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Engagement in Sport Career Transition Planning Enhances Performance

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ABSTRACT

Retirement from sport has the potential to be a major loss for professional athletes. Yet, many athletes resist engaging in career transition planning programs prior to their retirement. This research note reports the findings from an investigation on whether planning for an inevitable resource loss event (i.e., retirement from professional sport) can accrue gains (i.e., sporting performance). Data for this study was sourced from the National Rugby League, a top-level men's professional sports league in Australasia, and included 28,516 performance selection observations for 632 players over three seasons. The findings demonstrated that higher levels of engagement in preretirement planning were positively associated with team selection, team tenure, and career tenure. Preretirement planning was also found to exert its effect on performance through the experience of career transition practitioners and the number of intervention support sessions the athletes participated in. Results are discussed in relation to conservation of resources and cognitive dissonance theories.

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Retirement from sport has the potential to be a major loss for professional athletes. Past research on this topic has focused on the consequences of sport retirement and how making the transition out of sport can lead to reductions in personal (e.g., loss of sporting performance skills), material (e.g., loss of occupation), and symbolic (e.g., loss of identity) resources to which the athlete was emotionally attached (cf. Harvey, 1996). Nearly one in five elite athletes experience distressful reactions following retirement from sport, and many experience feelings of loss (Grove, Lavallee, Gordon, & Harvey, 1998; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). More recent studies have also started to examine what resources can help athletes cope with the career transition process, including preretirement planning (Park et al., 2013).

Preretirement intervention programs offer career and education support to professional athletes during their playing careers to help them plan for

their inevitable transition out of sport. Although preretirement planning is one of the best predictors of successful career transitions out of sport, many athletes elect not to engage in intervention programs even when they have access to such services (North & Lavallee, 2004). This resistance has been attributed to the perception that engagement in career transition intervention programs while still competing could be a distraction from their sport performance (Park et al., 2013; Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). Cognitive dissonance, therefore, may play an important role in preretirement planning.

Cognitive dissonance theory postulates that individuals strive toward cognitive consistency when a situation involves conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. If there are inconsistencies, people will make alterations in their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce psychological discomfort and restore balance in their lives (Festinger, 1957). The magnitude of dissonance depends on importance or value of the attitude, belief, or behavior that is dissonant, and thus influences the pressure to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. As the magnitude increases, pressures to reduce dissonance and avoidance from situations that generate dissonance also increase. Furthermore, when individuals take actions that appear to be in conflict with their starting preferences, they experience feelings of discomfort. To minimize or avoid this discomfort, people change their preferences to more closely align with their actions.

Recent theoretical and empirical perspectives influenced by Hobfoll's (2002) conservation of resources (COR) theory may also help advance knowledge in the area of retirement from sport. COR theory has been adopted previously across several different sporting contexts and populations (e.g., Ford & Gordon, 1999; Wendling, Kellison, & Sagas, 2018) but the focus has generally been on psychological stress and strain. A recent trend in the literature concerning COR theory has been its extension to better understand how individuals allocate and conserve resources in the context of resource gains and losses. Central to COR theory is the principle that resources need to be invested by people in order to protect or limit potential losses. COR theory also postulates a gain paradox principle: Resource loss is disproportionately more salient and important than resource gain (Hobfoll, 2012). From these principles, a number of relevant corollaries of the resource investment process have been proposed to help understand the downstream impact of changes in resources. For example, investment becomes more difficult when individuals lose resources and they become more prone to further investment loss (i.e., loss spirals) under stressful conditions. On the other hand, when individuals gain resources they have greater opportunities to invest and accrue additional resources (i.e., recourse gain spirals). These patterns have been supported through

studies showing how individuals who possess resources are more capable of offsetting losses, and how this serves to facilitate the acquisition of other resources (Ennis, Hobfoll, & Schroder, 2000).

