying that with my retirement, I had been reborn. But now, over the last few months, I have been thinking about it. I think that yes, it was an end, a very painful, difficult end, and I didn't feel the pain right away. I started to feel it little by little, but that pain also caused me to be reborn. I discovered that I was reinventing myself.
(Former athlete 1)

The statement by Former athlete 1 demonstrates how retirement in the context of a sports career is a cognitive restructuring process following the end of a stage (DOS SANTOS, ALEXANDRINO, 2015), and is accompanied by stress, fear and anxiety. It requires the individual to adjust emotionally to a new group and lifestyle (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2000) and a loss of a sense of identity, as reported by Former athlete 3:

You cease to exist. When you're playing, you have that status; you have people who are there, taking care of you. You stop. You're no longer in the media. Everything ends. There's nobody there for you. They forget you exist.
(Former athlete 3)

This loss of a sense of identity corroborates Schollossberg's (1981) assertion that the transition causes changes in the way people perceive themselves, influencing their individual behavior and their social relationships. No longer practicing sports, which was an aspect of their identity— *"the athlete ceases to exist," "they forget you exist"* — caused some of the former athletes interviewed to try to postpone their retirement, even after they had suffered different physical injuries and received medical recommendations to stop playing sports.

Among those interviewed, all remained involved in sports, as coaches, managers/executives or members of sports committees. This decision seems to be based more on opportunities that arose rather than on planning and preparation and is motivated by the affective view and memories they have about sports because they do not have to separate themselves from the "glory" they experienced.

Oh, I found the transition very painful. But I made up for it when I formed this team of mine (...). (Former athlete 8)

In line with the argument that it is a transition moment rather than an end, when asked if they consider themselves more fulfilled today than when they were competing, all of the former athletes stated that they were more fulfilled when they participated in competitions and had the routine of a high-performance athlete. As such, although their current activities are important—because they maintain a connection with their status as an athlete—the feeling of being seen as a high-performance athlete cannot be replaced.

It's very hard to compare, it's... Nothing can compare to being a professional athlete and winning titles. Perhaps the only thing that can compare in my life is the birth of my two children. I feel like I'm in the process of being fulfilled. Maybe fulfilled, when you say fulfilled to me like that, for example, 'Ok, I fulfilled my mission.' No, I'm still discovering what my mission is. I'm in the middle of the process, discovering it gradually. (Former athlete 1)

Continuing with activities related to sports is in line with what is argued by MACIEL (2015), who says that despite the low emphasis placed on a future professional career, the new career has a connection with the sport practiced, demonstrating a lack of preparation or a lack of foresight or concern by high-performance athletes for their professional career after sports. This situation has consequences for the identity and subjectivity of the individuals, who state that finding an activity to pursue after the end of a competitive career can become a moment of rebirth and rediscovery.

It's an end on the field, but a new beginning in soccer, being able to pass on everything I learned during that period in my career (...). (Former athlete 5)

A fresh start in life; a fresh start in life and truly living, living like everyone else; do you understand? A rebirth, for sure (...). (Former athlete 7)

When considering the trajectory of the individual, there is continuity in the experience in terms of sports. Even experiencing the transition moment as a rupture, the individuals find motivation in their identification with sports, to continue working professionally and contribute their knowledge and experiences.

This underscores the importance of considering subjective aspects when studying careers, as the perception of the former athletes reveals that no longer competing and performing as an athlete on a team interferes with their trajectory and decision; however, subjective aspects, such as personal motivation, family, and the desire to and fulfillment of remaining connected to sports and continuing to be recognized for their sports performance, are also important, thereby integrating the dimensions surrounding their career, as indicated by BENDASSOLLI (2009) and Carvalho *et al.* (2015).

4.4 EMERGING CATEGORY: GENDER INEQUITIES

When performing a historical reclamation, no matter how far back one goes in history, women have always been situated in positions subordinate to men and have thus not shared the world on equal terms (BEAUVOIR, 1970; Tedeschi, Colling, 2014).

The conditions of inequality to which women are subjected are not the result of a biological fate, a biological determinism, or sex (Nicholson, 1994) but, rather, social constructions originating in the social relations between men and women, i.e., the genders, the material basis of which—work—is manifested through the sexual division of labor. This division is characterized by a distinction that allocates the productive spheres and the public spaces to men and the reproductive spheres, the private spaces, and the domestic and family environment to women. It is also characterized by a hierarchy, with spaces in the productive sphere being more recognized and valued (Kergoat, 2009).

