

## Retirement from Competitive Sport: The Experiences of Kenyan Soccer Athletes

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**Abstract:** Career building is a monumental task especially in performance oriented enterprises such as competitive soccer. Beyond career building, career transition/termination is riddled with diverse outcomes accentuated under different theories. The purpose of this study was to unearth causes of retirement, coping strategies, problems experienced and perceived intervention programmes needed to address the plight of retired soccer athletes in Kenya. Data was collected through questionnaires from n = 18 retired soccer athletes. Findings indicate that subjects retired from soccer due to different causes, bordering on age and conflict with sports administrators, employ diverse coping strategies, experience numerous problems and a myriad of intervention programmes are tenable. It is recommended that sports administrators and other consultants need to actively engage their athletes in pre-retirement planning and intervention programmes need to be put in place to address the plight of retired soccer athletes.

**Key words:** Athletes, coping, retirement, strategies

### INTRODUCTION

Most athletes who reach Professional, world class and olympic levels do so as a result of a long term commitment to training. Athletes competing in a given sport often skip areas of the overall maturation process due to their sport-related focus and a 'shielding' of external anxieties and stresses by coaches, parents and team managers (Tinely, 2003). After staying in the sport arena for a prolonged period of time, athletes come to retire from active participation in sport. Indeed, athletes retire from sports due to different reasons. Some of the common reasons why athletes retire from sports include: - injuries, declining abilities, conflict with occupational demands, family pressures, coaches, sport administrators, age, decline in encouragement by significant others, decline in importance placed on engagement in sports, a desire to spend more time with friends who are non-athletes and a shift in the relative importance placed on sports compared with other age-appropriate activities (Kleiber *et al.*, 1987; McPherson *et al.*, 1989; Blinde and Stratta, 1992; Coakley, 2001; Morakinyo, 2002).

The process of retirement is often most traumatic for those professional athletes who have been the most visible, have earned high incomes and have little formal education and few job skills to transfer to non-sport occupations (McPherson *et al.*, 1989). Upon retirement from sports, the process of adaptation is equally challenging and replete with adjustment problems. The adjustment depends on social-demographic factors such

as age, social-economic class and educational attainment, other work opportunities available in the labour force, the degree to which sports has been a central part of self-identity, the amount of pre-planning or socialization for alternative roles and the support system available from family and friends for de-socialization from the sport role (Kleiber *et al.*, 1987; Mcpherson *et al.*, 1989).

Some of the problems experienced by retired athletes include poverty, downward income mobility, unemployment/unemployability, psychological crisis, depression, confusion, loss of identity, idleness, dejection, lack of direction, substance abuse and marital break-ups (Houlston, 1982; Mcpherson *et al.*, 1989; Weiss, 2001). However, these problems may vary according to the athletes preparation for retirement educational level gender and career prospects outside sports arena. Coping with retirement from sports is a monumental task as athletes are coerced to use a variety of coping strategies during career transition and that some strategies are more used significantly than others (Groove *et al.*, 1998). According to Taylor and Oglivie (1994) the five step model of adaptation to retirement begins with the causes of retirement (age, de-selection, injury, free choice) on top level and descends to include factors related to adaptation to retirement (developmental experiences, self-identity, perceptions of control, social identity, tertiary contributors) and available resources (coping skills, social support, pre-retirement planning on the lower levels. The above factors resulted in what they called quality of adaptation to retirement with either a healthy career transition or a retirement crisis (psycho-

Pathology, substance abuse, occupational abuse, family/social problems).

However research studies have indicated that in order to address the plight of retired athletes, different intervention programmes have been put in place in different countries. Some of these programmes include career counselling training for retired athletes, provisions of support and resources, career and education services, companies' provision of attachment positions for retired athletes, formation of alumni association, online sites for job searches (Perason and Petitpass, 1990; Chow, 1999). From the foregoing, it was apparent that there was need to establish the causes of retirement, problems experienced, coping strategies and intervention programmes to be put in place to address retirement from soccer in Kenya.

