

# When the Final Whistle Blows: Identity, Adaptability and Skill Transfer among Retired Team Sport Athletes

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how retired Finnish male athletes from elite football and ice hockey navigate the transition from professional sport to working life. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews from the *Elämän Pelikirja* podcast, we conducted a theory-driven thematic analysis grounded in established models of career transition, identity reconstruction, and skill transfer. The analysis is based on authentic first-person narratives, offering unique insight into an underrepresented national context. Findings reveal that most transitions were abrupt, emotionally complex, and lacked formal institutional support. Athletes struggled with identity disruption and limited planning, yet gradually repurposed sport-derived meta-skills—such as resilience, communication, and goal orientation—in new professional roles, particularly in sales, media, technology, and leadership. Differences between sport cultures also shaped transition experiences. By highlighting both individual agency and structural gaps, this study offers policy-relevant insights for improving athlete support systems and broadens the understanding of post-career adaptation in elite sport

**Keywords:** Professional role, Career transition, Identity reconstruction, Skill transfer

## INTRODUCTION

For most elite athletes, retirement is inevitable yet poorly supported. Despite increasing attention to athlete welfare, the transition out of elite sport remains one of the most complex and understudied phases of the athletic career (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2012). It often entails identity disruption, emotional disorientation, and practical challenges in repurposing athletic capital to non-sport domains (Lavalley, 2005; Park et al., 2013). While some describe the exit as liberating, many experience it as abrupt, unsupported, and disorienting (Torregrosa et al., 2015).

Psychological and social aspects of retirement have been explored through frameworks such as Stambulova's athletic career transition model (2003), Wylleman and Lavalley's developmental model (2004), and research on identity foreclosure (Brewer et al., 1993). However, prior research often focuses on single-sport contexts, lacks longitudinal perspective, or underrepresents national sport cultures beyond dominant Anglophone systems. In Finland, where ice hockey and football are major sports but support systems are

fragmented, cultural scripts around retirement remain underexamined (Ryba et al., 2016).

This study investigates how retired Finnish football and ice hockey players experience and navigate the transition from elite sport to civilian life. Drawing on 19 first-person interviews from the *Elämän Pelikirja* podcast, we apply theory-driven thematic analysis to explore how athletes understand their career endings, reconstruct identity, regulate emotion, and interpret the transferability of their athletic skills. We ask: How do elite athletes in team sports make sense of and adapt to life after sport?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSFERABLE SKILLS AND CAREER TRANSACTIONS**

Athlete career transitions have been conceptualized as complex, multidimensional processes that unfold over time and across several life domains (Wylleman & Lavallée, 2004). According to the holistic athletic career model, transitions are not only athletic but also psychological, psychosocial, educational, and vocational. These dimensions often interact and accumulate, creating vulnerable phases during and after a sport career (Wylleman et al., 2013).

Stambulova's (2003) Athletic Career Transition Model defines transition as a process that presents demands which must be met through internal and external resources. Successful adaptation depends on the athlete's coping strategies, perceived barriers, and availability of social and institutional support (Stambulova et al., 2021). The presence or absence of planning plays a critical role in whether the transition is experienced as a crisis or a growth opportunity.

Another key concept in this study is transferable skills developed in one context (e.g., elite sport) that can be applied in another (e.g., business or education). Research suggests that elite athletes often develop high levels of psychological capital (self-efficacy, resilience, optimism), self-leadership, and team collaboration skills (Luthans et al., 2007). However, the tacit nature of these skills can make them difficult to articulate and transfer without structured reflection (Park et al., 2013).

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital further informs this framework. Athletes accumulate social capital (networks, reputation), cultural capital (ways of behaving, speaking, and presenting oneself), and in some cases symbolic capital (recognition, prestige) through their careers. The activation of these forms of capital—particularly outside sport, can significantly shape the quality of career transition (Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen, 2016).

Finally, identity construction is central. Athletic identity has been found to be both a resource and a vulnerability in transition (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Strong athletic identity can foster high motivation and structure during a career, but if unidimensional, it can hinder adjustment when sport is removed (Lally, 2007; Debois et al., 2015). Narratives of identity reconstruction and reorientation are thus crucial for understanding how athletes reframe their professional roles.

These theories collectively illuminate transitions as psychosocial, cultural, and skill-based processes. This framework also guided the construction of the coding scheme used in the current study and shaped the interpretation of the podcast interview data.

