

Professional Springbok rugby players' career transitional reality after retirement

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Abstract

Rugby in South Africa provides entertainment and creates hope and the sharing of a common purpose among South Africans. The recent victory of the Springboks in the 2023 Rugby World Cup has proven again that the sport can unite a nation. However, the players' careers are short-lived. This paper examines the transition period after the cessation of a professional rugby career and the impact this process can have on the athletes who provide us with entertainment and all the positive tenets of this phenomenon. More specifically, the study in which this paper has its origins (Strauss, 2023) identified the main factors that affect the successful transitioning of former professional rugby players into their careers post-retirement. The qualitative study provided a critical analysis and discussion of these identified factors and offered recommendations to remedy the oftentimes dire situation in which players find themselves after retirement. The empirical study relied on semi-structured interviews with participants with first-hand experience of the transition process from professional sport. An exploratory and descriptive approach was applied to gather and interpret their perspectives. The literature review showed that there are numerous challenges retired athletes face post-sport. The empirical study confirmed the conclusions derived from existing literature and highlighted other scrutiny areas. The study's recommendations are based on the critical literature review, empirical analysis, and the author's experience (who experienced a similar transition as a retired professional Springbok rugby player).

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However, there is a gap between what the literature suggests and the practical implementation and tangible results modern athletes experience after retirement.

1. Introduction

Sport has become increasingly professionalised in the last two decades. Professional athletes competing internationally are expected to apply their craft within the framework of a full-time job, regardless of their age, often sacrificing developmental aspects that could have sustained them in possible other career paths after retirement – a phase in life which most working people only deal with in their sixties. In contrast, professional athletes retire as early as the first half of their thirties. Barriopedro *et al.* (2018:34) suggest adopting a dual career approach while practising sport as a possible solution. However, the level of performance required to compete at an international level frequently demands more commitment and less flexibility to achieve this outcome. Robnik *et al.* (2021) also note that the "sidelining [sic] of academic activities" further complicates the possibility of transitioning into other careers after retirement from professional sport.

The end of an athlete's career is commonly associated with a sense of loss and a period of adjustment (Baillie & Danish, 1992:91). Some retirements are planned. In contrast, the ending of an athlete's career is often untimely. There are instances where the athlete is equipped for the transition and can flourish, whether financially sound or having a sufficient education or qualification to fall back on. As Hattersley *et al.* (2019:13) suggest, current athletes need to be educated to prepare for the inevitable future. Since the transition from a professional sports career can be difficult and daunting for professional athletes who generally retire from their sports careers at a relatively young age, this study focuses on the transitioning process after South African professional rugby players retire.

Professional competitors in the sporting arena are more than just athletes as there are many aspects such as overall well-being, mental health, savvy with finances, et cetera, that need (deliberate) attention. While competing in sport, the outcome of the game or event might become the main focus and priority, often leaving other important aspects by the wayside. However, the athletes should be aware, or made aware, that they need to take ownership of their development in other areas (such as the identification and intentional development of leadership skills) that will assist in a smooth transition after sport (McDevitt, 2020:47). Exiting a career in sport leaves many participants wishing they had been better prepared to cope with this moment. An athlete's identity, central to most lives, undergoes a shift. Often, this shift in identity leads to feelings of aloneness and distress. Creating awareness of this retirement process can help prepare for this transition (Menke & Germany, 2019).

1.1 Background

Sport as an industry has grown faster than the economy in the recent past, showing the importance of the sport sector's financial aspects and economic activity (Gratton, 1998:115). This notion often leads to a challenging career transition to life after sport. Many sporting codes have seen a rise in remuneration levels. However, this can also create a false sense of security and unrealistic comfort for what lies ahead. Social media, marketing, and an athlete's brand have become assets and potential revenue streams if managed well. Gladden *et al.* (2001:313) hypothesises that strategic business management and brand management will become a prevailing focus in the future of professional sport.

Regarding research on the career transition after a professional sports career, the study field's scope and volume have increased and are becoming more relevant in the ever-changing sport environment. Research on the implementation of practical remedies associated with the termination and transition of an athlete's career has historically not enjoyed the necessary scholarly attention. In existing research, individuals validated the outcome and impact as successful and helpful where positive transitioning models and transitioning programmes are initiated (Stankovich *et al.*, 2001:81,83). Knights *et al.* (2019:527) suggest that four factors accompany a positive transition throughout Australian Football codes. These include planned retirement, organisational support, social support, and proper preparation for life after sport. Athletes were mainly satisfied with their help from friends and family, although they suggested a lack of support from their former clubs and unions (Knights *et al.*, 2019:527). This highlights the need for the athlete to take responsibility for the planning and preparation of their career after sport – one of this paper's main conclusions.

The experiential model suggests that individuals can better prepare themselves for the challenges that the future might hold. The experiential model refers to the daily experiences people are exposed to (Liu *et al.*, 2021:15). This can refer to the experiences gathered through sport and applying it in future endeavours. According to Barnes and Larcus (2015:85), students involved in sport are prone to develop skills that contribute to future success. These student-athletes can be equipped and taught how to apply these principles to other areas of their lives (Barnes & Larcus, 2015:85). It is estimated that 78% of professional athletes in America become financially insolvent within three years after retirement from their sport (Galletta, 2022). A recent online article published on 1 October 2022 on the Netwerk24 (Afrikaans version of Network24) webpage underlines the dire circumstances in which many retired South African rugby players find themselves (Claassen, 2022).

The need for guidance and assistance in this transition is evident on websites such as *LAPS* (Life After Professional Sport), which, as the name suggests, is dedicated to helping retired professional athletes by creating a resource platform where they can, among others, engage with other athletes as registered members and the website also offers the opportunity for people employed in different sectors to act as mentors to athletes who may be interested in a particular career path after sport (LAPS, 2022). It is evident from a basic search on Google Scholar and academic research databases that academic research interest related to the transition from professional sport to the business sector has increased significantly in recent years. It is a problem that all professional athletes eventually face, and in numerous cases, the transition is painful and disappointing.