**Conceptual frame work:** This study was conceptualized under a synthesis of theories which have been previously used to explain retirement from sports. One of the theoretical perspectives offered by Oglivie and Taylor (1993) is grounded in thanatology which illuminates that sports retirement is a form of social death including isolation from former team-mates and players. This has been supported in studies where athletes reveal difficulties retired athletes face while staying connected to the newer younger players (Adeniyi, 2007). Some athletes may view failure as a form of premature death, because so much of their self-image and self-esteem is related to being successful. An ego tied to sport cannot cope with the future. This may lead to excessive use of drugs or alcohol, marital breakdown, chronic unemployment or suicide (Coakley, 1983; Tinely, 2003). However, the above theoretical predisposition is negalistic in equating sport retirement with death. Sport retirement should be looked at as a graduation to post-active-sport mileu.

Theories in social gerontology, emphasizes on how aging process affect career development in sport. Four types of social gerontology theories are presented below.

- Disengagement theory holds that older persons in the society withdraw for the younger individuals to enter the workforce. As younger individuals take responsibility of the older ones, lost roles are replaced by new ones hence there is continuity of activity where there is the thought that both the athlete and society withdraw for the good of both (e.g. enough embarrassment after poor performance).
- Activity theory as proposed by Havighursh and Albrechi (1953) explained that lost roles arising from schedule of duties (activities) of the retirees are replaced by new ones when new appointees assume responsibilities so that overall activity level may continue.
- Continuity theory, Atchley (1980) explained that as people exhibit different roles when they disengaged, the time and energy from the previous work might be reallocated to the new roles where people with varied

roles re-allocate time, energy and focus to remaining roles (addressing issues which were missed during early styles in life).

- Social breakdown theory, Kuypers and Benston (1973) identified retirement as having significant evaluation that leads the individual to disengage from activity and thereby internalize the negative evaluation.

However, the use of social gerontology in the study of athlete retirement lacks in the empirical support for the relationship between sport-retirement and non-sport retirement, the belief that the differences in age, life experiences and expectations between athletes and main stream retirees is too great to share the same model. Indeed, both thanatological theory and social gerontological theories have been criticized in that both conceived retirement in a limited way or being a singular, abrupt event. That is why Coakley (2001) was unequivocal that the dynamics of the sport retirement process is grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Indeed, factors such as gender, age, social economic status, social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sports. Retirement from sports sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but by itself, it is often not the major cause of those problems. Thus it was prudent to establish pre-retirement plans, adaptation to retirement and possible intervention measures to be put in place by the cardinal stakeholders in the Kenyan sports arena to ensure that retired soccer athletes are not condemned to abject poverty.

**Objectives of the study:** The study aimed at establishing the retirement process of Kenyan soccer athletes with the following objectives:

- To establish the causes of retirement of Kenyan soccer players.
- To establish problems encountered by retired soccer athletes in Kenya.
- To unearth the coping strategies employed by retired soccer athletes in Kenya.
- To determine the possible intervention programmes for retired soccer athletes in Kenya.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Research design:** The study adopted a survey research design employing purposive sampling technique to select subjects for the study. Due to the unique characteristics of the subjects Snowball sampling procedure was utilized to get the retired soccer athletes (Borg and Gall, 1983). A criterion had been set at 30 subjects but after getting to 18, it became evident that the rest of the retired soccer athletes were living outside the capital city and could not be traced easily either physically or through the phone.

Table 1: Demographic data

Characteristics	N =18 Response rate	
	F	%
<b>Current age</b>		
31-40 Yrs	1	5.55
41-50 Yrs	11	61.11
51-60 Yrs	6	33.33
<b>Age when retired from active soccer</b>		
26-30 Yrs	3	16.66
31-35 Yrs	11	66.66
36-40 Yrs	3	16.66
41-45 Yrs	1	5.55
<b>Highest level of formal education</b>		
Primary Education	2	11.11
Secondary Education	13	72.22
Middle Level College	3	16.66
<b>Current occupation</b>		
Coaching	10	44.44
Business	3	16.66
Sports Marketing	2	11.11
Sports Officer	1	5.55
Supplier	2	11.11

Consequently, it is the data of 18 subjects which is presented in subsequent sections.