Given these contexts of inequalities and the division and hierarchization of spaces, questions began to emerge regarding women being confined to private spaces and occupations as mothers, wives and caregivers, driven by socioeconomic and demographic changes. Contextual shifts, such as increased access to education and the increased participation of women in the labor market, enabled the construction of reconfigured female identities (Couto, Scharbier, 2013). However, even

with these advances and their entry into the public space, polarized and hierarchical environments still predominate (Scott, Cordeiro, 2013).

In the labor market, for example, inequalities between men and women exist and can be perceived in different ways (CAMARGOS, Riani, Marinho, 2014), such as through the forms of entry (Silva Filho, Queiroz, Clementino, 2016); in salaries (Gomes, Souza, 2018); in the periods of time dedicated to the productive and reproductive spheres (Hirata, 2015; Sousa, Guedes, 2016); and in occupations.

In general, a significant portion of female workers provide services in precarious conditions (Nascimento, 2014); hold positions at lower hierarchical levels; and are less recognized and valued (ANDRADE, Macedo, Oliveira, 2014). It is also possible to observe that since the earliest studies on female labor in Brazil, the options for paid work for women have been limited, for example, to certain races and social classes.

Specifically, in sports, the focus of this study, considered a legitimately heteronormative and masculine area, women athletes are faced with the difficult task of excelling in virile practices (CAMARGO, KESSLER, 2017).

Through the accounts of some of the former female athletes interviewed, it is possible to perceive gender inequalities and their repercussions on the relations between woman and labor. Former athlete 9, for example, says that she knew she would experience “*prejudice*” when she began playing women’s soccer, which at the time was neither recognized nor valued as a profession, unlike men’s soccer. Former athlete 10 also speaks about prejudice and how difficult it was for her to become a volleyball coach following her retirement from sports as an athlete:

I started to be a coach, right, for children, adolescents; but at that time, women were not highly valued. So, they don’t place a lot of value on women being a trainer, being a coach at that time. This made it very difficult, also in terms of advancement. (Former athlete 10)

The excerpt from the statement by Former athlete 10 makes it possible to interpret that there is a difficulty related to (re)allocation in the labor market in areas that are socially considered to be male areas (in this case, volleyball trainer and coach), corroborating Kergoat (2009), ANDRADE, Macedo and Oliveira (2014) and CAMARGO and

KESSLER (2017). When she says that being a woman “*made it very difficult*” to advance, Former athlete 10 also corroborates Scott and Cordeiro (2013) regarding the existence of spaces that are still polarized and hierarchical, the lowest hierarchical levels of which are usually reserved for women. In addition, when these women seek to move up the hierarchy, there are barriers that try to prevent them from reaching the highest levels, i.e., the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling was introduced in the 1980s in the United States to describe barriers that are so subtle that they are transparent but simultaneously strong enough to make it impossible for women to reach the highest levels of organizational hierarchies (Steil, 1997).

Although Former athlete 10 struggled to move up the organizational hierarchy, she succeeded. She was probably not able to fully break the glass ceiling, as there were still obstacles for her to remain in the position, for example, but she was able to make the glass ceiling weaker by taking a management position at a sports complex in Rio de Janeiro. According to her, “*I was the first woman to manage a very large sports complex in Rio de Janeiro [...] It went like this: I sat down at a table; all the presidents of the federation were men, and I was the only woman, right, confronting that situation.*”

Consistent with the difficulties encountered by the former athletes as a result of gender inequalities, another respondent, Former athlete 9, says that she confronted hardships (primarily machismo and discrimination from her father) to play a sport that, at the time, was considered a men’s sport, a statement that supports issues addressed CAMARGO and KESSLER (2017), who discuss the difficulties faced by women athletes in a space—sports—that is considered to be for men.

[...] my father strongly discouraged me because for my generation, he said that soccer was for men; so, he didn’t like it when I played in the street with the boys or at school. [...] My mother was in charge at home, fortunately for me; so, my mother said ‘yes,’ and that was what, what I pursued. (Former athlete 9)

Relations between women and labor, such as those presented above, have been the focus of feminist and gender studies, which point to the need to triangulate the intersections— or intersectionalities—that characterize those relationships: social class, gender, and race. Through the dynamics of those intersections, it is possible to seek explanations for

the inequalities between men and women, such as the limited access of women to life without violence, to less precarious jobs with greater recognition and appreciation, to higher salaries, and to higher positions in organizational hierarchies (BANDEIRA and DE ALMEIDA, 2015).