Although various factors influence the transition process, including psychological and educational stumbling blocks, ideally, both players and unions need to accept ownership in developing everyone's skills as these skills are vital in participating in a business environment after sport. This notion is especially relevant to team sports players who must function independently after they retire from those teams. Professional rugby players often retire younger than in typical occupational situations – even up to 30 years younger. Compared to their peers who have spent years climbing the ladder in various industries, these athletes are confronted with a gap that either needs to be caught up or bridged through experience, knowledge and skills already developed through participation in sport on a professional level. Effective career planning in sport is not always possible. Contracts seldom exceed a few years, and player cuts and career-ending injuries are always an underlying reality. Professional athletes are accomplished individuals in their respective fields. Still, when their sports careers end, they must be equipped to face the challenges and opportunities that await. In an abundance of instances, this is not the case.

1.2 Problem Statement

Research has shown that professional athletes struggle to remain financially solvent after the cessation of their sport careers. Recent research on the career transitions of Olympic athletes after their sport careers end shows that even a tertiary education does not guarantee a smooth or even a successful transition as a multitude of factors influences the transition process after retirement from a professional sport career (Robnik *et al.*, 2022:1-2). Numerous retired professional rugby players are also ill-equipped to handle their inevitable career transitions after professional sport.

The study combined a critical exploration of existing literature on relevant themes, sport studies, and business studies with input from sport personalities to better understand the relationship between

these seemingly unrelated topics. There is currently no clear consensus on the importance of these skills in the post-sport arena and very few formal development strategies. The identification and purposeful development of specific factors could translate to possible future business and career success and actively facilitate an effective transition from a professional sports career.

Thus, based on existing literature one of the problems highlighted in this paper is the lack of support and structure during the professional athlete's transition process, from professional athlete to commercial industry participant.

1.3 Primary objective

The primary objective of the study was to explore whether specific characteristics (for example leadership traits, etc.) manifested during the transitional period of professional South African rugby players and how these characteristics impacted their success in the business environment after retiring from professional sport.

1.3.1 Secondary objectives

Three secondary objectives underlay the study, namely to:

- identify which characteristics are present in retired professional South African rugby players;
- examine the effectiveness of these characteristics in the individual's current business environment; and
- determine if these characteristics can be instilled and intentionally developed from an earlier stage in young South African rugby players' careers.

2. Literature Review

Louis (1980:330) defines a career path transition as: "the period during which an individual is either changing roles (taking on a different objective role) or changing orientation to a role already held (altering subjective state)". A career transition is affected by numerous factors. The Schlossberg model identifies the perception of a transition, the characteristics of the individual and the differences between the environment pre- and post-transition as the most significant factors that influence a career transition (Schlossberg, 1981)

A study conducted in Fiji suggests that the potential consequences when a sports career winds up include economic difficulties, loss of self-esteem, substance abuse, depression, and marital breakdown. With players devoting all their time and energy to performing in sport, these disposable national heroes often sacrifice their education and training to acquire employable skills/knowledge and the necessary qualifications demanded in life after sports for financial management and career development for their post-career livelihood capacity (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2014:1389,1395). This study further emphasises the importance of expanding the individual's self-identity and accumulating skills. The authors suggest that numerous variables affect the transition process while highlighting educational preparedness as a primary factor that can facilitate the transition process.

Jennings (2015) proposes nine reasons for retirement from sport. These reasons are: 1) work/study commitment, 2) loss of motivation, 3) age, 4) injury, 5) selection issues, 6) politics in sport, 7) decreasing performance, 8) financial reasons, and 9) decrease in enjoyment. This study further emphasises the importance of expanding the individual's self-identity and accumulating skills. Jennings suggests that numerous variables affect the transition process while highlighting educational preparedness as a primary factor that can assist in the transition and also lead to a more balanced self-identity (Jennings, 2015:24,76).

A systematic review by Park *et al.* (2013:9) indicates a positive correlation between some areas and the transition from sport to life after that. Education, finances, self-perception, the balance of life, changes in lifestyle, and the need for support programmes are examples (Park *et al.*, 2013:9). Various sporting codes are becoming increasingly professional, requiring a lot of time. It focuses on developing the physical and technical abilities needed to perform at the highest level. The characteristics developed in this high-performance environment need to be identified. This contributes to success in their post-competitive life (Zaharia, 2021:39).

A preliminary literature review suggests that numerous commonalities exist between sport and business. Jones (2002:270) identifies five key areas: one-to-one coaching/consulting, high-performance teams, leadership, stress, and organisational issues. There also appears to be an overlap between professional sports and the business sector regarding constructs such as accountability, intrinsic motivation, and leadership skills. The importance of every individual/player being accountable and taking responsibility for their career should not be understated. A strong correlation exists between transformational leadership and athletic performance. Intrinsic motivation mediates this interaction (Charbonneau *et al.*, 2001).

When professional athletes retire, their identity is often under scrutiny. Many skills that were useful in sport became obsolete. However, transferable skills can be utilised in other areas of their life (Bernes *et al.*, 2009:63,64). These sources highlight the realities after a professional sports career cessation: a possible identity crisis, other psychological aspects, and the financial implications.