Wang, Henkens, and van Solinge's (2011) resource-based dynamic model has proposed resources as the central mechanism that shapes how people cope with retirement from the workforce. According to this model, losses, gains, or no change in resources will lead to decreasing, increasing, or stable trajectories in the retirement process, respectively. Recent work by Topa and Valero (2017) has applied this model in a study exploring retirees' satisfaction, depression, and actual loss of resources. Results revealed that the threat of resource loss had a positive relationship on retirement satisfaction and depression levels after retirement.

While recent studies in sport have helped inform the development of preretirement intervention programs for elite athletes around the world, little research has examined the impact of the investment of resources during the career transition process.

Given the extant research (e.g., Topa & Valero, 2017), an interesting line of enquiry would involve studying whether planning for an inevitable resource loss event (i.e., retirement from sport) can accrue gains. Such an extension of COR theory may contribute to new ways of testing the resource investment process (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine whether engaging in a preretirement planning program can enhance sporting performance.

Method

Anonymized data for this study was sourced from the National Rugby League (NRL), a top-level men's professional sports league in Australasia. A total of 16 teams play in the NRL, 15 of which are based in Australia and one in New Zealand. The NRL operates on a single group system, with no divisions or conferences and no relegation and promotion from other leagues. Each team plays 26 games per season between March and October annually, with additional games scheduled in the finals (i.e., playoffs) rounds. A total of 17 players are selected to play per team for each game, based on performance levels at the time of selection.

Performance data was sourced across three seasons (2014, 2015, and 2016) from official NRL databases, with all performance data double-checked for quality assurance purposes. Performance data included team selection, team tenure, and career tenure for each player for each game across all three years (final round games were excluded because every team was not represented). The players selected for each team for every potential game, taking into account availability for selection and excluding injured,

suspended, and players being rested, were initially coded. The number of years each player had been contracted at his current club (team tenure) and playing in the NRL overall (career tenure) as at the start of the season in question were also recorded.

Preretirement planning data was sourced for each player and included an engagement in preretirement planning measure at every team selection point. Engagement in preretirement planning was determined through a measurement of Career Decidedness (Gordon, 1998) and Career Planning (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992). Career Decidedness was applied with three categories as follows: *Undecided*: “I don’t know what I want to do after footy”; *Exploring Options*: “I have an idea of what I want to do/a few interests but I’m not sure yet which I really want to do after footy”; and *Decided*: “I’m confident I’ve made a well-informed choice about what I want to do after footy.” Career Planning was applied with five stages adapted from the transtheoretical model of behavior change as follows: *Precontemplation*: no thought of or intention to do career planning; *Contemplation*: weighing up the pros and cons of career planning, but still doing no planning; *Preparation*: engaging in career planning; *Action*: taking action toward their future career (e.g., studying, working); and *Maintenance*: future career has been under way for at least three months (e.g., own business, a trade, property development). For someone to be *engaged* they were categorized as: Exploring Options or Decided in the area of Career Decidedness; and Action or Maintenance in the area of Career Planning. Career transition practitioners (i.e., career coaches) assessed Career Decidedness and Career Planning measures for every player at every team selection point, and entered the data into a software system built for tracking, reporting, and case management.

Data was also sourced on the experience of the career coaches (20 in total, including at least one for each team; categorized as experienced, novice, or no experience) and the number of preretirement intervention support sessions for each player (Mean = 1.63, $SD = .84$).

Results

The data set included a total of 28,516 performance selection observations for 632 players (mean age in 2016 = 23.84, $SD = 4.26$; mean years team tenure in 2016 = 2.52, $SD = 3.02$; mean years career tenure in 2016 = 4.02, $SD = 4.01$). Engagement in preretirement planning was found to be significantly correlated with each of the performance measures: team selection ($X^2 = 112.18$, $p < .01$), team tenure ($r_b = .48$, $p < .01$), and career tenure ($r_b = .52$, $p < .01$). Engagement in preretirement planning was also found to be significantly correlated with the number of preretirement intervention

support sessions ($r_b = .81$, $p < .001$) and career coach experience ($X^2 = 456.12$, $p < .001$).

