An Exploration of the Transition Experience among Korean Student-Athletes

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For decades, there have been changes in the perspective towards leaving competitive sports: from viewing it as a termination of a career to now seeing it as a new chance for post-athletic life. The better understanding of this transition has been an important research topic for many sport science researchers (e.g., Fuller, 2014; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & CôTé, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). In the United States, the transition of student-athletes from sport to non-sport fields has gained a lot of attention (Petitpas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 1996). In addition, as diverse policies and strategies have been implemented for elite sport development in many countries (e.g., De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009), the ever-increasing competitive sports environment globally begins to take its toll on the student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Guidotti et al., 2013). With the need for perfection often garnering negative experiences, student-athletes soon begin to become disengaged with the sport they play (e.g., Ball, 1976; Coakley, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). Therefore, the need for more research to understand the transitional experience of student-athletes’ socio-cultural and sporting contexts (e.g., different countries) has been suggested (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Stambulova et al., 2009).

For a long time, South Korea focused on an elite sport development, and as a result achieved many successes in international sports competitions. However, since 2000 the human rights and academic related problems of student-athletes has risen (KOC, 2010). Since then, the Korean government has been devoting effort to improve the elite sport system (MCST, 2014). In the case of soccer, since 2009, the weekend soccer league system has been conducted to help student-athletes to exercise and study at the same time (KFA, 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore the transitional experience among student-athletes within the context of policy and socio-cultural implications in South Korea. More specifically, the researchers examined how the transition process and experience of disengagement from competitive sports were conceptualized by Korean student-athletes. By focusing on the context of South Korea, this exploration contributes to the diversity in the research domain of student-athletes’ transitional experiences.

There have been several changes in the perspectives of how the event of leaving competitive sports should be conceptualized (e.g., Fuller, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Early on, most researchers suggested that leaving competitive sports was an involuntary decision and an unpredicted event that causes difficult career transitions for athletes (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Butt & Molnar, 2009). Therefore, leaving competitive sports has been conceptualized as a negative event like ‘termination’ based on social gerontology and thanatology models for athletes (Lavallee, 2000; Rosenberg, 1981). However, a new approach to athletes’ disengagement from sports has been offered. It suggests that leaving sport experiences does not have to be an inevitably stressful event, like an identity crisis, or the end of their career (Coakley, 1983; Crocket, 2014). Consequently, this suggests that the retirement from an athletic profession might not a singular end of a career, but instead a transitional process to find another life after leaving a highly competitive sports environment (Stambulova et al., 2009). Based on holistic lifespan perspective, researchers have conducted diverse studies to better understand the reasoning behind athletes’ decisions for leaving competitive sport environments. They have also suggested the need for athletes’ dual career development, which focuses not only on a sport development, but also on an educational development to prepare for a post-athletic life (EU Expert Group, 2012; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). In the case of student-athletes, it is suggested that their disengagement from sports can have unique characteristics (Fuller, 2014). Firstly, student-athletes generally face the event of leaving a sport at an unexpected point in their life. Contrastingly, the retirement of most professional and Olympic athletes is regarded as an on-time event with long-term career development (Crocket, 2014; Wylleman et al., 2004). Therefore, the transitional experience of student-athletes has been considered harder to cope with than the retirement of professional or Olympic athletes. Additionally, difficulties in the transition process could be different depending on the competitiveness the athlete was accustomed to (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In turn, this conveys the differences in the processes and experiences of student-athletes versus professional.
and Olympic athletes (Parker, 1994).

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, and a total of seven former soccer student-athletes were selected as research participants. On average, they had experience playing in soccer teams for about 8 years. The subjects had also participated in weekend soccer league games for more than two years and then decided to cease playing the sport. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, the participants were asked about their experience in athletic teams, experience of participating in weekend soccer league games, reasons for leaving the sport, positive/negative factors on transition from sport to non-sport fields, and what leaving the sport and transition means in their lives. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from research participants and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The collected data was analyzed by using the analytic framework of Creswell (2013).

In this particular case, several related themes emerged. Findings suggested that when the participants were student-athletes, the soccer players had a hard time due to excessive training, conflicts with their coaches, hierarchical relationships between senior and junior team members, and the stifling life in their training camp. Under these circumstances, they strived to enter college as student-athletes under the cut-throat competition. Consequently, they chose to leave the sport as they were unable to make the college’s starting line-up. Secondly, after leaving the competitive sport field, student-athletes experienced difficulties in career exploration and development. Moreover, they had conflicts with their parents. It was viewed that their difficulties and conflicts were attributed to the lack of career preparation due to the predominance of athletic life in sacrifice of student life. It was also found that with social support from significant others including parents, friends and professors, they had overcome those challenges and sufferings. With this, they successfully sought for new opportunities in life. Thirdly, the exiting elite sport development system was found to be a major challenge against the recent policy efforts to alleviate the current struggles and difficulties that student-athletes experienced.

The result shows that student-athletes’ perspectives on leaving sports can be changed during the transition process, and the experience can be recognized as a new life opportunity. Findings suggest that it is important to adopt a tailor-made approach considering the specific sport context in developing sport policy for student-athletes’ career development. Future research recommendations and strategies will be discussed during the presentation.