Erpič *et al.* (2004:57) assert that an athlete's quality and depth of experiences surrounding the end of a sports career can depend on athletic and non-athletic factors. The former includes voluntariness of career termination, subjective evaluation of athletic achievements and prevalence of athletic identity. At the same time, the latter comprises educational status and negative non-athletic transitions. Erpič *et al.* (2004:57) also assert that an athlete's quality and depth of experiences surrounding the end of a sport career can depend on athletic and non-athletic factors. The former includes voluntariness of career termination, subjective evaluation of athletic achievements and prevalence of athletic identity. At the same time, the latter comprises educational status and negative non-athletic transitions.

Available literature suggests that retirement from a career in sport should be viewed as a process, not a specific moment. Therefore, the inevitable ending of a career in sport should be a gradual consideration to decrease the levels of uncertainty and manage the consequences that may follow (Torregrosa *et al.*, 2004:41). An athlete's retirement can be planned or unplanned. Additionally, athletes need to say goodbye to the sport they love and deal with the grief of the loss because of their emotional connection with their respective sport (Eggleston *et al.*, 2020).

2.1 Background to retirement from professional sport

O'Riordan (2012) states that "all athletes die twice, and the first time is the hardest". O'Riordan is equating retirement from professional sport with a "first death". Sport is all that the players have known all their lives. Professional athletes must perform at a very high level, under constant pressure (Strauss, 2023). Their success is determined by how well they can manage the continuous peak condition that their bodies need to be in to perform their jobs' duties. Maintaining a top level of fitness and physical condition becomes the centre of professional athletes' lives. It is a career that is not only mentally and emotionally taxing (working seven days a week on many occasions, being away from their families and support systems regularly, etc.) but also physically demanding beyond the general demands of being fit. Professional athletes travel to different time zones and climates on long flights; they may also face career-ending injuries (Strauss, 2023).

It is fair to say that professional rugby players' (stressful) careers have been the centre of their lives from a very young age, and timewise, they have a tiny window of opportunity to reach their full potential. Individuals in other professions generally have the luxury of accumulating experience for potentially extended periods. In contrast, top rugby players peak in their 20s or 30s and have a limited international lifespan as many retire from competing locally or internationally in their mid-30s (Strauss, 2023). Empirical research on 495 professional rugby players who retired from the England Premiership shows that the average retirement age from professional rugby in England is 34 and that forwards tend to retire slightly older than backs (Winter, 2021).

This cessation of their careers (the centre of their emotional, mental, and physical lives) can be an emotionally taxing and often traumatic experience for relatively young individuals. John O'Keeffe describes the experience as follows: "Imagine the trauma when, with two-thirds of your lifespan still to live, the career that's brought you money, fame and influence is suddenly, definitively, over" (O'Keeffe in O'Riordan, 2012).

Players often face issues of low self-esteem and low self-image. Cosh *et al.* (2021:15) found that a lack of self-worth outside of sport often results in relationship difficulties and social withdrawal in retired athletes. Retired athletes can lose their sense of value or worth. Their self-worth is often strongly tied to their athletic identity and sporting ability. Athletic identity is the sport-related dimension of a person's self-concept, and it also has to do with the degree to which a person relates to their athletic role (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006:472). Since an athlete's self-worth is connected to their athletic identity, it often leads to accounts of withdrawal from peers or friends and social isolation. Inactivity has contributed to the transition struggles of athletes. The lack of alternatives and schedules can create the feeling that the athlete has no reason to leave the house or have nothing to do. Players realise that they are finished doing what they are potentially best at and experience a sense that a significant emptiness needs to be replaced (Cosh *et al.*, 2021:10).

An important factor influencing the difficulty of an athlete's retirement transition is the athlete's perception of controllability in determining their career cessation date. Most rugby players partially regulate the time and place of retirement, but it is not always within their control. Consequently, the feeling of not being in control of one's career termination leads to anxiety, which negatively impacts the transition process (Kuettel *et al.*, 2017:27). Injuries challenge players mentally, and among other things, they can become jealous because they cannot play and lose confidence in their ability to regain their position within the team environment (O'Riordan, 2012). A fulfilling and valuable aspect of rugby is that hard work pays off, and the reward of winning and celebrating victories plays a

significant role in rugby players' well-being (Reinboth & Duda, 2006:270-271, 281). One can argue that without these achievements or feelings of achievement, a perception of a lack of accomplishment and a sense of worthlessness can arise. Social withdrawal is common in retired professional athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992:89).

The loss of financial income profoundly impacts the lifestyle of retired rugby players and their families (O'Riordan, 2012). The transition's impact is felt and experienced by the athlete, and the families and other significant relationships are also influenced (Baillie & Danish, 1992:85-86). When a player retires, they can rarely receive the same salary as a professional rugby player, especially if the individual is at their peak (O'Riordan, 2012).

When retired players get together and talk about their experiences, some often highlight the notion that the sense of achievement that players experience through rugby and the adrenaline they feel when playing in front of a packed crowd representing their country is not easily matched by day-to-day activities in the business environment (known from personal experience and through conversations with retired players). The euphoria, self-worth and self-esteem often attached to being a sports star can quickly disappear, and the athlete's identity can be scrutinised (O'Riordan, 2012). The camaraderie and friendships fostered gradually on a deeper level are lost, and new relationships should be nurtured (known from personal experience and through conversations with retired players).

The benefit of being active and participating in a team might also diminish, and players feel that they are on their own and must fend for themselves overnight (O'Riordan, 2012). Numerous players experience the feeling of longing, or not belonging, and can even share feelings of helplessness and isolation (Jewett *et al.*, 2019:416). The challenges that teammates overcome as a group build solid connections and are perceived by some as irreplaceable (O'Riordan, 2012). The support that players receive from the public also generates a sense of responsibility towards the supporters to perform well and not let them down. This responsibility often disappears when the interest diminishes in the athlete's career.