Linear and logistic regression analyses were also tested following relevant variable transformations. These results demonstrated that engagement in preretirement planning was positively associated to team selection ($F = 6.94$, $p = .008$, $R^2 = .19$), team tenure ($F = 16.58$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .23$), and career tenure ($F = 28.57$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .27$). Sobel tests were employed to explore whether the experience of the career coach and the number of intervention support sessions could explain the impact of preretirement planning on performance. Significant ($p < .05$) results were found for the experience of the career coach (team selection: $z = 2.21$; and team tenure: $z = 2.07$) and the number of intervention support sessions (team selection: $z = 1.98$; and career tenure: $z = 3.22$).

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine whether planning for retirement from sport can enhance sporting performance. When relationships across the study variables were examined, higher levels of engagement in career transition planning were found to be related to team selection when available (i.e., not injured, suspended, or being rested), the number of years contracted by the team, the number of years playing overall, the experience of the career coach, and the number of intervention support sessions. The results support the findings by Topa and Valero (2017) as the threat of a resource loss event can have a positive impact on preretirement planning.

Further analyses showed how greater engagement in career transition planning predicted team selection, team tenure, and career tenure. These findings can be partially explained through cognitive dissonance theory, as engaging in preretirement planning may have led to less cognitive dissonance, allowing for more time to focus on sporting performance. Previous research (e.g., North & Lavallee, 2004) has shown how many athletes resist engaging in preretirement programs they have access to, possibly due to the perception that such engagement could be a distraction from their sporting performance (Petitpas et al., 1992). In this study, evidence was found to suggest that inconsistencies that might normally influence professional athletes to not engage in preretirement planning were altered. The value players placed on preretirement planning appears to be greater than the pressures to focus exclusively on sport performance (cf. Festinger, 1957), perhaps due to the experience of the career coach and number of intervention support sessions. The experience of the career coach was found to explain the significant relationship between engagement in career transition planning and team selection and team tenure, and the number of

intervention support sessions was found to explain the significant relationship between engagement in career transition planning and team selection and career tenure.

By applying the process of resource loss and gain cycles among professional athletes, this study extends Hobfoll's (2002) COR theory into the retirement from sport context. The findings also support COR theory, as the professional athletes who took action through engagement in preretirement planning invested resources in order to limit potential losses. In line with Hobfoll's (2012) gain paradox principle, resource gains would have increased in salience as loss circumstances became higher. In this study, individuals were deemed to be engaged in preretirement planning if their levels of career decidedness (i.e., exploring options or decided) and career planning (i.e., action or maintenance) were in the advanced stages. The downstream impact of changes in resource investment is seen in the performance data for the individual, team, and career overall. When individuals accrued resources in planning for their retirement, they would have had greater opportunity to accrue additional resources through gain spirals. In a similar way to Ennis et al. (2000), this would have allowed the athletes to be more capable of offsetting losses and thereby jumpstarting further resource gains. Future researchers should consider the role that time plays in the dynamics of resource investment. This temporal aspect can take many forms, ranging from the amount of time over which resources are lost or gained, to the length of recovery periods necessary to regain resources, to the specific timing that a resource becomes available relative to the timing of resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 114).

In terms of study limitations, every performance selection opportunity across the three seasons was considered individually rather than in a repeated-measures design. Furthermore, the measurement of engagement in preretirement planning was assessed by career practitioners with varying experience levels. Although the measurements were underpinned by career decision-making theories (Gordon, 1998; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992), it is possible that less experienced practitioners were not as accurate in their assessment of career decidedness and/or career planning. The data for this study also included only males in one professional sport (National Rugby League).

The results of this study may have implications in the delivery of career transition programs for professional athletes. Many athletes experience feelings of loss following retirement from sport. Athletes who are effectively supported by practitioners in preparing for this resource loss event can realize a potential competitive advantage in their sport. Teams can also benefit by retaining athletes in the system for longer, along with the sport itself. These downstream impacts can occur when the value players place

on preretirement planning is greater than the pressures to focus exclusively on sport performance. It is, therefore, important for players, sports coaches, and senior administrators who may have misconceptions that engagement in preretirement planning is time poorly spent to understand the positive benefits in relation to team selection, team tenure, and career tenure.

Notes on contributor

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