Intersectionality, in the case of the former athletes interviewed, may be evident in the statement by Former athlete 10, both a woman and a descendant of indigenous peoples. Although she refers to the discrimination she experienced only as ethnic-racial discrimination, we consider the possibility that this discrimination is the result of an intersectionality, in this case between gender—being a woman—and ethnicity-race—being a descendant of indigenous peoples:

I went to Rio de Janeiro in 1970. When I got there to do a tryout, I thought I was going to do a tryout, right? I got there, and he didn't even want to look me in the face. He just said: 'Go to the dressing room and get changed.' So, I said: 'But how am I going to get changed? I don't even wear shoes. I play barefoot.' I said: 'But I don't know how to use sneakers. I don't have any.' Then he said: 'But you have to have them here.' Fluminense soccer club at the time was a club of elites, so much so that they were referred to as 'pó de arroz' [white face powder; used to connote that their fans are preppy and white]. The people who played soccer, none of them were black in my day [...] I received a lot of what they now call bullying, right? In the old days, that word didn't exist, but that is what happened to me, and how. My nickname here [Rio de Janeiro] was Bororó because my grandmother was indigenous, right, and from the Bororó tribe. So, my nickname was Bororó, and I played barefoot, so it was: 'But how can you not know? You don't even have television in your town, right? How did you end up here?' Those kinds of things happened a lot; it was very painful. (Former athlete 10)

In this case, because Former athlete 10 is referring to soccer—a sport that is socially considered male—it is clear that both ethnic-racial and gender discrimination are involved. As Franzini (2005, p. 316) explains, soccer represents a space that, since its origin, has been eminently masculine and that because it is not only a space related to sports but also a sociocultural space, “[...] the values embedded in it and derived from it establish limits that—while not always so clear—must be

observed for the perfect maintenance of ‘order,’ or ‘logic,’ that is attributed to the game and expected to be confirmed in it. The admission of women onto the field would subvert that order.”

Considering the analyses presented here, it is possible to assert that gender, as well as its interaction with ethnicity-race, must be considered and that women, as well as being discriminated against in different contexts, also exist in the context of sports, considered a male space. These discriminations originate in the inequalities of genders, socially constructed, disseminated and (re)produced throughout history, since the colonial period.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study sought to answer the following research question: What transition occurs in an athlete’s sports career following the end of high-performance activities? Based on the assumption that athletes understand the moment of their “retirement” from competition as a milestone and transition, rather than the end of their career in sports, the objective was to understand the career transition process of those high-performance athletes.

The findings of this investigation indicate that in most cases, there is no planning for the transition. Careers begin very early, and athletes usually do not think about the future, only about living in the highly desired moment afforded by high-performance activities as well as the recognition gained through success and financial rewards. However, most of the former athletes report that they did not think that their high-performance activities would be a momentary phase; on the contrary, they believed and wanted to remain involved with sports for a long period of time.

In this context, athletes do not expect unforeseen events to happen nor interruptions to their careers. This study demonstrated that physical fitness is the primary reason for the transition (end of high-performance activities/new possibilities in sports) and that they would have liked to have been able to continue had they been in good physical condition. This motivation is accompanied by the influence of the family, as sports take up a great deal of time and family

members are burdened by the absence required for high-performance activities.

For the former athletes interviewed, the transition is not seen as the end of the career; rather, the post-transition moment is envisioned as one of new possibilities for continuing to be devoted to sports. Many reported that this period was a difficult moment, albeit one of great reflection, rebirth and rediscovery. This points to the importance of continuing to address subjective aspects when studying sports careers.

The thesis that athletes understand the moment of their “retirement” from competitions as a transition rather than the end of their career is thus confirmed; this is due to the strong emotional appeal and affective involvement of athletes with their successful trajectory in the world of sports, which is why they seek to continue working in related areas.

It was also possible to perform analyses within the scope of gender studies and the interaction between gender and ethnicity-race in sports. Women are discriminated against in different contexts, and it is no different in the context of sports, considered a male space where gender inequalities are socially constructed, disseminated and (re)produced.

The intention of this study is to support and inspire new research, in order to broaden the theoretical framework on the subject and facilitate new discussions warning athletes about the need to plan their careers for difficult periods, such as the transition, and new dialogs regarding the possible intersection with topics that address the social context and the experiences of individuals.

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