Although retired rugby players often take up other sports or forms of physical activity, some of these retired players point toward the difference between individual and team environments. Feelings of emptiness often accompany the sense of loss (Brown *et al.*, 2018:74). Some players also concede that the unions and management have "spoon-fed" them and dictated their daily routine, including travel arrangements, diet, time schedules and training programmes (O'Riordan, 2012). Losing that structure

creates a diminished sense of security and safety. This lack of structure, which was previously routine and determined by the institutions the athlete was involved with, is often accompanied by anxiety or loss (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Many rugby players struggle with transitioning to a career after sport. However, there are also numerous success stories. Bassett (2023) interviewed Springbok legend Bryan Habana in a recent article. He played more than a hundred matches for the Springboks. According to Habana, the career transition period is one of the most stressful for athletes. He compares this process to a mini-death (an observation similar to that of O’Riordan regarding the two deaths that professional athletes suffer, which was quoted in the first paragraph of this section). Habana emphasises the importance of giving yourself an adequate education to understand the consequences and challenges that await every athlete. He acknowledges that while he was playing rugby, he wanted to be the best in his position in the world. It took a lot of focus and effort, and he sacrificed being balanced to achieve these sports goals. He reiterates the challenge of leaving behind everything you’ve ever known and moving forward into the unknown and something completely different (Bassett, 2023).

Habana created a brand that was built on integrity, honesty, and commitment and which was engaging. This allowed him to continue building relationships even after he retired from rugby (Bassett, 2023), underlining how a professional player’s social image and rugby career can become a marketable brand which could be a catalysator in the successful transition between careers from professional sport to another field (Strauss, 2023), which is discussed later in this paper. He states that he could have been better prepared for this transition; however, to achieve these goals and perform at the desired levels, he sacrificed some aspects of preparing himself to dedicate himself entirely to his role as a rugby player. Habana understood the importance of building a brand and realised that rugby was a part of his life, not his whole life (Bassett, 2023).

He took up a business unit manager course at an international institution in his final year of playing rugby, where he was introduced to the basic principles of business. He is also actively involved in media and covers rugby events. He compares some basic skills and concedes that people in the working environment have built and developed these skills for 15 to 20 years, and as a rugby player, he felt he had a disadvantage. Nevertheless, he caught up as much as he could as soon as possible, knowing these skills were critical (Bassett, 2023). There are numerous success stories of retired rugby players who flourish in the business environment after retirement. This transition process, however, does not occur effortlessly. By acquiring relevant information from individuals with first-hand

experience, valuable insights from the process can assist future rugby players in their quest for success and well-being after rugby.

3. Research Methodology

The methodological approach for the study was qualitative, with semi-structured interviews as the means of acquiring primary data. Table 1 reflects the details concerning the methodology applied in the study in terms of the sampling, population, sample size, etc.

Table 1: Research methodology

Research approach and design	Qualitative approach with non-probability, purposive sampling
Population size	Retired professional South African rugby players who have transitioned from a career in sport and are currently working in a business and/or entrepreneurial environment
Geographical location	South Africa
Sample size	Saturation of data
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews with participants via Microsoft Teams and Zoom
Semi-structured interview guide	Questions were guided by the set objectives of the study
Data analysis	Data was analysed using Creswell's (2012:237) proposed qualitative data analysis method The coding process (thematic analysis) comprised several steps, starting with the transcription of the recorded interviews, assigning a code to words, phrases, paragraphs or sentences of the transcriptions as well as interview notes, looking for overlaps, and combining codes into groups to highlight themes (reduction of data) that have surfaced in the analysis process

3.1 Ethics

The study was an inductive, qualitative study with human participants. The study population was retired professional South African rugby players during their sports careers, who have transitioned away from a career in sport and who currently work in a business and/or entrepreneurial environment post-retirement from professional sport. The sample group was selected through purposive sampling.

Participation in the study was optional. The primary data collection strategy was in the form of qualitative semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded.

Willing participants in the study were informed fully on the scope of the study, its aims and objectives, their role in the study, and all procedures involved in the process. Participants gave informed consent that they understood the terms and accepted participation. Participants' explicit consent was needed to record the video interviews which were done for transcription purposes only. The video recordings were not made (publicly) available. The researcher of the original study (Strauss, 2023) received ethical clearance (NWU-00630-23-A4) to conduct and record the semi-structured interviews. The transcriptions were language edited with the consent of the participants. The final draft of the study was proofread professionally.

The video recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions' first draft (with participants' personal information) were stored in encrypted, password-protected folders. Any sharing of the data (research seminars, feedback sessions, in the study itself, any possible conference papers or research articles that may arise from this study, and the examination of the study) was done with each participant's consent. Each participant received a participation number, and participants were referred to by this number and/or their names whenever data were shared. The questions of the semi-structured interviews were formulated in such a way that the answers provided did not make it possible for someone to identify a participant by name. Still, the participants preferred to make that information shareable.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Introduction

The participants' background was obtained by asking them a set of questions. These background questions helped to gain an understanding of their involvement in professional sports and an overall view of their career transitioning process. The data reduction and identified themes are discussed below, with a thematic analysis of the interview guide questions.

4.2 Findings - Overall experience

Question: *How would you describe your overall experience as a professional athlete?* This question aimed to get the participants' background information to determine whether the participants viewed their involvement in professional sport as an overall positive, negative or neutral experience.

4.2.1 Reduction into categories

The full dataset was reduced into manageable categories identified through thematic analysis by reviewing participants' responses. This information is presented in Table 2 below. The participants' responses in Table 2 are transcriptions (verbatim) of the participants' verbal answers to the corresponding questions during the individual interviews.