**Questionnaire:** The questionnaire was designed and validated by a team of experts competent in research methodology and sports sociology. The questionnaire was divided into four major sections.

**Section A:** Sought demographic information of the subjects such as age, age when started playing soccer, educational background, professional qualifications and current occupation.

**Section B:** Gathered information regarding causes of retirement,

**Section C:** Gathered information on the coping strategies employed by retired soccer athletes.

**Section D:** Dwelt with problems encountered while in retirement. Lastly,

**Section E:** Ssolicited for information centering on the government intervention policies on the retirement of soccer athletes.

Items in section B to D were weighted on a 5 point likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Negatively stated items were scored on the reverse. The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire ( $r = 0.78$ ) was ascertained by the researcher. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the data along the objectives and conceptual these of the study.

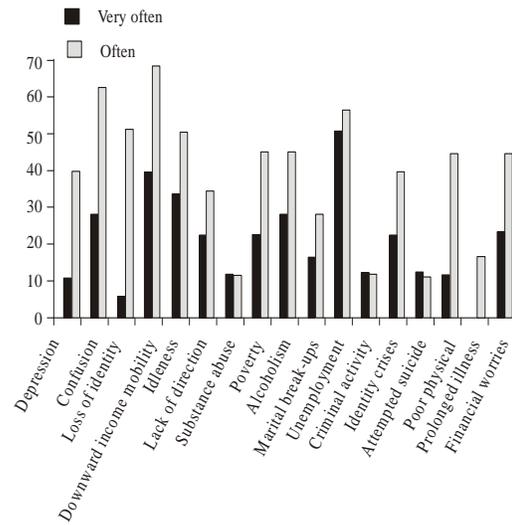


Fig. 1: Causes of retirement from soccer

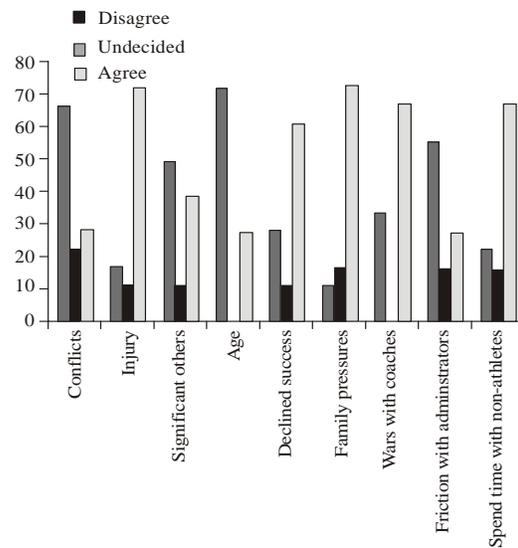


Fig. 2: Problems experienced by retired soccer athletes

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Demographic details of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

From the Table 1, it appears that a majority of the retired soccer athletes 11(61.11%) were aged between 41-50 yrs and 12(66.66%) had played for the national team for 1-3 years. Equally majority of the retired soccer athletes 12(55%) retired from competitive soccer at the age of 31-35 yrs. Aply, 13(72.22%) had their highest level of formal education as secondary education. Almost half 10(55.55%) of the retired soccer athletes are involved in coaching while the other half is involved in business,