## THE STUDY CONDUCTED

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven thematic analysis based on verbatim transcripts from the Finnish *Elämän Pelikirja* podcast. For this study, we selected 19 episodes that featured male athletes from football and ice hockey who had retired from professional sport and transitioned to working life (e.g., in sales, management, media, or entrepreneurship). All episodes were transcribed and cross-verified for accuracy. Only material from the athlete guests was included in the analysis. Although the podcast was not designed as a research interview, its format and depth align with narrative and autobiographical data collection standards in qualitative research (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

All participants were Finnish male athletes who had competed professionally in football or ice hockey and appeared on the *Elämän Pelikirja* podcast. All participants had transitioned into roles in sales, entrepreneurship, management, or media. This focus was intentional, as these occupational domains provide fertile ground for exploring the application of meta-skills, identity reconstruction, and cultural capital derived from elite sport.

Importantly, all of them had at some point after their athletic careers worked in roles with a commercial or client-facing dimension—typically in expert-based B2B sales or partnership development. This focus was intentional, as these occupational domains provide fertile ground for exploring the application of meta-skills, identity reconstruction, and cultural capital derived from elite sport.

## Analytical Framework & Codebook

We used a theory-driven codebook based on established models in athlete transition research (Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallée, 2004; Ryba et al., 2016). Coding was conducted manually using a matrix structure and discussed iteratively among the research team to ensure reliability and interpretative rigor. To ensure analytical consistency, a codebook was developed combining predefined categories and inductive insights from the data. Table 1 presents the main themes, indicators, and supporting references used in the thematic analysis.

**Table 1:** Analytical codebook based on athlete career transition theory.

Main Theme	Subcategories / Indicators	Key References
Career Termination	Voluntary/Involuntary; Anticipated/Sudden; Emotional response	Stambulova (2003); Wylleman & Lavallée (2004)
Identity and Change	Strength of athletic identity; Identity reconstruction	Brewer et al. (1993); Lally (2007)

(Continued)

**Table 1:** Continued.

Main Theme	Subcategories / Indicators	Key References
Transition Resources	Psychological capital; Social support; Personal coping	Cecić Erpič et al. (2004); Stambulova et al. (2021)
Support Systems	Career services; Educational pathways; Club support	Aquilina (2013); Stambulova & Wylleman (2019)
Transferable Skills	Recognition; Application; Skill translation challenges	Lavallee (2005); Knights et al. (2016)
Social/Cultural Capital	Networks; Recommendations; Sport prestige	Bourdieu (1986); Ryba et al. (2015)
Sport-Specific Contexts	Cultural norms; Transition practices in different sports	Ryba et al. (2016)
Emotional Processing	Grief, anxiety, relief, mental fatigue	Park et al. (2013); Debois et al. (2015)

## RESULTS

The findings from the thematic analysis based on eight key dimensions drawn from athlete career transition theory. Each subsection highlights major patterns and is supported by direct quotations from the athletes. All quotes are drawn from the Elämän Pelikirja podcast interview transcripts and used with permission.

### Career Termination

The majority of athletes described their transition from elite sport as abrupt or poorly planned, regardless of whether the decision was voluntary or forced. Emotional responses ranged from grief and disorientation to relief.

*“I never made an official retirement decision, it just ended.” (I-AV)*

*“It ended really fast. I didn’t really have time to think.” (I-TS)*

*“When it ended, it left a huge void... I went pretty deep.” (I-ToS)*

*“After the game there was no speech or anything. It just faded away.” (I-MP)*

Some transitions were sudden due to injuries or contractual issues. Others described a slow realization followed by an emotionally heavy moment.

*“The coach had basically thrown me out a week earlier, and then I had to present player options to him.” (I-MI)*

*“In a way, I saw it coming – but when it finally ended, it still felt brutal.” (I-DH)*

### Identity and Change

Athletic identity had been central to nearly all participants. The sudden loss of this identity led to a search for meaning and self-definition in the post-sport phase.

*“It took a long time to realize that hey, I’m not a player anymore.” (I-AV)*

*“For a long time I was just the footballer. Then I had to figure out who I am without that.” (I-HM)*

*My whole identity had been built around sport. Suddenly there was nothing.” (I-ToS)*

*“At the point when my career ended, I really felt like: who am I now, if I’m not a footballer anymore?” (I-DH)*

Some found the adjustment particularly hard when their departure from sport had been involuntary or accompanied by injury. Others described a gradual reshaping of identity over time, especially through professional reinvention.

### **Transition Resources**

Many participants emphasized the role of routine, small goals, and support from close family and friends in building post-career stability.