Table 1: Participants' background on their overall experience of competing

Participant	Participant response	Category
Fourie du Preez (PAR 001)	I loved playing rugby, and getting money for it was just a bonus for me. I always take my dad as an example. When he grew up, he also wanted to become a Springbok and play senior rugby, and he did. It's just that he didn't get paid. I think they were actually in a better position than us. They could study and be professional. My dad was qualified as a chartered accountant at the age of 21 and still played for the Bulls until he was 33. In some sense, it was almost a better system not doing professional rugby. You can still get to the top and have a professional career outside of sport. I always wanted to play rugby and always wanted to test myself and try to be the best that I could be, whatever that was. It was great to be a Springbok and play 12 years for the Springboks. And then have a professional career and get paid a lot, which has its advantages and disadvantages.	Love for the game Getting paid – pros and cons Tertiary education
Schalk Brits (PAR 002)	I think in the beginning, the overall experience is fantastic. The values you learn from rugby are quite phenomenal. And from an early age, you're sort of in charge of your own destiny if you can say that, although there are so many variables that you can't control. But for me, still after retirement, I'm very grateful for playing this unbelievable sport and for the values that rugby has taught me. Yet, with every success, there's a sacrifice, and with every mistake or failure, there's a sacrifice as well. I've learned through rugby things happen, like injuries and	Love for the game Values learned through rugby

	<p>reasons why you are not picked, and I always thought in the beginning I was quite entitled to being selected. The later I got into my career, I concluded, for my own happiness, that certain things you can control and certain things you can't. Attitude you can control the way you look at the game. In the beginning, it was all about achieving goals. Later on in my career, it became all about making memories and enjoying the journey. And what will happen will happen as long as I put in the hard work. And sometimes things don't happen. So, I've got no regrets.</p>	
<p>Victor Matfield (PAR 003)</p>	<p>I loved it. I mean, I think we all love doing what's our passion. Sport has always been my passion as a little kid. As someone at school, I loved sport. Of course, my parents said I had to go study. So, I went to Tuks firstly to go study and then the rugby just fell into place. It wasn't that at the age of 16, I decided I was going to be a rugby player. I went to study and to play rugby, and the rugby helped with a bursary at Tuks and so on. And then things just developed. Things went better pretty quickly. Even the two years when I retired, I was still missing it, I still wanted to be back, I wanted to be in it. After the two years that I took off, went back for another two years. After that, I was done. I loved every second of my career. But it's time to move on now.</p>	<p>Love for the game</p> <p>Tertiary education</p> <p>Longing to return</p> <p>Realisation to move on</p>
<p>Flip van der Merwe (PAR 004)</p>	<p>I loved it. I think that's why we all did it. First of all, we had a love for it and eventually discovered we can actually be quite good at it. So, it was a real passion, I loved it, I loved competing at the highest end. I loved competing on an international stage as well as a local stage; it's still a game I love very much. It was also at the same time very challenging at times. There's a lot of expectations. And we're not necessarily equipped with all the tools at that age already to handle all the expectations and the fame and the money, etc. But I loved it in general.</p>	<p>Love for the game</p> <p>High level competition</p> <p>Extreme expectations with limited tools</p>
<p>Jean de Villiers (PAR 005)</p>	<p>Look, I think it's an immense privilege to be able to do something that you absolutely love. To be able to travel the world. To be able to see places that you never would have seen had it not been for rugby. To be able to meet the people that I've met, teammates that have become friends. Then too, at the end of the month, getting paid for it. I think it's a fantastic privilege to be able to have, and I think it's</p>	<p>Love for the game</p> <p>Travelling and developing friendships</p> <p>Generate an income</p>

	<p>something that kind of, as a professional sportsman, as a professional rugby player, you kind of get financially a bit of a head start on other people as well, on kind of your peers. And I'm sure we'll delve a little bit deeper into that because that kind of becomes the problem as well. It was an amazing experience to call myself a professional player to get to travel the world. And the people that you meet, not just teammates but everyone else, are just fantastic.</p>	<p>Financial head start and/or problem</p>
<p>Bryan Habana (PAR 006)</p>	<p>It is a dream come true with a lot of benefits and privileges. I think as a young boy getting inspired to play the game of rugby, you always have the far-fetched mentality of what that dream or the realisation of the dream would be, I think getting to that point. For me, playing my first ever game for the Springboks, having been a senior professional rugby player for about three years, getting to wear that jersey for the very first time. I mean, as much as it was great having my family in London experiencing that, as great as it was, being able to put on that jersey for the first time. I think the privilege, the responsibility and the accountability that came with wearing it for the very first time made me realise what an absolute dream come true this is. I think you look back now, and it's easy to reflect once you're done, but it really was a pinch yourself every moment type of career span were travelling the world, meeting people, doing some phenomenal things, that's just absolutely brilliant. It really was, for me, a dream come true and one that I'm extremely grateful for that I could get to achieve.</p>	<p>Love for the game</p> <p>Pride of being a Springbok</p> <p>Travelling and meeting new people</p>
<p>John Smit (PAR 007)</p>	<p>Look, I loved it, but it is also a difficult question to answer because I don't have anything else to compare it against. I was a professional player from the time I left school. I went to varsity, but it was a waste of time. I wasted my opportunity there at university. After seven months, I just realised I wasn't going to achieve anything there. At the time, I was playing SA under 19, SA under 21 and for the Sharks. I wasn't even getting to lectures. So, I gave the rugby thing a shot, and it worked, which meant I never really got back to varsity. I only finished my post-grad at the age of 40. So, I don't have anything to compare it against, but my experience of the game has been phenomenal. I look back at the</p>	<p>Love for the game</p> <p>Wasted initial opportunity at tertiary education – complete after rugby</p> <p>Memories and friendships made</p> <p>Becoming normal again</p>