Table 2: Coping strategies employed by retired soccer players

Coping strategies	Very much		Some		Not much	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Re-focusing on career growth	13	72.22	2	11.11	3	16.66
Going back to college to pursue courses related to soccer	7	38.88	6	33.33	5	27.77
Concentration on sport related activities such as coaching or scouting/officiating	15	83.33	2	11.11	1	5.55
Introspection I.E. thinking backwards	6	33.33	2	11.11	10	55.55
Dealing with personal issues which were pending while I focused on sports	10	55.55	6	33.33	2	11.11
Going back to college to pursue courses not related to sports	6	33.33	2	11.11	10	55.55
Business-oriented enterprises	10	55.55	7	38.88	1	5.55
Getting to games/sports which are not as involving as the initial one	4	22.22	10	55.55	4	22.22
Joining sport politics e.g. leader of a federation	12	66.66	6	33.33	-	-
Working on contracts in sports related areas	11	61.11	6	33.33	1	5.55
Getting involved in low-income employment	1	5.55	6	33.33	11	61.11
Matatu/taxi business	2	11.11	2	11.11	14	77.77
Turning to religion	1	5.55	14	77.77	3	16.66

sports marketing, sports administration respectively. It is also evident that 12(66.66%) of the soccer athletes retired voluntarily while 6(33.33%) of the retired athletes did not retire voluntarily. The causes of retirement for the retired soccer athletes is shown in Fig. 1.

It appears that the retired soccer athletes main causes of retirement from soccer was age 13(72.22%), decline in importance placed on success in soccer by myself or spouse 13(72.22%), declined performance 12(66.66%), conflict with occupational demands 11(61.11%) and friction with sport administrators 10(55.55%). On the other hand, the retired soccer athletes did not retire due to family pressures, injuries, desire to spend time with friends who are non-athletes, declined success and loss of self-control. The problems experienced by the retired soccer athletes are shown in Fig. 2. When the columns for very often and often were collapsed together ,it was evident that problems experienced mostly by retired soccer players included downward Income Mobility 12(66.66%) followed by confusion 11(61.66%) unemployment, 10(55.55%), idleness 9(50%), loss of identity, isolation from friends and poverty. Problems which the retired soccer players have never experienced included attempted suicide, substance abuse, criminal activities and marital break etc. The coping strategies employed by the retired soccer athletes are shown in Table 2.

Coping strategies employed by the retired soccer athletes included concentration on sport related activities such as coaching or scouting 15(83.33%), followed by refocusing on career growth 13(72.22%), joining sport politics 12(66.66%) and working on contracts in sport related areas 11(61.11%) amongst others.

The retired soccer athletes perceived that most of the intervention programmes proposed were possible with exception of provision of scholarships to retired athletes to pursue further education(27.77%), career counselling/training seminars to retiring athletes(88.88%),

and manual designed to retired soccer elite athletes understand issues related to career termination (88.88%).

## DISCUSSION

Results have showed that a majority of the retired soccer athletes had retired voluntarily from soccer. Therefore, it can be speculated that soccer athletes must have pre-planned their retirement. The soccer athletes retired mainly due to age, declined in importance placed on soccer, friction with sports administrators and declined performance. This finding corroborates previous studies which have shown that athletes retire due to de-selection, injury and expiration of eligibility. Other causes of retirement from competitive soccer would include declining abilities, conflicts with occupational demands and conflict with sports administrators (Coakley, 2001; Morakinyo, 2002; Adeniyi, 2007). Friction with sports administrators caused a significant number of athletes to retire from soccer. This sheds more light on how weak structures of sports governance can push “out” athletes in Kenya. Nay, Kenya Football Federations (KFF) is characterized by unending internal squabbles which make the Federation to attract FIFA bans and sanctions every now and then (Njororai *et al.*, 2005).

Problems experienced after retirement included downward income mobility, confusion, idleness and loss of identity. These findings finds support in Houlston (1982) and Weiss (2001) who reported that retired athletes had feelings of depression, confusion, loss of identity and downward income mobility. Consequently, it is alluded that these retired soccer athletes may have experienced some adjustment difficulties more aptly caused by lost prestige and downward income mobility. This is buttressed in Adeniyi (2007) finding that retirement phobia was found among athletes with low educational attainment than athletes with higher education attainment.