*“I just had to create some rhythm. A run, breakfast, whatever – but some kind of structure.” (I-AP)*

*“Small wins helped me – going to the gym, keeping a journal.” (I-JL)*

*“Luckily I had family and a few trusted friends. That helped organize things.” (I-HM)*

The importance of psychological self-management was highlighted, including creating a daily structure and redefining purpose beyond competition.

*“I needed to make some routine for the day or I would’ve lost it.” (I-RR)*

### **Support Systems**

Formal support systems—such as clubs, federations, or career services—were largely absent in the athletes’ narratives. Many felt they were left alone to manage the transition.

*“There was no structure, no guidance, no advice.” (I-AV)*

*“There was no support at the time. No one asked how I was doing.” (I-ToS)*

*“I basically handled it alone. No players’ union reached out to me at least.” (I-MP)*

*“In football, clubs don’t really prepare you for what comes after your career.” (I-DH)*

Several also reflected that post-career preparation was not part of the sports culture during their playing years.

*“Nobody talked about planning post-career during my playing days.” (I-AH)*

*“I didn’t build a proper business network during my playing years. I had no plan.” (I-MI)*

### **Transferable Skills**

Despite limited formal preparation, many athletes found that key skills from elite sport translated effectively into working life, especially in sales, leadership, and client-based roles.

*“Sales is like hockey: if you don’t perform, there are no results.” (I-TK)*

*“You learn to handle pressure, make quick decisions on the ice. That works elsewhere too.” (I-AV)*

*“Working in crisis communication is very similar – fast pace, decisions under pressure.” (I-TL)*

*“If anything, it taught me pressure tolerance and working in a team.” (I-AP)*

Others mentioned communication, discipline, and strategic thinking as skills they carried over from sport into their new careers.

*“Goal-setting, focus, those things came from football and I still use them.” (I-JM)*

*“I learned to communicate with all kinds of people. That helps now at work.” (I-ToS)*

### **Social and Cultural Capital**

The role of networks was particularly emphasized. Several athletes had intentionally built relationships during their careers, while others realized post-career that their network was insufficient.

*“I consciously built networks throughout my career. Didn’t know where they’d lead but felt it was important.” (I-AV)*

*“Those relationships I had built helped me a lot when my career ended.” (I-AV)*

*“I started networking already while playing. Attended events, talked to people.” (I-MP)*

*“You think people know you, but I didn’t have any real network.” (I-DH)*

Some felt that the prestige of their athletic past opened initial doors, but maintaining and leveraging those contacts required effort and professionalism.

*“I knew a lot of people, but the doors didn’t open automatically. You had to work for it.” (I-ToS)*

### **Sport-Specific Contexts**

Athletes highlighted how career transition culture varied across sports. Footballers and hockey players alike noted a lack of institutional attention to life after sport, though some observed a gradual shift in recent years.

*“In football, there’s no built-in transition path. You have to figure it out yourself.” (I-DH)*

*“Football clubs don’t prepare you for what comes next.” (I-JL)*

*“In hockey circles no one talked about retirement. It was almost a taboo.” (I-AV)*

*“Back then in football, no one really considered life after sport.” (I-AH)*

*“In the latter part of my career, people started mentioning transitions – but not in depth.” (I-TK)*

### **Emotional Processing**

Emotionally, the transition was described as a period of grief, confusion, and in some cases depression. Yet others experienced relief or saw it as a new beginning.

*“I went pretty deep. I felt like I wasn’t needed anywhere.” (I-ToS)*

*“It hit me emotionally when the structure disappeared overnight.” (I-HF)*  
*“There was grief for sure – but also some relief. I was exhausted.” (I-TL)*  
*“At first it was hard, but then came a strange sense of freedom. I didn’t have to prove anything anymore.” (I-TS)*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored how Finnish elite football and ice hockey players experienced the transition from professional sport to working life. Building on established frameworks (Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallée, 2004; Ryba et al., 2016), the analysis highlighted that transitions were often abrupt, emotionally charged, and insufficiently supported by institutional systems. Nevertheless, athletes demonstrated varying degrees of agency in repurposing sport-acquired meta-skills and gradually reconstructing new professional identities—especially in sales, leadership, media, and entrepreneurship.