	<p>memories that I've made, the friendships. Someone asked me the other day is it not disconcerting to have people stop you in the street and come to your table at a restaurant. And the reality is I don't really know any other way. The cool thing about getting older is that people are starting to forget. And it's probably one of the things that helped me, but I'm starting to feel like more of a normal person than anything else. Playing rugby is not a normal life, it's a fairy tale. I had an amazing fairy tale. I was very blessed, fortunate with coaches, fortunate with teammates, fortunate in the era that I've played, and so blessed in many, many ways. So, the answer simply is yes, I loved my life as a rugby player. But it has got a small little proviso in that I don't know what to compare it against because I've only ever been a rugby player until the age of probably 38, and I'll add those three years overseas with the Sharks. I only really got into the real world at sort of 38. So that's how I felt.</p>	
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4.2.2 Primary Emergent Themes

The initially identified categories were reduced to three primary emergent themes. Table 3 illustrates these themes. Themes are patterns that emerge from the collected data (Williams & Moser, 2019:49). Emergent themes are an effective analytical tool to provide detailed insights into participants' subjective experiences in qualitative studies (Williams, 2008:248). Emergent themes crystallise because of the rigorous analysis of, for example, field notes, memos, transcriptions and various media sources, and these themes must be empirically (using the data) and conceptually (contextually) grounded (Williams, 2008:248).

Table 2: Categories reduction into primary themes

Categories	Primary emergent themes
Love of the game Getting paid – pros and cons Tertiary education Love for the game Values learned through rugby Love for the game Tertiary education Longing to return Realisation to move on Love for the game High level competition Extreme expectations with limited tools	Love for the game (8) Income and Tertiary education (6) Travelling, friendships, memories, values and pride (5)

<p>Love for the game Travelling and developing friendships Generate an income Financial head start and/or problem Love for the game Pride of being a Springbok Travelling and meeting new people Love for the game Wasted initial opportunity at tertiary education – complete after rugby Memories and friendships made Becoming normal again</p>	
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4.2.3 Extracted emergent themes

Theme 1: Love for the game

A strong common theme in all the participant's feedback was their love and passion for the game of rugby. Their initial involvement with the game was fuelled by this passion and not necessarily by the desire to become a professional athlete. However, all the participants enjoyed their experience as professional rugby players. Some often long for the opportunity to be back on the field, compete, and showcase their talents and abilities.

Some of the participants' statements were the following:

PAR 003: *"I loved it. I mean, I think we all love doing what's our passion. Sports has always been my passion as a little kid. As someone at school, I loved sport."*

PAR 004: *"I loved it. I think that's why we all did it. First of all, we loved it and eventually discovered we can be quite good at it. So, it was a real passion, I loved it."*

PAR 006: *"It really was, for me, a dream come true and one that I'm extremely grateful for that I could get to achieve. It really was, for me, a dream come true and one that I'm extremely grateful for that I could get to achieve."*

PAR 007: *"Playing rugby is not a normal life, it's a fairy tale. I had an amazing fairy tale. So, the answer simply is yes, I loved my life as a rugby player."*

The participants also noted that playing rugby at the highest level was a dream come true and expressed gratitude for being able to be closely involved with a sport they love.

Theme 2: Income and Tertiary Education

Rugby in South Africa is a professional sporting code, and the opportunity to derive monetary compensation for participating professionally has increased. However, players' compensation varies greatly based on their participation and performance level. Not all players can save and plan sufficiently for retirement, emphasising the need for players to prepare adequately for their career transition from rugby and their post-sporting lives.

Formal tertiary education is one aspect of self-development that can assist in this process. Some participants had to sacrifice their education to develop their rugby talent full-time and adhere to their respective unions' schedules and demands to achieve success in rugby.

Some of the feedback from the participants included:

PAR 001: *"I think they were actually in a better position than us. They could study and be professional. You can still get to the top and have a professional career outside of sport."*

PAR 003: *"Of course, my parents said I had to go study. So, I went to Tuks firstly to go study and then the rugby just fell into place."*

PAR 005: *"[...] you kind of get financially a bit of a head start on other people as well, on kind of your peers."*

PAR 007: *"I wasted my opportunity there at university. After seven months, I just realised I wasn't going to achieve anything there. At the time, I was playing SA under 19, SA under 21 and for the Sharks. I wasn't even getting to lectures. So, I gave the rugby thing a shot, and it worked, which meant I never really got back to varsity. I only finished my post-grad at the age of 40."*

Fourie du Preez expressed that, in his view, it is unnecessary to sacrifice education to become a professional athlete. However, according to du Preez, the current support structures do not always allow players to develop themselves regarding formal education.

Jean de Villiers mentioned the financial 'head start' that young professional rugby players enjoy compared to their peers.

Theme 3: Travelling, friendships, memories, values and pride

The respondents expressed gratitude toward 'the game' for allowing them opportunities at a relatively young age that they might not have experienced otherwise. Rugby instilled in them a set of values

transferable to and of value in other facets of their lives, exposed them to unique relationships and locations, and provided them with lasting friendships and memories.

Some statements made by the participants were:

PAR 002: *"The values you learn from rugby are quite phenomenal. And from an early age, you're sort of in charge of your destiny if you can say that, although there are so many variables you can't control. But for me, still after retirement, I'm very grateful for playing this unbelievable sport and for the values that rugby has taught me."*

PAR 005: *"To be able to travel the world. To be able to see places that you never would have seen had it not been for rugby. To be able to meet the people that I've met, teammates that have become friends."*

PAR 006: *"I think you look back now, and it's easy to reflect once you're done, but it really was a pinch yourself every moment type of career span while travelling the world, meeting people, doing some phenomenal things, that's just absolutely brilliant."*

4.3 Career path satisfaction

Question: *Are you satisfied with your career path transition into a post-sporting environment?*

Like the previous question, the data was reduced into categories and grouped thematically to derive the primary themes. Four emergent themes were identified; they are discussed below. The respondents reiterated the difficulty of the transition process. John Smit referred to it as the transition from false realities to the 'real world'.