William (1981) financial management concept will leave us inferring that athletes who did not have enough resources before their retirement can fear the financial consequences retirement may bring/brought. Nay, downward income mobility has a multiplier effect on the retired athletes' lifestyle adjustment problems such as lost recognition and lower standards of living. Though, Kenyon (1990) found that most retired athletes had a good attitude towards sports, yet they felt a sense of loss of identity, friends and opportunity and unfinished business. This is partially true as a significant number of members of these retired soccer athletes are engaged in coaching soccer. Indeed, their humble formal education showed that it would have been very difficult for the retired athletes to extend their tentacles into other careers outside the sports arena.

After retirement from competitive soccer and more aptly when the retirement is non-voluntary, people have to diverse coping strategies. Results of the study has indicated that retired soccer athletes coping strategies revolving on focusing on career-growth, dealing with personal issues and dwelling on sport related activities such as coaching, scouting, officiating etc. These findings were echoed by Groove *et al.* (2005) results on acceptance, positive re-interpretation, planning and active coping as the most used coping strategies during the career transition process. Findings of the study have also shown that the least used coping strategies included turning to religion, getting involved in low-income employment and introspection. This is supported by Groove *et al.* (1998) when they found that alcohol/drug abuse and turning to religion was the least coping mechanism employed by retired athletes in Australia. Other coping strategies reported else where included dealing with personal issues which were forgotten (Coakley, 2001), low income employment (Mcpherson *et al.*, 1989), concentration on sport related activities and working on contracts (Groove *et al.*, 1998).

Different countries have put in place intervention programmes to address the plight of retired athletes in their respective countries. But do the intervention programmes really address the problems of the affected athletes. Findings of this study have shown that provision of scholarships to retired athletes to pursue further education and career counselling training seminars to retired soccer athletes did not get hundred percent approval by subjects in this study. This is not remote as the retired athletes had shown that they have had a humble formal education background. Indeed, Morakinyo (2002) had advised that coaches and sport administrators make it their duties to advise athletes on the importance of acquiring academic certificates in addition to their sport skills. Equally Kenyon (1990) argued that athletes who

have no other career or means of generating funds for the remaining part of their lives are likely to show more fear than athletes who have high educational attainment. Time has come for the government to implement the intervention programmes which the retired soccer athletes perceived to be possible. These would include pre-retirement counselling and planning, provision of support and resources, job opportunities programmes, medical scheme etc. However, caution has to be born in mind that the implemented intervention programmes need to have long-term effects on the lives of retired soccer athletes.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Prowess in sporting activities cannot continue for ever and it is apparent that athletes are reminded that at one time, they will cease from being national or global celebrities. Findings have shown that retired soccer athletes in Kenya retire due to age, declined performance and conflict with sports administrators. As they retire from soccer, they experience a myriad of adjustment problems ranging from downward income mobility to confusion and idleness. Their coping strategies zero down to refocusing on career growth, concentration on sport related activities and introspection. Retired athletes strongly perceive that numerous intervention programmes need to be put in place to address their plight. Thus it is recommended that:

- Coaches and sports administrators need to encourage athletes in their tutorage to pursue academic courses as they play soccer.
- That the educational authorities need to ensure that athletes in their disposal do not jeopardize their academic aspiration at the expense of soccer pursuits.
- Sport psychologists and other consultants need to assist soccer athletes in pre-retirement planning. This would have a strong influence as the quality of adaptation to retirement when athletes eventually disengaged from active sport participation.
- The government needs to recognize soccer athletes beyond "tokens" of appreciation. As a matter of fact, the government needs to retain a percentage of the athletes earning to take care of them after retirement.
- In line with the sport policy as enshrined in the sessional paper No.3 of 2005 on sports development in Kenya intervention programmes have a lot of implications to the government and federations. There is a compelling urgency to ensure that retired athletes don't continue leading a lifestyle of "hand to mouth".
- Further studies should be done encompassing other disciplines, different levels of competition and comparative studies with other countries.

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