### **Abrupt Transitions and Identity Disruption**

Confirming previous research (Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013), the findings revealed that most transitions were involuntary or poorly anticipated. Emotional experiences included disorientation, loss, grief, and existential uncertainty. As interviewee AV noted, *“I never made an official retirement decision, it just ended.”* Others, like interviewee ToS, described post-career depression: *“I went pretty deep. I felt like I wasn’t needed anywhere”*. These narratives align with the literature on athletic identity foreclosure, where strong athletic identity and limited exploration of alternative roles can hinder post-career adjustment (Brewer et al., 1993; Lavallee, 2005). Many interviewed athletes described identity confusion in the absence of the structured lifestyle and recognition provided by sport.

### **Transferable Skills and Professional Reinvention**

Despite emotional and logistical challenges, many athletes eventually mobilized transferable skills—such as pressure tolerance, goal orientation, communication, and team leadership—in their new careers. This supports Lavallee’s (2005) findings on the applicability of sport-derived competencies in organizational life. As interviewee TK put it, *“Sales is like hockey: if you don’t perform, there are no results.”*

These findings also reinforce Knights et al. (2016), who argue that athletes possess a rich portfolio of meta-skills but often lack support in articulating or translating them into workplace contexts. Interviewees like TL, AV, and JM demonstrated how these skills can be leveraged in high-stakes environments like sales—especially when paired with continuous learning.

### **Missing Structures and Informal Adaptation**

Consistent with Stambulova and Wylleman (2019), the study found that institutional support structures were largely absent. Very few participants reported receiving proactive career services or transition support from clubs

or federations. Instead, most relied on personal networks, family, and self-initiated routines.

This informal adaptation echoes Aquilina (2013), who emphasized the importance of non-sport identities and informal support systems in facilitating positive transitions. Yet several athletes amended that they had not invested in network building or planning during their playing years, highlighting a missed opportunity for proactive preparation.

### **The Role of Social and Cultural Capital**

The study illustrates the value—but also the limits—of social and cultural capital gained through elite sport. While visibility and reputation helped open some doors (Bourdieu, 1986; Ryba et al., 2015), success in post-athletic careers required deliberate effort and adaptability. As interviewee ToS observed, “I knew a lot of people, but the doors didn’t open automatically.” Athletes like MP and AV exemplified strategic networking during their playing years, which eased their transition. Conversely, others realized post-retirement that symbolic capital did not guarantee employability, particularly in industries requiring domain-specific expertise or formal qualifications.

### **Cultural Contexts and Changing Norms**

Sport-specific cultures significantly influenced how transitions were perceived and managed. In both football and ice hockey, retirement was historically considered a taboo topic, as noted by several former athletes in this study. However, some interviewees indicated that awareness of career transitions has improved in recent years, aligning with the increasing efforts by players’ unions to promote dual-career development and post-sport support services. This development echoes Ryba et al. (2016), who argue that transition pathways are shaped by the cultural scripts embedded within each sport.

Despite these positive signs, the athletes’ accounts suggest that meaningful change has been slow, particularly within Finnish sport institutions. Club-level initiatives aimed at integrating education, mentoring, or dual-career planning were rarely mentioned, indicating considerable room for systemic improvement.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study investigated how Finnish elite football and ice hockey players navigated their transitions from professional sport to working life. Drawing on 19 podcast-based interviews and a theory-driven thematic analysis, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of post-sport adaptation—highlighting both the individual struggles and broader systemic gaps that shape this pivotal life stage.

Most athletes experienced their career termination as abrupt and emotionally taxing, echoing prior research on identity disruption and psychological challenges (Stambulova, 2003; Lally, 2007). While few had access to formal support structures, many demonstrated resilience by gradually reconstructing their identities and repurposing sport-acquired meta-skills in sales, entrepreneurship, media, and leadership roles.

The study also underscores the value of social and cultural capital built during athletic careers. Yet symbolic capital alone was not sufficient; successful transitions often required proactive planning, networking, and continued learning. Despite some evidence of increasing awareness, structural support from clubs, federations, or unions remained limited, particularly in the areas of career services, dual-career development, and post-retirement guidance.

By drawing attention to these gaps, this research offers practical implications for policymakers, sport organizations, and educational institutions. Systematic transition support—integrated early in athletes' careers—could ease the psychological burden of retirement, promote skill recognition, and improve long-term life satisfaction.

Future research could extend this study by including female athletes, individual sports, or comparative cross-national perspectives. In particular, the role of socio-economic background and education in shaping transition outcomes warrants further exploration.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that while the final whistle marks the end of one chapter, it also signals the beginning of a new one—where the lessons, struggles, and strengths forged through elite sport can find powerful new expressions in life beyond the game.

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