Theme 1: Lack of transition support

There is an increase in support programmes to assist players during their transition phase and after the perceived transition has been concluded (Mockford, 2019). Clubs like Saracens have been at the forefront of innovating and refining their player support programmes. However, certain shortcomings still exist, and the feedback from the participants highlights the need for better awareness and implementation of the current support structures. Some areas that the participants emphasised are presented below.

PAR 001: *"I think the system in SA is broken, especially for professional rugby players."*

Fourie du Preez asserted that the system of player development and support in South Africa is 'broken' and should be reviewed.

PAR 002: *"We started a program at Saracens where people that want to be a plumber, for example, we made sure of professional services or courses to become a plumber, a builder, a gardener, in my case my background was accountancy, that's what I studied at Stellenbosch."*

PAR 003: *"I will very much see it still as a work in progress."*

PAR 005: *"We kind of constantly push to improve, to achieve more, and that's a constant. It's not one single moment where you can say okay, press the button, I'm now successful, I've reached the pinnacle."*

Some of the participants suggested that the transitioning phase is a continuous process. Even though they are somewhat content with their current situation, they move toward their goals and continue striving to achieve more.

PAR 006: *"I don't think if you want to achieve, you're ever going to be happy, and I think the drive for continuous success [...]."*

One of the coping mechanisms and tools that the participants suggested is staying active and being involved with some sport or physical activity.

PAR 007: *"So the transition for me really, and I say it with the prof listening, but I mean one of the biggest tools was the mountain bike."*

Theme 2: Relevant skills

The participants overwhelmingly suggested that various transferable skills and tools are applicable within the business environment. These include leadership, culture creation, work ethic, discipline, perseverance, competitive nature, broad network, and teamwork. Ratten (2015:450,451) claims that

leadership characteristics are essential in the business environment, and sportspeople can develop these skills while competing. This overlap was acknowledged in the interviews:

PAR 002: *"[...] but with my work ethic, leadership skills, and network, they were sure they would find me something."*

Some participants emphasised the lack of practical and technical skills, and the topic is explored further later.

PAR 003: *"But it was difficult. I mean, you walk into a meeting where you actually have no clue what it's about. You almost have to fake it."*

In a somewhat contradictory statement, Bryan Habana alluded that the skills and tools he developed through rugby had to be 're-learned'. Although he developed and possessed certain skills, the application was different in a business environment.

PAR 006: *"I think I've also understood that as much as rugby, in particular, taught us very many skills that are transferrable into this new career path, understanding that for me I had to unlearn a lot of the things that I learned in professional sport."*

Theme 3: Lack of scheduled structure (uncertainty)

Rugby provides a sense of security in structure and planning for players. Players get told what to do and when. The loss of this structure is often troublesome for athletes, and Flip van der Merwe expressed the level of uncertainty this creates. The players must take responsibility for their diaries and determine their direction in a way that provides new purpose in their post-retirement lives.

PAR004: *"Uncertainty of what am I going to do now because with rugby you sort of knew that you're going to wake up tomorrow and you're going to train, your whole day was planned out to the minute, every five minutes you had to do this, and you got fed by a spoon, and you got very used to it."*

The participants also referred to the impact retirement has on their families. It is not only the players that need to be able to adapt to the transition phase but their friends and family as well.

PAR005: *"Whether that is your income or diary for a week, everything changes, and you need to adapt. Your family also need to adapt to that."*

Theme 4: Fall from grace

As suggested by Cosh *et al.* (2021:15), the impact of retirement on an athlete's mental state can be very challenging. The athlete's identity is under scrutiny. According to the participants, it can be attributed to the feelings and emotions the athletes experience and because they are treated differently in their social and new work environments.

PAR002: *"In rugby terms, you are probably in the top 5% of your industry, where you go back to the investing world or the corporate world, you're probably in the bottom 5%."*

PAR003: *"From being at the top of your game when everyone looks up to you, and then starting at the bottom again."*

The participants allude to the feeling of a 'fall from grace'. Retired athletes often feel they have lost credibility, purpose, and esteem the moment they retire. This feeling is amplified when it is reiterated in their new environment and if external parties highlight their inadequacies.

4.4 Current reality

Question: *Are you content with your current situation as a retired athlete?*

Two main themes were identified. The participants were selected based on the notion that they have integrated reasonably well into a post-retirement life. Therefore, their overwhelming feedback expresses the feeling of being somewhat content. They reiterate that the process remains challenging even with their successful transition.

Theme 1: Challenging process

Even with proper preparation, individuals can struggle to find their self-worth and struggle with imposter syndrome. Retired athletes must find their true identity and not conform to their athletic identity, which a lot of players have grown accustomed to. Athletic identity can be defined as the degree to which a person has a personal connection to a sport (Edison *et al.*, 2021:7331).

PAR004: *"As I said, I'm not satisfied yet that I've made the complete circle. It's very much still a work in progress. Knowing your worth, fighting the imposter syndrome, and finding your place whenever you go into a meeting is important [...]."*

The participants emphasised the immense mental challenges that accompany the transitioning process.

PAR005: *"I think depression is certainly something, mental health rather, is something that certainly becomes very important as well in that transition phase for a rugby player."*

Theme 2: Balanced support

The importance of a balanced support structure that includes a network outside of rugby circles has provided some participants with much-needed assistance. This network includes support and guidance from family members, business mentors and friends. Being financially sound has assisted with some participants through this challenging time.

PAR001: *"Yes, I'm very fortunate to have a lovely family, kids, and a very good support system. There's a lot of balance in my life."*

As mentioned, some participants expressed their need to shift goals continuously and are somewhat anxious about what is next. Finding their feet is an initial challenge, but after they have settled into their 'new lives', the process of transitioning continues, and a sense of uncertainty remains.

PAR002: *"Now I am very content with where I am. I'm quite nervous about the next step."*

PAR004: *"[...] the struggles and finding your feet again after rugby is probably the toughest part."*

5. Practical Implications

The participants shared valuable insights from their first-hand experiences. The primary objective was addressed and completed. However, during the interviews, the participants also shed some light and added a broader perspective on what they perceive as important to facilitate a better transition. The following recommendations emerged from the study:

- **The need for better structural support and guidance.** Some programmes and assistance are available; however, the awareness around these initiatives needs to be increased. MyPlayers is an excellent example of a players' Union that offers various services and support, but not enough players embrace this optimally.
- **The rugby unions in South Africa share a responsibility in assisting the players with their self-development and allowing (under reasonable conditions) players the opportunity for self-growth.** They are responsible for creating a culture of awareness that rugby is temporary.
- **Mental health is critical for players during and after their sporting careers.** This topic cannot be understated. Players must look after their psychological well-being and have access to professional help pre- and post-retirement. Many athletes experience, among others, a 'fall from grace', a decrease in self-worth, and a sense of loss. The researcher recommends that retired players should aid in breaking the stigma surrounding talking about the more challenging experiences associated with retirement from professional sports. A platform in the form of peer support groups could be highly beneficial and valuable for retired players to openly share their experiences with others who understand what they are going through.
- **Rugby unions should dedicate resources toward players' individualised, personal development.** This could be viewed as a value-added service a union should provide and can be mutually beneficial for the players and the institutions they represent.
- **It is evident that some skills and characteristics developed through rugby are beneficial for the players in the long-term.** Players should embrace the opportunity to better themselves, and unions should appreciate that they are dealing with young individuals who often lack the wisdom to attain this.

- **It is imperative for players to receive proper financial guidance.** The participants (however successful) all stressed the need for a financial structure to sustain them in times of financial instability. Luxurious lifestyles, excessive spending, and bad investment decisions were often referenced as pitfalls many players fall prey to. The participants agreed that proper financial mentorship from trustworthy sources could remedy some of these failures.
- **According to the participants, players must face a harsh reality: there are no ‘freebies’ after rugby.** Players need to plan their careers and accept that the cessation of their careers is inevitable. Some of the participants acknowledged that one cannot fully prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. However, with proper planning, the transitioning period could be primarily mitigated.
- **Retired athletes should apply what they learned from their rugby careers and 'play to their strengths'.** They should accept that they lack in some areas that their peers have been developing while they were professional athletes. They should approach the next phase of their lives with the same commitment, willingness to learn, consistency, hard work, dedication, honesty, and authenticity as they have during their careers. They should be able to set new goals, dream big, and realise that a world of opportunity awaits.
- **Players should invest in their education.** Not all players have the same interests, ideals, and abilities, but players should continuously upskill whether they further their studies through tertiary institutions, do courses, or develop crafts. The researcher recommends that employees are encouraged and supported in the corporate environment when they take the initiative to invest in self-development or professional development opportunities. Rugby unions should afford professional players the same opportunities for professional (educational) and self-development. Provisions should be made for players to take specified leave for such endeavours.
- **Retired athletes should decide how to distance themselves from the game after retirement, if ever.** This could be a gradual process or an abrupt end. There are opportunities that the game of rugby allows retired players, and they should be wise and cautious not to miss this. Some retired players remain active in the game and generate an income from rugby or rugby-related industries.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the transitioning phase for professional athletes (rugby union players) in South Africa. It aimed to contribute to South African sport research in general and sport management research. The focus was identifying specific characteristics and facets (through semi-structured interviews with a sample of seven participants selected by purposive sampling) that could potentially assist future generations of players if addressed earlier in a player's career. The qualitative empirical study's (thematic analysis) findings and critical literature review led to the study achieving the primary and secondary research objectives. During the course of the study, the concept of responsibility (which was not a key question at the inception of the study) came to the fore as a key aspect which could be a crucial first step in the process of determining where accountability lies in efforts to close the gap between the findings of academic enquiries and the policies that affect professional rugby players in South Africa. The notion of responsibility may prove to be integral as a requirement to posit solutions that may prove to bridge said gap between existing scholarly literature, and the efforts and shortcomings encountered in practice and policies.

6.2 Limitations

Some limitations include that all participants competed at the highest level and received the highest honours in South African rugby, namely playing for the Springboks. Most participants also captained the national side, and their brand equity is not necessarily comparable to the whole demographic of South African rugby players. Furthermore, the participants' gender is also not representative of the entire demographic of local players.

The study intended to focus on successful athletes who perceivably transitioned successfully. By doing so, the study aimed to derive the tools and skills required to assist athletes in transitioning. However, an athlete's career and transitioning process are unique, and every athlete's experience will be different. Not all rugby players will possess the same opportunities and abilities that the participants have/had.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

Further research is suggested on facilitating a professional athlete's transitioning process. Mental well-being is a significant factor in this process and should be considered a focal point for future studies. The institutional support structures and 'systems' in South Africa should be scrutinised with player development and well-being in mind. As mentioned previously in this study, research on the transition process from professional sport and the impact it has on retired players has been conducted for the

past four decades, but there is still primarily an absence of the implementation of suggestions for adequate support for retiring players from the unions' side. The research findings through the years have not transpired into policy development and continuous policy development that would benefit the transitioning players. It would be beneficial to determine where the gaps between the existing research, the implementation of suggestions, and the creation of suitable policies are in the South African rugby context. Research that could identify and address the gaps could ultimately lead to policies and guidelines being implemented to show a tangible change in the well-being of retiring and retired players.

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